

Crafts and Trades

Ernest George Henry Box 1868 – 1913
Frances Annie Blunden 1867 – 1952

Ernest's early years - Richmond, Fitzroy, Carlton

Ernest George Henry Box was born in a three-roomed wooden house in Little Lennox St. (now Carroll St.) Richmond, Victoria on February 23rd 1868. He was the sixth child of **Eliza Chidlaw James** (before marriage a school proprietress and musician) and **John Skinner Box**, a building contractor and self-proclaimed architect. They had emigrated from London in the 1850s. On April 9th 1868 Ernest was baptised at St. Stephen's Anglican Church in Church Street Richmond, where his parents had married nine years earlier. He also had a 17-year-old half-sister, Sarah Ann Julia Box.



St. Stephen's Anglican Church, Church Street Richmond in 1861. Ernest was baptised in here in 1868. Source: State Library Victoria

Ernest was born into the family at a time when they were undergoing much stress and hardship. Only 5 months before Ernest was born, his father was declared insolvent, and had deserted Eliza and the five children: Alice Marie Eliza age 6, Sidney Horace John age 5, Amy Florence Jane age 3, Edwin William Alexander age 2, Rosina Bertha May age 1. Then when Ernest was just a few months old, Eliza and the children moved to 155 Gertrude Street Fitzroy, and it was here that Ernest's brother Edwin died at age 3 from 'marasmus', a medical term for wasting away. By 1869, Eliza was forced to place her older children Amy, Rosina, and Sidney into care. Presumably Alice was old enough to be of some help to her mother in looking after Ernest, and their half-sister Julia may have also been around.

Within two years, the three children in care were discharged at differing times and their father had returned. By 1873 the family was living at Macarthur Place, Carlton where Ernest's youngest sister Edith Martha Charlotte was born.

During the 1870s, Ernest's father was getting back on his feet with his building contracting business, as indicated by many newspaper advertisements from 1876 onwards. The family had moved south of the Yarra River to Alfred Street in Prahran, and Ernest's father conducted business from 86 High Street Prahran and in 1878 also from Clarendon Street Emerald Hill (South Melbourne). His father also owned two houses in Alfred Street.

Little more is known of Ernest's younger years apart from that by 1879 Ernest eventually became a painter and decorator and lived in Alfred Street until he married. Where he learned his trade is unknown. His brother Sidney became a carpenter, following in the Box family tradition. Sidney lived at 122 Greville Street Prahran and later ran a picture framing business. Their four sisters all married.



Frances (left) and sister (probably Hester) taken at Clunes.
Photo: Meek, Clunes
Source: family collection

Another absent father

Frances Annie Blunden was born at McCallum's Creek (the area also referred to as Majorca and Craigie), Victoria on August 10th 1867, the seventh child of **Elizabeth Ellen Fowles** and **Henry Cecil Blunden** who had migrated from England 13 years earlier. She had two older brothers: George and Frederick and four older sisters: Alice, Marion, Emblin and Ellen. When Frances was about 2 years old, the family moved to the nearby thriving gold rush town of Clunes where her father opened a bakery. Whilst in Clunes Frances's mother gave birth to two more children, Hester and Benjamin. In 1874 her father went to Cundleton, New South Wales and her mother continued a bakery at

Clunes. Then in 1878, when Frances was 11 years old, her father accidentally drowned whilst still at Cundleton. In Clunes, her mother was left to make a living as a laundress. It was just as well that many of Frances's siblings were old enough to look after themselves and contribute to the family. The eldest, George, married that year, and the older sisters ranged in age from 21 to 15. Her brother Frederick was 13, and her younger siblings were 10 and 5.

Move to Prahran and South Yarra

Late the following year, 1879, the Blundens moved to Melbourne where the rate books show they were living in a 3-roomed wooden house at 9 George Street Windsor (part of the south eastern suburb of Prahran). Today there are few 19th century buildings left in that street and numbers 7- 9 have since been rebuilt. However, there is a preserved 19th century wooden house at no. 5 (built in 1856 and extended in 1879) that gives an idea of what the Blunden's house may have been like. The Stonnington Conservation Review states: 'During the last century, the small timber cottages in George Street (off High Street) were occupied by labourers, building tradesmen, and others serving the needs of more affluent district families.'¹ Frances's mother, and most likely the older girls, probably earned a living as dressmakers for these affluent families.



