PAPER
CITY

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Exhibition dates
14.07.11 – 31.10.11

Gallery hours
Monday 10am – 2pm
Tues to Fri 11am – 6pm
Saturday 11am – 4pm

City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall
Swanston Street
(enter via halftix)
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CITY OF MELBOURNE

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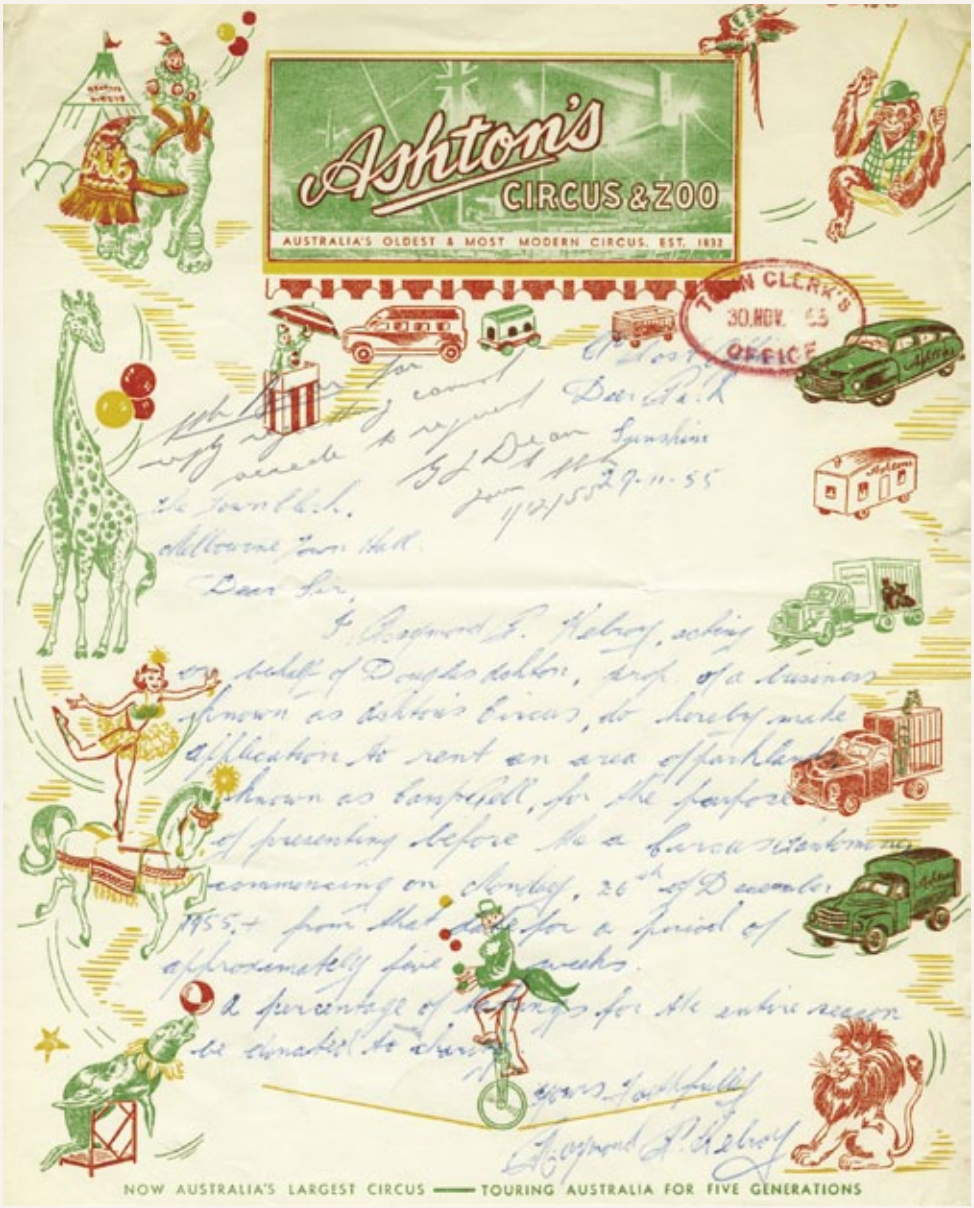
STATE of DESIGN
Victoria's Design Festival

PAPER CITY

An exploration of symbols and images from the City's vast archive of historic letterheads.



