



James Birtwistle

(1930s courtesy Tony Birtwistle)

James Birtwistle (1857-1939) was born 28 September 1857 at Sandhurst (the official town name used 1854–1891, then Bendigo) in Victoria, the son of mason James Birtwistle senior and Richmul nee Wolstenholme, both parents originally from County Lancashire in England. James had a sister Nellie.

On the first day of April 1871 James Birtwistle junior became an articled clerk to the firm of Vahland and Getzschmann Architects at Sandhurst. An agreement was drawn up, the signatories being James Birtwistle senior, William Charles Vahland (1828–1915) and Robert Getzschmann (1824–1875). The partners agreed to take James Birtwistle junior as their articled clerk for a period of five years, and to teach him the profession of an architect. During the first two years they would not pay him any salary, during the third and fourth year they undertook to pay five shillings per week, and during the fifth and final year ten shillings per week. James Birtwistle senior on behalf of his son promised to see that James junior would be ‘punctual in his attendance during office hours on every lawful day’, and ‘would not absent himself without consent first being obtained. That the said Birtwistle junior would at all times appear respectably clothed and dressed and that he would be supplied with all the necessary books and drawing instruments at his own cost and that he would at all times be obedient and civil to Vahland and Getzschmann’.

Thirteen years later a note was added to the foot of the agreement: ‘I hereby certify that the above named James Birtwistle, who commenced his articles as above stated, completed the same with me, my former partner R. Getzschmann having died in the meantime. I gladly testify that the said James Birtwistle has been all what an articled clerk ought to be, and remained with me for about four years afterward; I wish him all success in life. (signed) W.C. Vahland Architect, Sandhurst 23 June 1884.’

Of note is that just over six months after the agreement was finalised, James Birtwistle senior was ordered to be sent to the Yarra Bend Asylum, where he died aged just 47 years in April 1877, placing a greater responsibility on the nineteen year old lad to help his mother support the family. James attended the School of Design and Mines at night. In the period 1878-1879 he won a number of prizes and a certificate of merit for designs displayed at various Industrial and School of Design Exhibitions. It is not certain what year Birtwistle moved to Melbourne, but presumably soon after leaving Vahland's employ around 1880, and he appears to have commenced his own practice with George de Lacy Evans around 1884. James Birtwistle was nominated as an associate of the Victorian Institute of Architects in July 1884, and entered into a number of architect partnerships in Melbourne – Evans & Birtwistle 1884-1885, with John Henry Brabin as Birtwistle & Brabin 1886, and John Edward Scanlan as Birtwistle & Scanlan 1891-1893.



Great Southern Hotel, Beaumaris of 1889
 (<http://www.walkingmelbourne.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=455&start=36>)

Just preceding an economic collapse that followed the end of the 'Marvellous Melbourne' boom years of the 1880s, James Birtwistle brought the impressive £7,700 Great Southern Hotel at Beaumaris to completion in 1889. He also designed a hotel at the Yan Yean Reservoir, 30 km north of Melbourne;

unfortunately he took 200 shares in the hotel company for payment, and the corporation later went into liquidation. The grand mansion *Illawarra* at Toorak was designed in 1889 for land-boomer politician Charles Henry James, whom Birtwistle sued unsuccessfully in 1891. Although never fully completed, the extensive *Kirkbrae* at 60-64 Fitzroy Street, Kilmore was designed by Birtwistle and built for John McAlister Howden c.1890 as a holiday home. In May 1893 Birtwistle called tenders for the Shire Hall and offices at Preston, and they were finally opened in April 1895. Despite the difficult economic times, during the period 1890-1894 Birtwistle (and Scanlan) managed to employ Arthur Floyd Trebilco (1872-1922) as an articulated apprentice.



Illawarra at Toorak of 1891 for land-boomer politician Charles Henry James
(<http://www.adonline.id.au/buildings/illawarra/>)



Kirkbrae at 60-64 Fitzroy Street, Kilmore was designed c.1890 for John McAlister Howden
(Tucker, Maya V, 'Kilmore on the Sydney Road', Shire of Kilmore, Kilmore, 1988 p.131).



