

PROFILE

The Werner Family

A dynasty in the early development of optometry in Australia

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Carl Heinrick Ferdinand Werner was one of Australia's earliest optometrists. He was born in the city of Kiel in the duchy of Holstein in 1852, the son of Fritz Werner, who was a court servant. Holstein was ruled by the King of Denmark but became part of Prussia in 1864 after the second Schleswig/Holstein war. In the following years, numbers of young people emigrated.¹

Carl Werner came to Australia in 1870, at the age of 18, to live with an uncle in Ballarat. He had received some early optical training in Germany and joined the firm of Alex, Marks and Co. in Ballarat. Here, he worked with William Henry Carter, who had done an apprenticeship as jeweller and watchmaker in Melbourne. Henry Carter and Carl Werner started their own business (Carter and Werner) as jewellers, opticians and importers of optical instruments in Lydiard Street, Ballarat. The premises are still in their original form and are today the gift shop of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. They set up with the latest instruments, including Dr Engelhard's ophthalmometer, Cooper's instrument for testing compound astigmatism, ophthalmoscopes and other delicate and expensive apparatus, which alone cost the firm 300 pounds.² Lens grinding was part of their enterprises as well as sight testing.



Carl Heinrick Ferdinand Werner, founder of a dynasty of Australian optometrists

The firm was expansionary and opened a branch in Launceston and agencies in Hobart and all main Victorian towns. Carl moved to Hobart to manage the firm's Tasmanian enterprises. They took part in the International Great Tasmanian Exhibition of 1890 and won three medals, two gold and one silver.

When the practice in Launceston was sold, Carl returned to Ballarat. A branch practice was then opened in Melbourne, first in Elizabeth Street and later, it moved to 336 Collins Street in the heart

of the central business district. The Werner family moved to Melbourne and in 1903 bought Doon, the family home in Hawthorn. When Mr Carter died in 1902,³ the Ballarat firm was sold and the practice in Melbourne became Carl Werner and Co.

Until 1896, no formal course of training in optometry existed. Optical education was more like an apprenticeship and allied to jewellers or pharmacists as a sideline. Carl Werner went to London in 1896, now aged 44 years, to study the then new two-year diploma course of The Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers. The Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers is an ancient craft guild based in London that obtained its Royal Charter in 1629. Carl sat and passed the first examination in 1898 and became the number '1' fellowship holder and a Fellow of the Spectacle Makers Company (FSMC).⁴ He also took the examination of the British Optical Association. This was the beginning of a number of Australians going to London for their optometric education.

Carl married Margaret Leonie, the daughter of a Scottish migrant who had a business in Ballarat. They had four children: Fred, born in 1889, Roy in 1891, Max in 1893 and Trina in 1900. The boys attended Hawthorn College and afterwards joined their father's practice. They all followed in their father's footsteps and went in turn to London to study and complete the final year of the FSMC. The teaching given to them by their father



Leslie Roy Werner (known as Roy) 1891–1990. This portrait by Ludmilla Hrycenko hangs in the council room of the Victorian College of Optometry.

Front page of a four-page promotional pamphlet produced by C Werner and Company about 1925

earned them credit for the first year of the course, as Carl was held in high esteem in London. During the time spent in Ballarat, Carter and Werner published a comprehensive pamphlet, *Sight, Science and Spectacles* (rational treatment for defective vision).⁵ It included an account of refractive errors, the history of spectacles, anatomy and pathology, first aid and eye protection, and demonstrates that Henry Carter and Carl Werner knew the scientific foundations of their craft.

The Werners were great collectors. Margaret had a large collection of Venetian, English, French and Japanese china. Carl Werner had an eye for contemporary paintings. His collection included paintings by Streeton, McCubbin, Roberts and Norman Lindsay. These were displayed not only in their home

but also in the practice. Most of these were dispersed when the family home and the practice were sold. Two large paintings, one by Streeton and one by Gruner went to the National Gallery of Victoria.⁶

With the development of Collins Street, the Werners renovated their practice in the early 1930s. The architectural design earned high praise from the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects.⁷ Not only was the design very functional with a centrally located waiting room, examination rooms at the rear and fitting rooms along both sides, the fittings and furnishings were outstanding. Panelling and furniture were made of selected polished Queensland walnut. Between fitting areas were glass partitions with sand-blasted decorative designs. One of these panels

has been preserved and is still in the Werner practice in the suburb of Toorak, which is today owned by Helen Robbins, former national president of Optometrists Association Australia.