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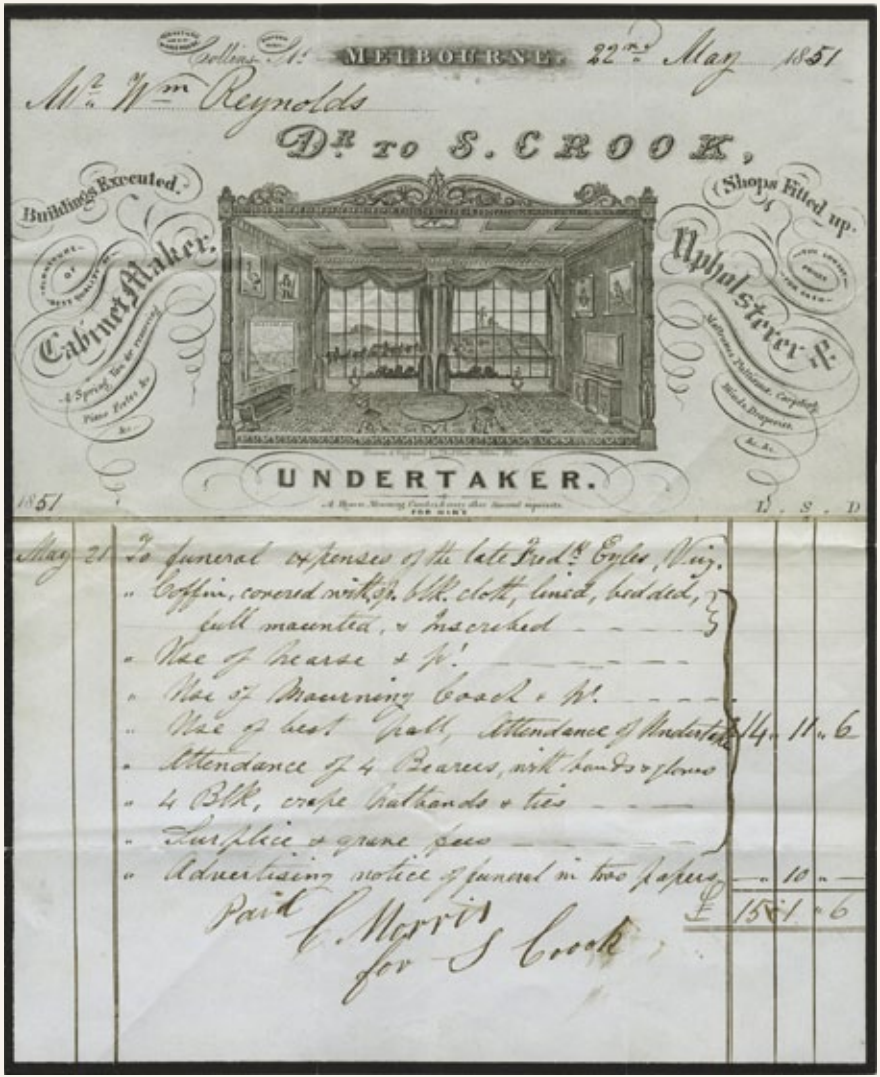
Ashton's Circus to Town Clerk, 30 November 1955, PROV, VPRS 3183/ P5, Unit 19, 5428

PAPER CITY

The idea of the *Paper City* was conceived after the three curators—a graphic designer, an artist and a historian—sorted through over a century and a half of correspondence received by the City of Melbourne and variously housed in its Art and Heritage Collection, Archive and at the Public Record Office Victoria repository. From over 10,000 letterheads, a little more than 250 were selected as showcase items, selected for their social or historical significance, striking symbolism or distinctive design features.



②

S. Crook to William Reynolds, 22 May 1851, City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

THE LETTERHEAD AS ADVERTISING

If letterheads are graphic depictions of urban objects and environments, what sort of city is built from this accumulation of paper? Lithographs and engravings of business premises, factories or their products, company logos, fanciful images and cartoons, and a host of other examples—all supply factual information, but are also coded with advertising hyperbole. Letterhead design and symbolism plays fast and loose with the truth in order to instil confidence, encourage investment, and legitimate certain ideologies. Visually, the letterhead can exaggerate and distort reality as it plucks things out of their everyday contexts. A motor-car becomes a symbol of freedom. The embellished logo of a society says "we are important too"! An artistic rendition of poverty or disadvantage can quickly evoke empathy.

