



**Ernest Porter**

(courtesy Jane Brummitt)

**Ernest Saunders Porter** (1862-1937) was born 22 June 1862 at *Koonoona* sheep station near Burra, ninety miles north of Adelaide in South Australia, son of Jane Elizabeth (nee Rhead) and Thomas Saunders Porter, merino breeder. Thomas Porter, the eighth of thirteen children of a Dorset farmer, left England for Australia in 1850, when he was twenty years old. He was industrious, and gradually achieved success in rural pursuits. After building up his assets, Porter sold up and returned with his family to England in April 1873 on the *Orient*.

Thomas and Jane Porter had three children, Hedley, Isabel and Ernest. One reason for the Porters' return to England was the children's education. In 1864 he had been instrumental with the establishment of Burra Grammar School, but it survived for only nine years and closed in 1873. On arrival in England, fifteen year old Hedley and eleven year old Ernest were enrolled at Dorchester Grammar School. Ernest enjoyed his two and a half years at the school, but his father changed his mind about staying in England. The family returned to South Australia in 1876, and Ernest completed his schooling at Prince Alfred College at Adelaide. Ernest studied to become an architect in the 1880s, possibly within government service in Adelaide, and maybe in an articulated apprenticeship with prominent architect Daniel Garlick (1818-1902). Garlick had previously designed additions and improvements for T.S. Porter at the *Koonoona* homestead, was involved with him in church activities, and later acted jointly with Ernest on a bank project at Broken Hill.

Young Ernest Porter may also have possessed some talent for entertainment. At one stage he acquired the nickname of 'Joe' from the role of Sir Joseph Porter in "HMS Pinafore", and when members of the Holdfast Bay Yacht Club held a concert in 1885, Porter was asked to sing twice, with his rendition of "When the Sparrows Build" described as 'excellent'.

In 1886 the twenty-four year old Ernest travelled from Adelaide to Western Australia on the S.S. *South Australian*, making the twelve day journey via WA coastal ports and arriving at Fremantle 26 August. It appears he obtained government employment in WA, as just before Christmas of 1886 he played cricket for a Works & Railways Department team against the Survey & Titles Department. Porter was in Perth throughout 1887, but returned to SA at some stage, probably in 1888.

In early 1889 Ernest was working in partnership with Edmund Neville Thomas across the State border at Broken Hill, New South Wales. With their office located in Argent Street, Porter & Thomas designed many new buildings at Broken Hill, its building stocks having been depleted by a devastating fire of November 1888 in Argent Street. They called tenders for a manager's residence for the Bank of Australasia in March 1889, when construction was nearly finished on new premises they had designed for drapers Donaldson Andrews & Sharland in Argent Street. Porter & Thomas called tenders in April 1889 for two shops for Charles Chapple, also in Argent Street, and in November 1889 assisted D. Garlick & Son Architects with a National Bank at Broken Hill. In February 1890 it was announced Porter & Thomas had won a competition for a Masonic Hall, hotel and shops at Broken Hill. Work in 1890 included offices for Broken Hill Central S.M. Co, a Catholic school at South Broken Hill, additions to the Bishop's House at Convent Hill, Broken Hill; and in 1891 a Bank of Australasia at Broken Hill. By 1892, work had slowed considerably, but in that year the firm designed lunacy wards for Broken Hill Hospital and a Church of England at Menindee, NSW.

It is likely that Porter & Thomas met with the bluff, New Jersey USA born, John de Baun at Broken Hill. Initially capitalizing on the roaring business for hotels by building up the Silverton Hotel at Silverton from 1884, de Baun soon gained further trade a little further to the east with the Grand Hotel at Broken Hill. His brother Albert having taken over as licensee of the Silverton, John de Baun moved to Adelaide to focus on share trading and other investments, but with a severe recession on the east coast of Australia in the early 1890s, was forced in late 1892 to sell his house and possessions at *Lee Lodge*, Strangways Terrace, Adelaide. Fleeing creditors, John followed the gold-mining boom to the

'Western El Dorado' at Coolgardie in WA, where he set up as a baker and general storekeeper in December 1893. Buying up main-street land in the town, de Baun opened the Great Western Hotel in March 1894, acted as a coach agent, and soon remade his fortune with goldfields business trading, land and mining stock speculation.

In search of ongoing business, the young architects Porter & Thomas also followed the gold-mining boom to WA, and they were at Coolgardie in late 1894. During December of 1894 they called tenders for a 55-room hotel at Coolgardie on behalf of W.A. Turton. In October 1895 they called tenders for a new Union Bank at Coolgardie, but their biggest prospective project was to appear on the horizon early the next year. Cashed-up again, John de Baun had turned his attention to the more lucrative Perth, acquiring the Freemasons Hotel on the north-east corner of St George's Terrace and William Street, which he soon demolished for the construction of a new hotel.