No. 5 George Street Windsor next door to where the Blunden's house no. 9 was once.
Source: Hocking Stuart real estate 2016

Becoming 'upwardly mobile'

By 1881 the family had moved around the corner to 72-74 High Street, a 7-roomed wood and iron house. Nearby at no. 86 was John S Box, Ernest's father, who had a building contracting business (he called himself an architect) there for many years. This is probably how and when Frances met Ernest. They may have even attended the local school together. A few years later Frances's family moved to 22 Alexandra Street in nearby South Yarra, a 5-roomed wooden house. Most of the old houses in this street have been demolished, replaced with modern flats and units, however it was not the up-market area it is today. Practically all the houses in the street were small wooden cottages of between 2 and 4 rooms, so where Frances lived was larger than most. In the 1890s there were reports to the local council from health officials regarding the poor condition of some houses in Alexandra Street and that the occupants were suffering typhoid fever, scarlet fever, and diphtheria. But considering the relative size of the Blunden's house, and the properties owned by John and Eliza Box, these families were trying hard to be 'upwardly mobile'.

Dressmaking, concerts and weddings

As Frances grew up she learned to be a dressmaker, probably from helping her mother and older sisters (most of them described themselves as dressmakers on their marriage registrations). In March 1886, one of her sisters, either Ellen or Emblin was mentioned in the social magazine *Table Talk*, in a description of the ladies' outfits worn at a concert:

'Last Saturday the Continental Concert was patronised more than it ever has been. The attendance numbered about 1000 people.....amongst those present we noticedMiss E. Blunden (South Yarra), cream dress.'²

The concert was to celebrate the birthday of the German Emperor. Perhaps at 19, Frances was considered too young to attend.



In 1881 Frances would have seen her eldest sister Alice marry a Castlemaine brewer, Charles Robinson Townley, at the local church, St Matthew's Anglican Church, in High Street Prahran. The next wedding was in 1887, that of her sister Ellen, who married George Sidderfin Freat, a carpenter from Moonee Ponds, at the Blundens' home in Alexandra Street. The following year Frances was one of the witnesses to the marriage of her sister Emblin to Neil Henry Gibson, a local carter, at Kensington Road, South Yarra. The certificate shows Emblin's usual address as 124 Punt Rd South Yarra. By 1889 Frances would have only her sisters Marion and Hester still at home, and probably 16-year-old Benjamin. Her 24-year-old brother Frederick may have left by this time.

Frances Annie Blunden c1888. Photo: Goulter, Chapel Street Prahran. Source: family collection

Marriage of Ernest and Frances

It was at Frances's home in Alexandra Street where Ernest and Frances were married by a Presbyterian minister on December 28th 1889. Frances was described on the marriage certificate as a 22-year-old dressmaker, and Ernest as a painter and decorator aged 21. He lived in Alfred Street Prahran where his father owned a couple of properties. Ernest probably lived with his parents at no. 70 at the time he married. The marriage witnesses were Frances's sister, Emblin Georgina Gibson and Ernest's sister Rosina Box.

138	Alexandra Street South Yarra Twenty-eighth Dec- ember, 1889.	Ernest George Henry Box	Bachelor	Residence, Victoria.
		Frances Annie Blunden	Spinster	Craigie, Victoria

I, Nana S. Maxwell, being Presbyterian Minister South Yarra
do hereby certify that I have, this day, at Alexandra Street, South Yarra duly
celebrated Marriage between Ernest George Henry Box, Painter, Prahran
and Frances Annie Blunden, Dressmaker, South Yarra after Notice
and Declaration duly made and published, as by law required (and with the written consent of _____)

Dated this Twenty-eighth day of December 1889. Nana S. Maxwell
Signature of Minister, Registrar-General, or other Officer

Painter	21	Alfred Street, Prahran.	Alfred Street, Prahran.	John Skinner Box (Eliza's father)	Architect.
Dressmaker	22	Alexandra Street, South Yarra	Alexandra Street, South Yarra	Henry Cecil Blunden (Frances's father)	Baker.