Indeed, letterheads can have a habit of over-emphasising progress and efficiency. They are the ultimate confidence boosters. In current graphic design media terms, letterheads carry the correspondence content of an email with the distortive showcasing features of a website.

Paper City explores the symbolic meanings behind these letterheads and how they not only reflect the values of the business but also of the city and society itself. From the densely decorated 1851 billhead of cabinetmaker, upholsterer and undertaker S. Crook embellished with symbols including native fauna, freemasonry and a funeral procession; the aspirational 1878 Fergusson and Moore letterhead which alludes to success and industriousness through the engraved depiction of their printing office with

smoke billowing from the chimney; the precision of the 1921 Robison Brothers and Company letterhead with its typographic flourishes, highly detailed illustrations of machinery displaying their creativity and technical proficiency; the colourful Ashton's Circus and Zoo letterhead from 1955 framed with a playful menagerie of characters, animals, clowns and vehicles evoking a spirit of fun and performance; through to the comparatively minimal 1989 letterhead of the Met (the precursor to Metlink), with its corporate identity indicating mass movement.

Looking across such a vast historical lineage, certain patterns and shifts can be witnessed. In an exhibition of business correspondence, perhaps one of the most evident of these is the perception of 'progress'.

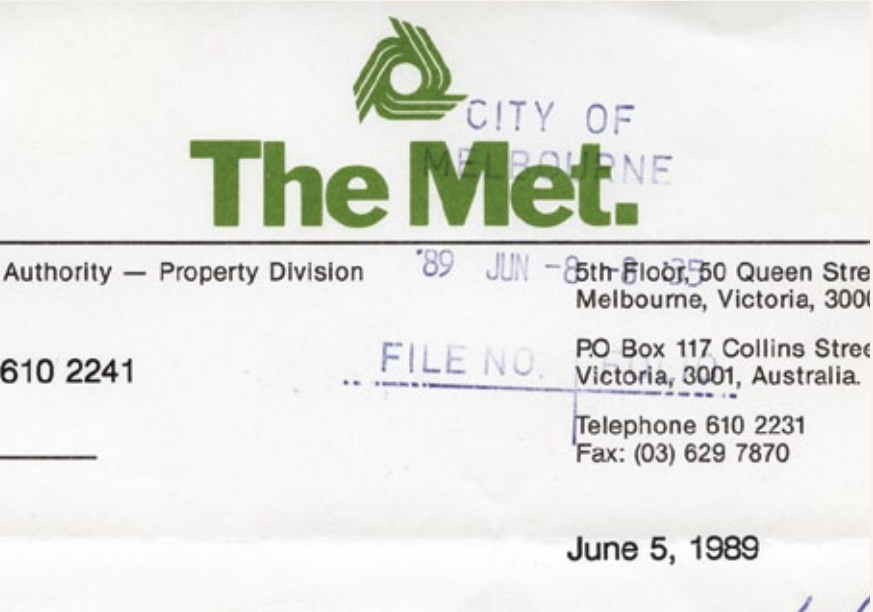
③

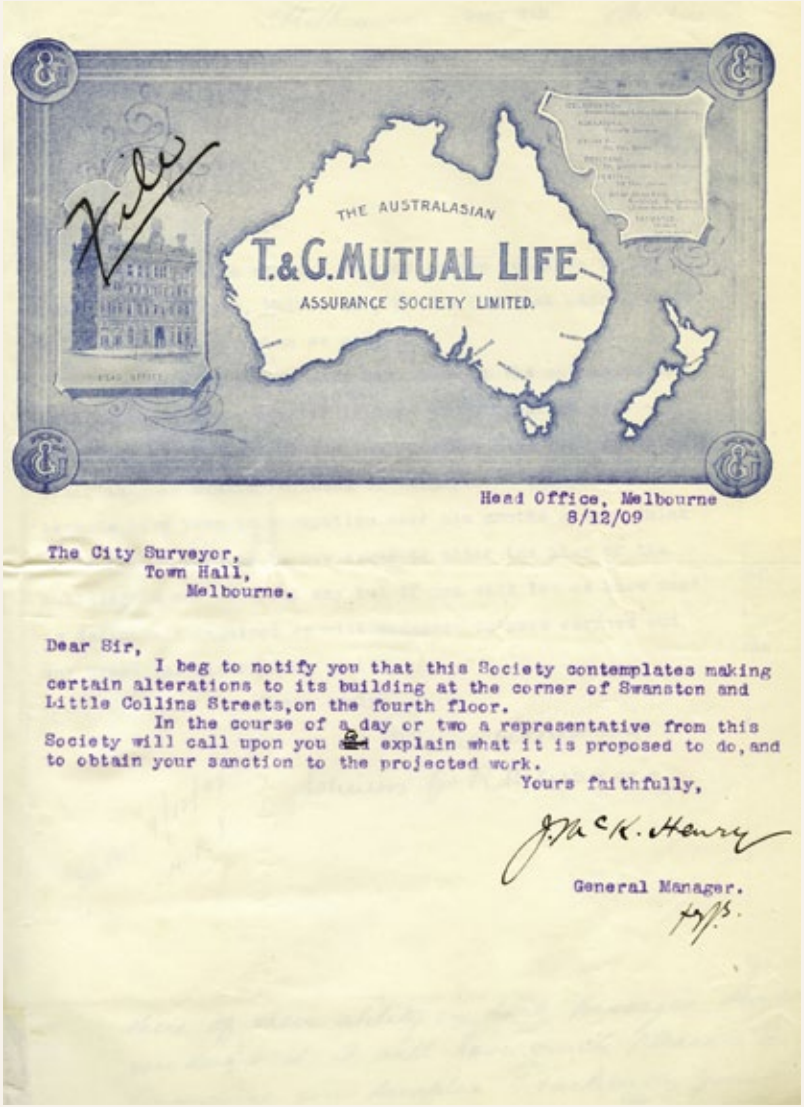
The Met to the General Manager, Operations Department, (detail) 5 June 1989, City of Melbourne Archive

④

Australian Motors Company to the Town Clerk, 18 September 1912, PROV, VPRS 3183/P1, Unit 110, 1912/5789

The early expressions of industriousness and 'progress' represented by belching factory smokestacks would doubtlessly be interpreted by twenty-first century values as environmentally reckless pollution. In other cases the emergence of new technologies such as telephones, cables, passenger lifts, electric lights and bells were specifically featured on letterheads to boast the progress, modernity and visionary aspirations of the city. In contrast, postwar letterheads tended to project their sense of progress through a minimal visual language – the use of a universal corporate identity system.





⑤

The Australasian T. & G. Mutual Life Assurance Society Limited to the City Surveyor, 8 December 1909, City of Melbourne Archive

