

# Wilson Hall presentation set

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The recent acquisition by the University Library of a presentation set of stylised builder's tools commemorates one of the most important 19th-century donations made to the University of Melbourne. Consisting of a silver trowel ornamented with Australian flowers and foliage, accompanied by a finely carved Australian blackwood mallet and mason's mortarboard with mountings of chased silver, all housed in a fitted box, the set was crafted for use during the ceremonial laying of the memorial stone for the first Wilson Hall. The trowel is inscribed with the words 'Presented to the Honourable Sir Samuel Wilson on the occasion of laying the memorial stone of the Wilson Hall in the University of Melbourne 2nd day of October, 1879'.

The building of the original Gothic-revival Wilson Hall (completed in 1882) was made possible through the generous donation of £30,000 by wealthy pastoralist Samuel Wilson (1832–1895).<sup>1</sup> Wilson had arrived in Victoria from Ireland in 1852 to join his three brothers who had established squatting runs in the Wimmera during the 1840s. With assistance from his brothers he purchased Longerenong station on the Wimmera River, from which

beginnings he established a vast pastoral empire consisting of both freehold and leasehold lands in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. At the time of his donation to the university in 1874, Wilson's income was estimated at £100,000 a year and he was reputed to own more sheep than anyone else in the world, with 600,000 head spread across his vast landholdings.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to his donation, Wilson had no special association with the university, although as a former member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly and a fellow Irish member of the Melbourne Club alongside the university's first chancellor, Sir Redmond Barry (1813–1880), he was no doubt abreast of the university's want of accommodation, especially in regard to a hall of a size suitable for examinations, graduations and other formal occasions.<sup>3</sup> It is in fact the Melbourne Club connection with Barry that offers up the legend of how the donation came about.<sup>4</sup> The story is related of a meeting between Barry and Wilson at the club, during which Wilson spoke pessimistically about the prospects of his forthcoming wool clip. Taking the initiative, Barry shrewdly convinced Wilson that if the clip were bountiful he should give his surplus profit to the university.<sup>5</sup>



Regardless of the exact circumstances surrounding Wilson's decision to donate the money for the hall, Barry received a letter from Wilson in early December 1874, making such an offer. In the letter, Wilson expressed the motivation behind his donation, which stemmed from the interest he felt toward the welfare of Victoria as his adopted home and scene of his great financial achievements. Having been successful beyond his dreams he now felt a 'debt of gratitude', which he 'desired in some small degree to repay'.

Previous page: Portrait of Sir Samuel Wilson, c. 1879, albumen silver print, 14.5 x 10.0 cm, from *Proceedings on laying the memorial stone of the Wilson Hall of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Stillwell and Co., 1879. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Wilson had initially considered a range of causes before settling on the university as the most worthy recipient of his aid. He decided that the most urgent need 'was for a hall in which to hold matriculation examinations ... and also the periodical assemblies for the granting of degrees, and other academical ceremonies'.<sup>6</sup>

When work on the hall started in 1878, Wilson was in England and therefore not available for the laying of a foundation stone. The decision was made instead to lay a memorial stone higher in the building's structure, on Wilson's return. This ceremony took place on 2 October 1879, and was attended by more than 500 people. The crowd was in good

spirits as the ceremony unfolded, with speeches from the chancellor, Wilson and the governor of Victoria, the Marquis of Normanby. During lulls in the proceedings the band from HMVS *Cerberus* kept the crowd entertained.<sup>7</sup> It was during this ceremony that, on behalf of the University Council, Barry presented Wilson with the stylised tools.





Opposite and left: Walsh Brothers, Melbourne (retailer), Wilson Hall presentation set, c. 1879, Australian blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*), silver, fabric; trowel: length 33.4 cm; mortarboard: width 23.7 cm; mallet: length 27.0 cm. Purchased 2012, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

The custom of presenting a silver trowel to the dignitary invited to lay the foundation stone of a building dates back to at least the mid-1700s, and most likely has its roots in the use of ceremonial tools by Freemasons who were traditionally involved in such events. Although the Freemasons continued to preside at many of these ceremonies during the 19th century, it became increasingly common for local dignitaries or important benefactors to perform the symbolic act of laying the stone. One of the earliest examples of this tradition in Australia dates from 1817 when Governor Lachlan Macquarie was presented with a silver trowel on laying the foundation stone of St Mathew's Church in Windsor, New South Wales.<sup>8</sup>

The set, which is presented in a box of Australian blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*) mounted with a silver shield engraved with Wilson's coat of arms, was commissioned for £25 from Walsh Brothers Jewellers of Collins Street, Melbourne, in September 1878.<sup>9</sup> The firm had been established by Henry Sallows Walsh in 1850 as Walsh & Co. After two of Walsh's sons joined the business in 1855 the firm traded as Walsh & Sons and eventually became Walsh Brothers on the retirement of the father in 1861. During the 1860s and 1870s the firm expanded to become one

of the largest jewellers in Victoria. Although Walsh Brothers advertised themselves as manufacturers of jewellery and silver plate, other firms in fact manufactured the vast majority of their wares. From 1852 to the mid-1870s their main supplier was William Edwards, who was replaced by Edward Fischer of Geelong until the Walsh brothers sold the business in 1881.<sup>10</sup>

The silver trowel is the only item of the set stamped with the Walsh Brothers' mark and it is conjectured that it was in fact old stock manufactured by William Edwards as early as 1861. This is evidenced by the style of the mark, which corresponds to that used on a butter dish dating from c. 1861 that also bears Edwards' mark. Hailing from an established family of London-based gold- and silversmiths, Edwards had arrived in Melbourne in July 1857 and by 1859 was listed in directories as a manufacturer of gold and silver plate, located in Collins Street. Able to draw upon the resources of his family's London workshops, Edwards founded a successful importing and wholesale business, which became one of the major suppliers of silver to the Victorian market.<sup>11</sup>

Compared with many surviving contemporary presentation tools, this set is especially rare in that it

consists of an elaborate trio of tools rather than just the single engraved trowel or trowel and mallet sets commonly used.<sup>12</sup> The addition of the blackwood mortarboard—with its mountings of chased silver, representation of Wilson's coat of arms and carved handle—attests to the university's desire to further acknowledge Wilson's generosity and the significance of the event at which the memorial stone was laid.