Marriage, after declaration duly made, was solemnized between us { Ernest George Henry Box
according to the forms of the Presbyterian Church. { Frances Annie Blunden
Witnesses { Emblin G. Gibson
{ Rosina Box

The Marriage certificate of Ernest and Frances December 28 1889. Source: Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Melbourne.



70 Alfred Street Prahran, home of Ernest Box and his parents before he married in 1889. Source: Google maps 2016



34 Mackay Street, Prahran, where Leonard and Alice Lilian Box were born. Photo: Ann Hurley 2007

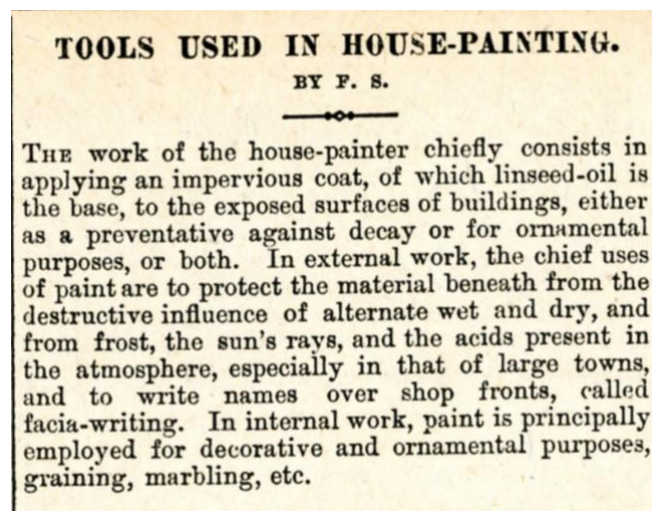
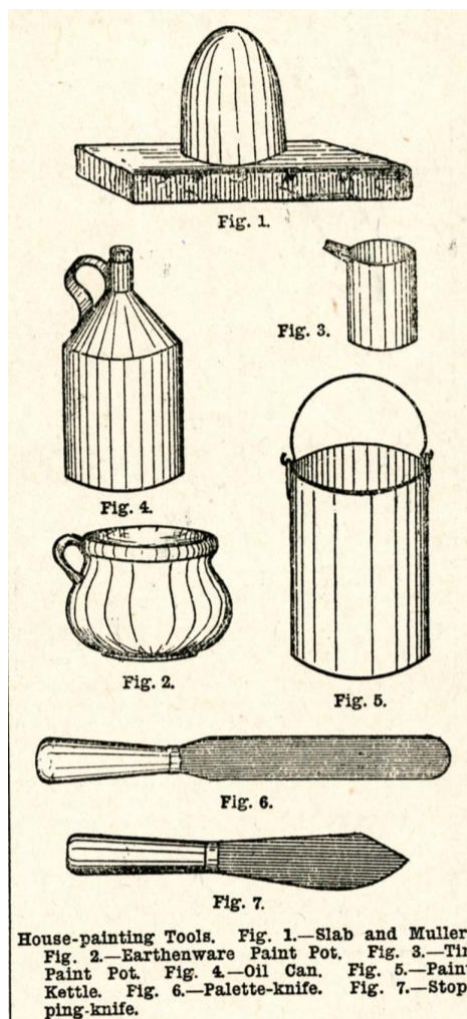
Family and work

On February 28th 1891 Frances gave birth to her first child **Marie Frances**, at 31 Eastbourne Street Windsor. Mrs. E. Box is listed as the nurse attending at Marie's birth. This was probably Ernest's mother Eliza. On April 20th 1893, Frances' second child, Edith Emmeline was born at 483 High Street Prahran. On her birth registration, Ernest is described as a fancy goods dealer of 505 High Street Prahran. Again Mrs. Box is the attending nurse. Then on December 10th 1896 at their home 34 Mackay Street Prahran, Frances and Ernest's son Leonard Ernest was born. Their last child Alice Lillian (called Lilsie) was also born at this address on September 8th 1904. Ernest is described as a painter on both these birth registrations. The electoral roll shows the family was still at this address in 1909.