⑥

Fitz-Gerald Brothers to the Town Clerk, 12 December 1902, PROV, VPRS 3181/ P0, Unit 871, 1902/4435

THE LETTERHEAD AS HISTORICAL SOURCE

The exhibition also reveals something of the history of the Melbourne City Council itself. The Town Council was incorporated in 1842, the same year as the first Sydney council. It was given authority over everything from markets, roads and sewerage to building regulations and street nuisances. Melbourne was created a City in 1849, and the first Town Hall was built on Swanston Street in the early 1850s. All correspondence to the Council crossed the desk of the Town Clerk, who for the years 1856 to 1891 was Anglo-Irishman Edmund FitzGibbon, who later became the first chairman of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works. Depending on its subject, FitzGibbon would refer each letter to one or other of the Council's officers or committees: the City Surveyor, Engineer or Architect, or perhaps to the finance, market, hackney carriage or public works committee.

The letterhead is therefore part of the Town Clerk's daily correspondence. In reading these letters, and deciphering their graphics, we can draw a better sense of the patterns of knowledge criss-crossing city, continent and globe. The files are full of advertisements and catalogues, prospectuses and blueprints, schemes and inquiries, sketches and handbills, all of which formed the daily diet of municipal intelligence.

The arresting design of letterheads and trade catalogues—with their sophisticated artwork, elaborate embossing and fancy foilwork—displayed new technologies and visions of modernity.

The selection of letterheads in the exhibition speaks to key historical themes, from the civic functions of municipal government, to subjects such as pleasure and leisure, icons and institutions, society and politics, transport and technology, and shops and services. The first extant letterhead in the collection—and one of the simplest—is on a letter from the 'Bank of Australasia, Melbourne, Port Phillip. N. S. Wales' in early 1843. From the middle of the nineteenth century businesses were slowly realising the advertising potential of more graphic letterheads in promoting their goods and services, though the heyday of the art form was perhaps in the post-Federation era.

Melbourne's letterheads display a vast array of consumer objects that reveal changes in fashions, superseded technologies, tastes in food and drink, and even household appliances.