Birtwistle & Scanlan's design of 1893 for Preston Town Hall - the clock tower was not built
 (<http://heritage.darebinlibraries.vic.gov.au/archiveimage/2490>)



Preston Shire Hall, opened in April 1895, is seen c.1930s between the Town Hall and City Hall
 (<http://heritage.darebinlibraries.vic.gov.au/archiveimage/2482>)

James Birtwistle had married Emily Davies in August 1889 at *Treharne*, the Prahran residence of the bride's parents. There were two sons from this marriage, Ivor Treharne Birtwistle (1892-1976) who became a prominent journalist and citizen in WA, and Victor Wolstenholme Birtwistle (1895-1972). Following the effects of the east coast economic depression of the early 1890s, the family left Victoria and sailed for gold-boom Western Australia, where in October 1895 James joined the Architectural Division of the rapidly expanding Public Works Department (PWD), earning a salary of £225.

Emily Birtwistle died 1 July 1908, and James quickly married again in December 1908, to Marie Theresa Mauermann (1875-1960). There were also two sons from this marriage, Gordon Sieber (1909-1966) and Alfred Joseph (1913-1988). Birtwistle almost certainly met Marie through her father, Emil Mauermann (1851-1937), a colleague at the PWD who had also worked at Bendigo. Emil

had emigrated from Germany to Australia in 1885, joining Vahland's firm as an architect and engineer before practicing on his own account, although this was some years after Birtwistle had moved to Melbourne. The Mauermanns had also fled the depressed conditions of Victoria for Western Australia, where Emil commenced with the PWD in March 1895.

Amongst many public buildings that were designed and documented by the PWD for the fledgling State, James was heavily involved in the turn of the century work that established the children's hospital at Subiaco, later Princess Margaret Hospital. Birtwistle survived the sharp reductions of PWD staff in the early twentieth century, and gradually gained seniority in the organisation. In 1903 when John Harry Grainger was the chief architect at the exceptional salary of £1,000 pa, Hillson Beasley as assistant architect earned £325, with W.B. Hardwick £270, James Birtwistle £270, William Wilkinson £260 and Moss Cohen £260 as senior draughtsmen. At that time there remained quite a number of other draughtsmen and assistants in the organisation. Beasley was the chief architect of a much reduced architectural branch in 1912, earning a salary of £600, with assistant architects Hardwick on £432 (including Workers' Homes Board duties), Birtwistle £300 and Wilkinson £300.

In June 1922 W.B. Hardwick as principal architect supported Birtwistle's claim to the Public Service Appeal Board for a salary of £480 as second in charge of architectural work. With the introduction of the *Architects Act* to WA, on 10 July 1922 James Birtwistle was one of the earliest to be registered as an architect (reg. no. 32). He retired from the PWD on 20 December 1925, following 30 years of continuous service. Following his public service retirement at the age of 68, Birtwistle continued in the period 1926-1930 as a private architect with a small number of diverse projects from his home in Subiaco, including a factory, a church, a service station and a residence. In 1934 the PWD recalled the 76 year old Birtwistle to help with the restoration of the office following Depression years. During the Depression the State Government had not employed architectural cadets, and had retrenched further numbers of draughtsmen from the Architectural Division, with the result that when the depression lifted there were few draughtsmen in the Department, and very few senior staff. Birtwistle assisted for approximately twelve months.



Mosman Park Baptist Tabernacle was built in 1927 on the corner of Eastbourne and Fairlight Streets, Mosman Park (Barry Baker 1989, <http://www.photosau.com.au/thegrovelibrary/>)

Graduating from difficult early circumstances, James Birtwistle was an extremely talented architect who produced some fabulous Federation-era buildings in his early thirties. Forced by economic conditions to move his young family across Australia in search of employment, James secured a position in government service and made substantial contributions within that realm. Following the loss of his first wife, he started another family and continued in his profession for another 25 years. Now relatively unknown in WA due to his work being within the greater achievements of the PWD, Birtwistle died aged 81 years on 21 February 1939 at his home, 45 Austin Street Subiaco. James was survived by wife Marie and four sons.

