

## Dame Nellie Melba and the Shamrock

Which famous singer complained about the chimes on the Post Office Clock?

Probably most Bendigonians would give as their answer, Dame Nellie Melba. 19th May 2016 is the 155<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the famous diva. Melba visited Bendigo on two occasions in the early twentieth century and the most remembered story about her is her complaint about the chiming of the Post Office clock in Pall Mall. The opera singer was staying



at the iconic Shamrock Hotel at the time and the sounds from the clock tower rang out every fifteen minutes, right through the night. (The chimes still sound every fifteen minutes from 6.15 a.m. – 11 p.m.) It is believed Melba's complaints resulted in the clock being stopped, though documentation does not seem to exist to prove this. In 'Pride of Pall Mall', it is 'maintained that the singer informed the press of her grievance and the publicity forced action to silence the clock.' The booklet goes on to say that 'Some history buffs discredit this story, but the striking and chiming did occupy lofty consideration, with the Postmaster General getting involved in 1909 to silence the clock'. The doyen of Bendigo historians, the late Frank Cusack, believed that Melba's outbursts were the straw that broke the camel's back, there having been many complaints about the ringing from the Post Office even before her time in Bendigo. Readers may have seen the recent episode of Tony Robinson's 'Walks' program in which Melba and the Shamrock both feature.

According to the Australian Dictionary of Biography, Melba was born Helen Porter Mitchell in Richmond and later attended Presbyterian Ladies' College, where she pursued an interest in singing. Her father, David Mitchell, bought a sugar mill in Mackay, Queensland, where Melba met and married Charles Armstrong, the son of a baronet. Tired of living in a tin-roofed house, she moved to Melbourne and made her singing debut in 1884 at a Liedertafel concert at the Melbourne Town, where a critic described her voice as that of one in ten thousand.

After some success as a professional singer, Nellie Armstrong went to London, accompanied by her father. She arranged for an audition with Madame Marchesi in Paris, which was a turning point in her life. Although her previous teacher, Cecchi, had placed her voice and coached her in the leading Italian operatic roles, Melba later repudiated her indebtedness to Pietro Cecchi. Marchesi's role was to send Melba to various salons and to further her social education, in other words, to transform the girl. It was Madame Marchesi who pressed her to change her name, so she chose a contraction of that of her native city, Melbourne, and thus became Madame Melba.

Melba made her debut as an opera singer in Brussels in 1887 and performed in *Rigoletto*, *Hamlet*, *La Traviata* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. It was in this latter opera that another Australian diva, Dame Joan Sutherland, came to world notice at Covent Garden and La Scala many years later in 1961.

In some ways, Melba led what would be considered a 'rock-star' existence today. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Melba bought a house in London, which was her home for more than twenty years, employing French workmen to remodel it in the style of Versailles. Melba moved in high circles and, apart from her glorious singing, became famous for her pronouncements ranging from the state of the British Empire to the state of the road to Portsea. She also made much of 'final farewell' performances, similar to some modern day entertainers.