The most elaborate letterheads include not only basic information such as the name and address of a business or institution, the date and perhaps a cable

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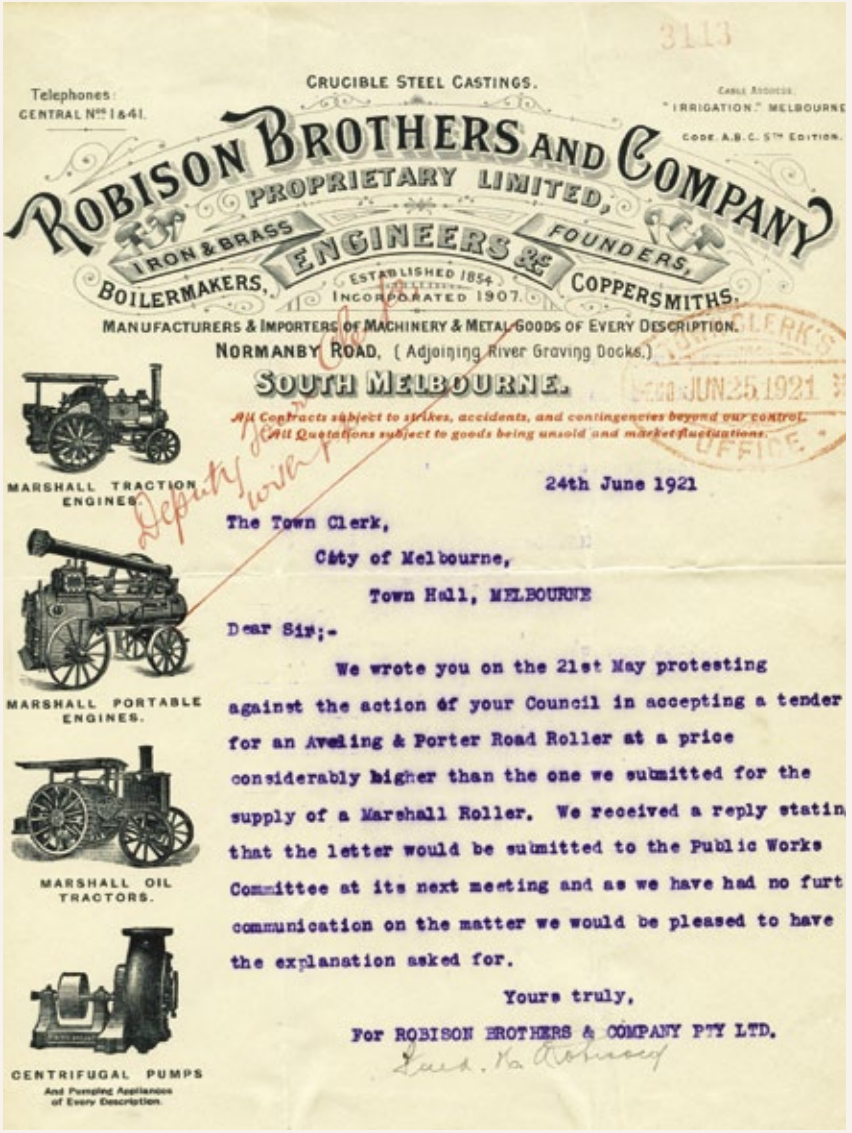
Robison Brothers and Company to the Town Clerk, 24 June 1921, PROV, VPRS 3183/ P2, Unit 20, 3113



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MARSHALL TRACTION ENGINES.

MARSHALL PORTABLE ENGINES.

MARSHALL OIL TRACTORS.

CENTRIFUGAL PUMPS And Pumping Appliances of Every Description.

24th June 1921

The Town Clerk,
City of Melbourne,
Town Hall, MELBOURNE

Dear Sir;-

We wrote you on the 21st May protesting against the action of your Council in accepting a tender for an Aveling & Porter Road Roller at a price considerably higher than the one we submitted for the supply of a Marshall Roller. We received a reply statin that the letter would be submitted to the Public Works Committee at its next meeting and as we have had no furt communication on the matter we would be pleased to have the explanation asked for.