References:

- 'Lunacy', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 28 November 1871, p.3 (father committed to Yarra Bend).
- 'Death', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 30 April 1877, p.2 (death of father at Yarra Bend of apoplexy).
- 'School of Design and Mines Exhibition', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 24 December 1878, p.2 (first prize for ornamental design).
- 'The Exhibition', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 30 April 1879, p.3 (exhibition medal winner).
- 'Prize Designs for Houses at Grace Park', *Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil*, 30 June 1884, p.103 (third prize with George de Lacy Evans).
- 'Victorian Institute of Architects', *Argus*, 9 July 1884, p.7 (nominated as associate of VIA).
- 'Tenders', *Argus*, 4 March 1885, p.3 (villa Hawthorn for G.C.M. Hanstein).
- 'Tenders', *Argus*, 25 April 1885, p.9 (houses tuberculosis patients Riddell's Ck for Dr Beaney).
- 'A Special Meeting', *Australasian*, 13 June 1885, p.28 (Birtwistle & Evans produce testimonial for VIA honorary secretary Peter Matthews).

'Tenders', *Argus*, 3 October 1887, p.3 (Public Hall at Fairfield, Alphington).

'Tenders', *Argus*, 8 October 1887, p.12 (3 two-storey terrace dwellings Roden St West Melb).

'Tenders', *Argus*, 16 March 1888, p.3 (Great Southern Hotel, Rickards Point).

'Tenders', *Argus*, 6 July 1888, p.3 (villa Essendon, shop-residence Cheltenham for C. Harrison).

'Tenders', *Argus*, 18 September 1888, p.4 (stables & sheds for Beaumaris Tramcar Co).

'Tenders', *Argus*, 2 March 1889, p.15 (two-storey residence Northcote for H. Burrows).

'A Trip Through Cheltenham and Beaumaris', *Mercury and Weekly Courier*, 18 April 1889, p.3 (Great Southern Hotel at Beaumaris).

'Tenders', *Argus*, 9 January 1890, p.3 (4 two-storey shop and dwellings Northcote).

'James Birtwistle', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 15 August 1890, p.2 (Hotel at Yan Yean Reservoir).

'Mr James Birtwistle', *Argus*, 9 June 1891, p.1 (Scanlan joins partnership).

'Legal Notes', *Argus*, 5 September 1891, p.11 (sues C.H. James re a number of Toorak works).

'Tenders', *Argus*, 12 May 1893, p.2 (Shire hall and offices at Preston).

'The New Shire Hall Preston', *Evelyn Observer, and South and East Bourke Record*, 10 May 1895, p.2 (hall opened in April).

'The Proposed Children's Hospital', *The West Australian*, 25 October 1898, p.2 (competition first prize to J.J. & E.J. Clarke, second H. Jefferis, third Oldham & Eales, Birtwistle assessor).

'Architectural Branch', *Western Mail*, 1 August 1903, p.44 (PWD employees and salaries).

'The Proposed Children's Hospital', *The West Australian*, 3 October 1907, p.6 (report on J.J. & E.J. Clark prize designs, to be supervised by honorary architects Hobbs Smith & Forbes).

'Proposed Children's Hospital', *Western Mail*, 18 January 1908, p.42 (prize design amended by Beasley & Birtwistle, Hobbs Smith & Forbes calling tenders).

'Professional Division', *The West Australian*, 30 March 1912, p.12 (Public Service staff).

'Mr J. Birtwistle Architect', *The West Australian*, 15 August 1925, p.13 (retirement announced).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 20 November 1926, p.6 (factory Francis Street Perth).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 14 February 1927, p.3 (Baptist Church Mosman Park).

'Building Enterprise', *The West Australian*, 26 March 1927, p.8 (Baptist Church Mosman Park).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 17 December 1927, p.14 (service station Claremont for E.G. Underwood – on north-east corner Stirling Highway and Stirling Road, now demolished).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 23 May 1930, p.11, (residence Claremont for Stanley L. Underwood - likely to have been 63 Vincent Street, n-w cnr Princess Road – now demolished).

'Deaths', *The West Australian*, 23 February 1939, p.1 (lists home, family, private cremation).

Biographical notes on James Birtwistle, architect, 1857-1939, State Library Victoria MSB 152.

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