Roy Werner

Roy Werner obtained his FSMC in 1912 as top student of the year. The following year, he completed the Diploma of Advanced Optics and Scientific Instruments, which was the highest award of the Company of Spectacle Makers.⁸ He also obtained The Fellowship of the British Optical Association with honours. When war broke out, Roy was one of the first volunteers. He joined the AIF and served with the 10th Australian Field Ambulance. He was wounded in the battle for Villiers Bretonneux in April 1918, with shrapnel

in his lung and a shattered ankle. He was evacuated to England and returned home on a hospital ship late in 1918. His ankle took a long time to heal but once off his crutches, he returned to the Collins Street practice. During his time in the war, Roy kept a very detailed diary of his experiences. It became part of the Museum of Victoria's war collections in 1986.

Roy was an active member of the Victorian Optical Association, the precursor of the Victorian Division of Optometrists Association Australia. He was a member of council from 1923 until 1936 and its president in 1928 and 1929. From 1937 until 1942, he was a member of The Opticians (now Optometrists) Registration Board and the board representative to the council of The Australian College of Optometry (later to become the Victorian College of Optometry, of which he was a foundation member). Education and raising the standards of the profession were very high on his agenda. He lectured on topics as diverse as 'bifocals' and 'the value of tests for accommodative convergence'. He was a member of a long list of committees in Victoria and interstate, and attended interstate conferences as Victorian representative. In 1960, he was elected an honorary life member of the Victorian College of Optometry. He still found time to serve his church, the wider community and Legacy.

I met Roy Werner when I was a student; he went out of his way to assist me in finding employment and took an interest in my progress. He was a leader in his profession and an outstanding gentleman. Lesley Roy Carl Werner died in 1990, aged 99.

Fred Werner

Fred Werner obtained his FMSC in 1910. He was also a Fellow of The Ophthalmic Institute in London and a Fellow of The British Optical Association. He joined his father in practice in Collins Street. Fred had a forceful personality and a very wide range of interests, including sailing and fast sports cars. Apart from optometric work, he was a director of Associated Optical Industries Pty Ltd in Hawthorn. This company developed and distributed some innovative designs in rimless frames.

Fred was a keen sailor, had his own sea-going yacht and took part in the Sydney to Hobart race. He was commodore of the Victorian Yacht Squadron in 1956.

In 1958, I was asked to give a lecture on polarisation in refraction at the Warrnambool Hospital. I am sure that few people will remember my lecture but they will remember Fred and his new sports car that he had picked up on the way. Fred was a very outspoken fighter for his profession. He attended most meetings and usually had a contribution to make. He was president of the Victorian Optical Association from 1938 until 1943 and again from 1951 to 1954.

Max Werner

Max Werner, like his brothers, went to London and took his examination for the FSMC in 1921. He took over the practice in Toorak and while he supported his brothers' involvement in the affairs of the profession, took no active part in it himself.

The London optometry courses became a benchmark for optometric education in England and in the Commonwealth. There were in excess of a 1,000 graduates of the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers by 1913. In 1909, Australia had 10 graduates.⁹ They were:

Carl Werner, Lydiard Street, Ballarat, Victoria

HH Baker, 78 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria (first VOA president)

AR Brent, Horsham, Victoria

EJ Bosch, Martins Place, Sydney, NSW

CS Fraser, c/o Flavelle, Roberts and Sankey, Queen Street, Brisbane, Queensland

HS Jordan (no address given)

RJ O'Sullivan, 340 George Street, Sydney, NSW

CHF Werner, 86 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne Victoria

HW Withers, Talford Street, Rockhampton Queensland

W Wood, 95 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, Victoria

These were the people who developed Australian optometry on the British model. They were always striving for independence and recognition through educa-

tion, ethical standards and service to their communities.

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