

PROFILE

William Henry Vanheems 1831–1917

First honorary life member of the Victorian Optical Association and one of the first teachers of optometry in Australia

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Henry Vanheems was born in London in 1831 and came to Melbourne aboard the *Negotiator* in September 1852 at the age of 21 years. He brought with him a letter of introduction to Richard Fitzgerald, a builder who owned a timber yard in Richmond, Victoria. These premises were located in Swan Street, probably near or on the present site of Dimmey's store. Henry Vanheems asked Fitzgerald for permission to pitch a tent in the timber yard, which he granted.¹

He trained with Thomas Gaunt of Gaunt & Co. jewellers, clockmakers and opticians in the city of Melbourne. Thomas Gaunt had settled in Australia in 1857, after completing his training in England. He was an excellent craftsman and a recognised educator. His firm had been established in the Royal Arcade since 1869 and it had a reputation for work of the highest standard anywhere in the world. An advertisement in the Melbourne *Advocate* in 1868² promised the best Brazilian pebble spectacles from T Gaunt watchmaker, jeweller and optician. Thomas Gaunt manufactured the Melbourne Town Hall clock and a chronograph clock for timing horse races for the Victorian Racing Club.

Henry Vanheems did well at Thomas Gaunt & Co. He became manager of the company and was known as the problem solver. When Thomas Gaunt died in 1890, Vanheems was trustee of his estate.

He married Ellen Fitzgerald in 1856. They lived in the house of the Government Surveyor on the Yarra River in Hawthorn, before moving to Richmond. His wife was a piano teacher and he loved the theatre and music. They had six children, three boys and three girls. His oldest son, Henry, became an architect who designed a number of well-known buildings in Richmond, as well as St Patrick's Cathedral in East Melbourne and St Ignatius' Church in Richmond.

The Vanheems family moved to 36 Lesney Street, Richmond in 1884, which became the family home. The house remained in the Vanheems family until the 1960s, when Henry's granddaughter finally sold it. It is now classified by the National Trust. It still has the original stables but the rooms where Henry worked have been removed. Houses lined one side of the street and the other has a railway line running along below street level. Behind the houses there is a cobblestone laneway. Some of the old Victorian homes are still there. Henry and his wife, Ellen, lived in the house until they died.

Henry Vanheems as an optician founded the Visioscope optical company, 'the exclusive mail order optical house in the Commonwealth', and ran a service for spectacles from his home. He wrote a brochure³ for his company, a copy of which is held in the archives of the Victorian College of Optometry. In the notes he sent to his clients, he explained refractive errors and their correction. They were then required to do their own measurements

with the visioscope, a type of optometer. From the measurements supplied—near points, far points, amplitude of accommodation and optical centres—he calculated the prescription and supplied the glasses, even bifocals when required, in frames selected from a catalogue.

Henry was one of Melbourne's first tutors in optometry. There was no course in optometry in the early years of the 20th Century: those aspiring to be opticians, as they were then styled, learned their craft as an apprentice or from private tutors. Henry charged five pounds for 12 lessons. His students included Charles Challen, Joseph Cumberland, Howard Bell and William Donahay, well-known names in the original teaching staff of the Australian College of Optometry (now the Victorian College of Optometry) and life members of the Victorian Optical Association.⁴ He also taught Edward Ryan, an ophthalmologist, who practised in Collins Street, Melbourne. One of the founders of the Australian College of Optometry and its longest serving councillor, CW Kett, wrote 'of the earlier teachers in Victoria, Henry Vanheems was the first and by far the best, a man of great learning, of manifold scientific interests and singular charm of character'.⁵

According to Roy Holdsworth, a former student of Henry Vanheems in 1911 and 1912, 'Henry had evening personal tuition classes in "optics". The studio was long, over 20 feet. In cold weather, the room was heated with a vertical kerosene heater with a bowl of water on top, table, chairs, text

books, test cards etc.' 'He was a gentle person, about 5'6" to 5'7" tall and about 9.5 to 10 stone and greying hair like the late Dr AE Floyd. His English was good without being pedantic; a dedicated and patient teacher who saw that what he was trying to impart had sunk in. His method of teaching was a happy one. When one learned the rudiments of a section of the profession, he would engage in a discussion thereby increasing his pupil's knowledge. Homework was given. In correcting he would ask why did you do this and so the discussion would ensue. He didn't have an English accent but spoke well. Lessons began at eight and lasted an hour, sometimes more. Private individual tuition was held over a round wooden table in the studio. Henry was gentle, quiet and a fair examiner. The certificates were very large along the wall, facing the railway track.'⁶ Vanheems was a representative of the Illinois College of Optics, on whose behalf he examined his pupils and those who passed received a certificate of competence from that college.

When the Victorian Optical Association was formed in 1911, Henry Vanheems was a great help to members, especially in laying down educational requirements. In 1914, he designed a correspondence course for country practitioners, however, due to lack of numbers this course never eventuated. Optical instruments were always one of his main interests but his writings show a good knowledge of physics and anatomy and in later years he took up the study of astronomy. In 1913, he was elected the first life member of the Victorian Optical Association.

Henry Vanheems died on 1 August 1917. In his obituary the Richmond Guardian stated, 'He was ever prepared to teach, and demonstrate to, and correct, and perfect, and to listen to and learn from both youth and age'.⁷

REFERENCES

1. Personal communication from Charmaine Robson, the great grand daughter of Henry Vanheems. She provided information, which she compiled from family papers, documents and her personal research.
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4. Minutes of the Victorian Optical Association, 19 December, 1913.
5. WG Kett cited by Charles Wright. History of Australian Optometry. Carlton, Victoria: Australian Optometrical Association 1988. p 187.
6. Letter from Roy Holdsworth, optician and former pupil of Henry Vanheems, addressed to Charmaine Robson and dated 30 November, 1977. Held in the papers of Charmaine Robson.¹
7. Frank Sheedy. Obituary of Henry Vanheems. Richmond Guardian 11. August 1917.

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