Yours truly,

For ROBISON BROTHERS & COMPANY PTY LTD.

or telephone number, but a variety of typefaces, highly elaborate ornamentation, and windows and breakouts that contain additional information from other products or services to lists of office bearers or even song lyrics! Most popular over time has been the depiction of the business premises, either as a lithograph or from the latter decades of the nineteenth century as a photograph. Such depictions could skew reality, often making the buildings out to be more impressive than they may have been in reality,or editing out unsightly neighbours or street life. But in some cases they remain the only visual representation of a former shop or factory.

THE LETTERHEAD AS DESIGN

Through an evocation of letterheads, *Paper City* invites the viewer to see the changes of the city's character, its values, its inhabitants and how it projected itself to others. Running in tandem with the social, industrial and political expressions of Melbourne's evolution from 1840 to present day, the letterheads selected for *Paper City* also tell us a great deal about the creative spirit of the city. Whether through the crafting of typography, the detail within an illustration, the lustre of printed colour and even the selection of paper stock used, each letterhead tells us something not only of the time in which it was made but also the origins of an investment in design, the fruits of which can be seen in Melbourne's growing status as a design capital.

It is an irony that it is only in the twilight of a medium that its significance is seen with greater clarity. Such may be the case with the letterhead.

⑧

E & M. Roughton Adornments, c.1914, City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

In its printed form, the medium of the letterhead is certainly in decline.

While its communicative role has been taken over by the efficiency of the email and its promotional virtues now served by the ubiquitous website, the letterhead leaves a distinct shadow in the history of graphic design and visual communication.

Its archival presence, evidenced by this exhibition, is arguably more durable than its successors as is its inherent tactility and immediacy. As difficult as it is to imagine an exhibition of emails, the contemporary and future modes of correspondence will need to be carefully kept, expressive as they are about a much bigger world outside of their seemingly day-to-day concerns.

The history of the letterhead embodies the history of technologies from the Industrial to the Digital Revolution, from the origins of the printing press and papermaking machines to lithography, photoengraving, typesetting machines and photography. But letterheads are more than just ink on paper. They reflect the changing world of design. The heavily embellished correspondence of the Victorian era can be easily matched to its fussy contemporaries in architecture and industrial design.

Through its design, the letterhead connects to a larger cultural expression, be it the striking visual expression of national confidence at the time of Federation, or the arrival of modernism, signalling social and industrial progress emphasising design functionality.

In an age where consumers are increasingly yearning for human experience and authenticity over products, we may yet see a resurgence of interest in the printed letterhead – perhaps not as a workable form of business correspondence but as a more personalised form of social expression.

After all, the experience of opening an envelope and unfolding a sheet of letterhead is an essentially tactile experience. Nobody ever had a paper-cut from an email. Letterhead correspondence reminds us of the real, of being human.

Stephen Banham, Christine Eid and Andrew May
July 2011

⑨

The Melbourne Moomba Festival to the City of Melbourne, 15 June 1973, PROV, VPRS 3183/ P9, Unit 2

CURATORS

Stephen Banham is a graphic designer, writer, lecturer and founder of the typographic studio Letterbox. He has a particular interest in the social significance of typography.

Christine Eid is a Melbourne-based researcher and artist. In addition to running her research and interdisciplinary arts practice TOW, she also undertakes curatorial work at the State Library of Victoria.

Associate Professor Andrew May is an urban historian in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne with an intimate knowledge of the social and cultural history of the city and its archive.

⑩

Melbourne Cricket Club to the Mayor Sir Maurice Nathan, 1 July 1971, City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Eddie Butler-Bowdon, Program Manager, Catherine Hockey, Collection Operations Coordinator, Cressida Goddard, Administration Officer, Art and Heritage Collection, City of Melbourne; Colin Fairweather, Chief Information Officer, Sahra Milk, Senior Information Management Officer, Business Information Services, City of Melbourne; Erin Reeve, Media Relations Adviser, Corporate Affairs and Strategic Marketing, City of Melbourne; staff at the Public Record Office Victoria; Liz Downes, Stephen Ireland, Jennie Jeppesen, Tom Rogers, Rebecca Sanders for research assistance; University of Melbourne, Cultural and Community Relations Advisory Group; Lan Huang, Letterbox; Louis Porter for loaning the letterhead collector's scrapbook from the Porter Archive; David Western, AMS Imaging; Exhibit One for production and installation; CPL Digital, Bambra Digital, Impact Digital; Studio Round for graphic design.

For historic Melbourne letterheads online, see **eMelbourne** at http://www.emelbourne.net.au/