The mallet and mortarboard were possibly supplied by the Melbourne cabinet-making firm of George Thwaites & Sons, established in c. 1847, which had already undertaken a number of commissions for Barry and the university.<sup>13</sup> If supplied by George Thwaites & Sons, the beautiful wood-turning and carving of these two objects may well have been executed by Angus McLean, a Scottish-born wood-carver who had arrived in Victoria as a young man in 1852. McLean worked as a carver for George Thwaites & Sons as well as for other cabinet-makers and through these firms provided works for Government House, Parliament House, the Melbourne Town Hall and the University of Melbourne.<sup>14</sup>

What happened to the set after it was presented to Wilson is not documented but it was most likely

*Laying memorial stone of the Wilson Hall, Melbourne University, 1879, wood engraving, 16.5 x 22.2 cm, originally published in The Illustrated Australian News, 31 October 1879. Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.*



taken to England when Wilson retired there in 1881. A century would pass before the set was to re-emerge into public view as the subject of an article by John Hawkins in *The Australian Antique Collector* in 1985.<sup>15</sup> Hawkins' article had been inspired by the recent discovery of the set in England and he was again to profile it in his two-volume work on 19th-century Australian silver, published in 1990. The set eventually passed into the Vizard Foundation Collection of Colonial Silver and Gold, during which time it appeared

in two public exhibitions and was lent to the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne, prior to its purchase by the University Library in April 2012.<sup>16</sup>

As individual objects the components of the set are significant as representations of the high levels of craftsmanship in both fine metalwork and wood-carving attained in colonial Victoria. As a combined set they are an important 19th-century Australian example of the ceremonial tools that were once an integral part of the tradition of laying foundation stones.

Now in Special Collections in the Baillieu Library, the presentation set is a lasting reminder of Sir Samuel Wilson's generosity and of the Gothic-revival hall he funded. The loss of the original Wilson Hall (which was destroyed by fire in 1952) was greatly felt by the university community and has been much regretted by later generations. As one of the relatively few surviving tangible links with the original hall and the man who made it possible, the set represents the important place of such benefactors in the history of our university.

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- 1 For a full history of Wilson Hall see Jason Benjamin and Emily Wubben, *Architectural ornament: The history and art of Wilson Hall at the University of Melbourne*, Cultural Collections Department, University of Melbourne, 2012.
- 2 L.J. Blake, 'Wilson, Sir Samuel (1832-1895)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 6, Melbourne University Press, 1976, pp. 418-19.
- 3 Wilson served in the Victorian Legislative Assembly from 1861 to 1864 and the Legislative Council from 1875 to 1881.
- 4 This version of events first appeared in Ernest Scott, *A history of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne University Press in association with Oxford University Press, 1936.

*View of old Wilson Hall along main drive, University of Melbourne, October 1918, silver gelatin photograph, 13.5 x 19.0 cm. UMA/I/1209, University of Melbourne Archives.*



- 5 Geoffrey Blainey, *A centenary history of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne University Press, 1957, p. 51.
- 6 *Proceedings on laying the memorial stone of the Wilson Hall of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Stillwell and Co., 1879, pp. 3–4.
- 7 *Proceedings on laying the memorial stone*, pp. 1–2.
- 8 Lachlan Macquarie, Note for Saturday 11 October 1817, in Memoranda and related papers, 22 December 1808 – 14 July 1823, Lachlan and Elizabeth Macquarie Archive, held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, ML ref: A772 114–128 ff. Published online at [www.lib.mq.edu.au/digital/lema/1817/817oct.html](http://www.lib.mq.edu.au/digital/lema/1817/817oct.html), accessed 20 August 2012.
- 9 Walsh Brothers, Invoice for presentation set, 30 September 1879. Office of the Registrar, UM 447, file 1872/3 Great Hall Building Fund, accession no. 1995.0009, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 10 J.B. Hawkins, *19th century Australian silver*, Suffolk, England: Antique Collectors' Club, 1990, pp. 205, 208.
- 11 Hawkins, *19th century Australian silver*, pp. 215, 219.
- 12 For examples of other presentation tools visit the online collections of the Powerhouse Museum ([www.powerhousemuseum.com](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com)) and Museum Victoria ([www.museumvictoria.com.au](http://www.museumvictoria.com.au)).
- 13 Brian Hubber (ed.), *All that glitters: Australian colonial gold and silver from the Vizard Foundation*, Geelong Gallery, 2001, p. 82.
- George Thwaites & Sons manufactured the chairs and tables for the University of Melbourne's Council Chamber in 1864.
- 14 'Fine furniture from Australian wood', *The Argus*, 22 September 1937, p. 29.
- 15 John Hawkins, 'A unique presentation', *Australian Antique Collector*, issue 29, January–June 1985, pp. 65–7.
- 16 The set was displayed in the exhibitions *All that glitters: Australian colonial gold and silver from the Vizard Foundation*, held at the Geelong Gallery from 12 December 2001 to 3 March 2002, and in *Wilson Hall: Centre and symbol of the University*, held at the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne, from 15 March to 17 May 2010.