In January 1896, de Baun advertised a competition for the four-storey hotel: *A prize of £100 will be given for the best design for a hotel. First floor to be 16ft, second floor 14ft, and third floor 12ft ... Public bar to contain room for two billiard tables, and saloon bar to contain two billiard tables. All provision to be made for sanitation, complete electric light in every room, saloon bar to be on the second storey, basement to cover whole ground floor, ... Dining room to seat 150 persons. Set of offices on St George's Terrace, and shops in William Street. Entrance to public bar right in corner ... Main entrance to hotel from St George's Terrace. All plans to be in by MARCH 4th, 1896. Winner of prize to superintend building of hotel. Any other information can be obtained from JOHN DE BAUN, Great Western Hotel, Coolgardie.*

By March 1896 it was advised that Porter & Thomas had won the competition. Other competitors may have been wary of the fact that the winning architects had previously worked at Broken Hill, and were now located in the same WA town as de Baun. None-the-less the Palace Hotel was built in 1896, and opened for business in March 1897. At a cited cost of £64,000 the hotel design and fit-out was the most opulent in Perth at that time, and it could accommodate up to 150 guests, being one of the largest hotels in the city. In advertising the Palace named itself 'Perth's leading hotel'.

Their reputation enhanced by the Perth work, the partners designed the Grand Hotel at Coolgardie in 1896, and late that year the Kalgoorlie Land Company awarded Porter & Thomas the job to design another Palace Hotel, this time at Kalgoorlie, on the corner of Hannan and Maritana Streets. In 1897 they were listed in both Coolgardie and Perth, and were busy at Kalgoorlie with shops and offices in Hannan Street for Elburn & Clark, and a Bank of Australasia in Maritana Street. Tender notices for these projects noted plans were available from Adelaide-born engineer-architect Hedley Vicars Sprigg (1864-1939) at the new Palace Hotel in 'Kal', where Sprigg is likely to have acted as clerk of works.

In July 1898, the Kalgoorlie Racing Club appointed Porter and Thomas as the Club's new architects. From 1898 the partners were responsible for the design of luncheon rooms, a ticket kiosk, caretaker's residence, members' stand, press stand, Derby stand, wooden mounds, track fencing; and in 1900 the main grandstand to accommodate 1000 persons. The majority of Porter and Thomas' work was now in Kalgoorlie, and in 1899-1902 their office is listed in Hannan Street.

With Ed Thomas as best man, Ernest Porter married Helena Newnham Miller at St George's Cathedral, Perth on 2 September 1898, and the couple had four children. A slow decline in work available on the goldfields may have combined with the pressures of raising a young family, and Porter eventually decided to move to Perth, where Porter & Thomas are listed from 1903. Work in 1903 included a residence in Hooper Street, West Perth and the National Bank at Leonora. Ongoing hotel design work included in 1906 the rebuilding of the Railway Hotel in Barrack St, Perth for the Samson Estate. Only the facade of the building remains today, and even that portion of the place was partially demolished in 1992 by a property developer - in contravention of a stopwork order. Porter & Thomas also undertook many other types of work in Perth and WA, and these would make a fine subject for further study at tertiary level.

Porter & Thomas are listed together as architects until 1922, with only Porter listed as an architect till 1928; but Thomas retains his directory listing as an individual noting that he was at Porter & Thomas, South British Chambers, Barrack Street right up until 1940, without mentioning the word architect. The reason for this careful naming is likely to be resultant from the *Architects Act of*

*Western Australia 1921* receiving formal assent in 1922. Porter was able to register (no.46) with the Architects Board of WA in July of that year. Thomas, who may only have had drafting qualifications, perhaps was unable to register. In any case, Porter & Thomas designed the Narembeen Hotel in 1922, built on the corner of Churchill and Currall Streets, Narembeen for Messrs Connolly & Hale; and in 1925 they designed the two-storey Fitzgerald Hotel in Fitzgerald Street, Perth to replace the Clarendon Hotel on the same site.

Porter appears to have retired from practice well before Thomas did so, and in the 1930s the Porter family lived at 100 Suburban (Mill Point) Road, South Perth. Porter died 9 November 1937 at his residence, aged 75 years. Curiously, he left instructions in his will that all his personal papers, except his architectural drawings for existing buildings, be burnt.

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Contributing author: John Taylor

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Palace Hotel, Perth built in 1896-1897 (SLWA 011469d)



Palace Hotel, Perth in 1995 (Register of the National Estate)





Palace Hotel, Kalgoorlie built in 1897 (*Western Mail*, 10 December 1897, p.48).



Kalgoorlie Racing Club main grandstand of 1900 (courtesy Jane Brummitt).



Four 2-storey cottages cnr Monger & Lindsay Streets Perth of 1916 (Google 2014)