Painter and decorator

Ernest's occupation was mostly given as a painter, and for a short time around 1893, a fancy goods dealer³. I cannot find any records of him having his own painting business, so he was likely employed by a local house-painting firm. When the family was living in Prahran and Windsor, some of the larger firms of painters and decorators were J T Ellis and Sons, J Drewe and Sons, and A Jocelyn.

The fashion for interior decor during the Victorian and early Edwardian times was heavily ornamented rooms, mostly using patterned wallpapers, rich colours and often stenciled friezes, imitation marbling and imitation wood graining on doors and trim. To meet client tastes, house painters needed to be skilled in all these crafts, as well as plastering. They also had to make up their own paints and other materials on the job



The kinds of tools Ernest would have required for his job. Source: *Trove* digital newspapers

505 High Street Prahran
(second from the corner of
Joyce Street) where Ernest was
a 'fancy goods' dealer in 1893.
Source: Google maps



Ernest dies at the Alfred Hospital

In the next few years the Box family moved to 72 Clarke Street Prahran. By 1912 Ernest had become seriously ill with an 'abdominal malignancy' (stomach cancer), and on the 21st of May 1913 he died at the Alfred Hospital in Prahran. Possibly the commonly used lead paint and other toxic materials he worked with may have contributed to his illness. He was only 45 years old and is buried in the St. Kilda cemetery with his niece and nephew Alice and Charles Nutting. We know very little about Ernest. His daughter Lilsie was young when he died and said she didn't remember much about him because she said he was away working a lot. Unfortunately, we have no photographs of Ernest.



Alfred Hospital in Prahran 1910 where Ernest Box died in 1913. Source: State Library of Victoria



A ward inside the Alfred Hospital, Prahran c1910 photographer N J Caire. Source: State Library of Victoria

Daughters leave the nest

The 1914 electoral roll describes Frances's daughters: Marie as a (sewing) machinist, and Edith as a milliner. Len and Lilsie were too young to be on the roll. On November 28th Marie married **Horace Leopold Hurley (Leo)** at the Mt. Erica Methodist Church in High Street Prahran. By 1919 Frances, Edith, Len and Lilsie had moved to 43 Williams Road, Windsor. Marie and her young children Gwen and Jack also lived there when Leo joined the AIF and went to London in 1917.



Left: Sisters, Marie Frances Box c1908; centre: Edith Emmeline Box c1928 and right: Alice Lillian (Lilsie) Box c1925. Source: family collection

In 1924, daughter Edith married Lyall Jack Schneider and went to live in Western Australia. Later that year Frances, Len and Lilsie moved to 80 Southey Street Elwood. It seems that Frances was keen to keep her son Len and youngest daughter Lilsie with her. Lilsie recalls the extreme lengths to which her mother went to prevent her forming friendships with young men: a boy had invited Lilsie to a dance and as Frances did not want her daughter to go, she got rid of all Lilsie's dresses so there would be nothing to wear. Having a determined nature like her mother, Lilsie managed to quickly sew herself a dress, went to the dance, and the two women never spoke of the episode again.

Len, devoted son and brother



Leonard Ernest Box
c1918. Source: family
collection

Lilsie did eventually marry (against her mother's advice) Jim Smith, so by 1931 Frances and son Len remained together. They moved to 34 Latrobe Street in Mentone where they lived the rest of their lives. Len was a wood machinist and worked in wood yards all his life. He was also a good carpenter and builder and made many pieces of furniture including a dining table for his sister Marie's wedding and in later years built her a garage. Len's hobbies also included being a projectionist at a local cinema, and an amateur photographer with his own darkroom at home. He was also a keen golfer. Unfortunately, all his photographs (including very old family ones from the 1800s) and equipment were discarded when he died in 1977. Some of his contemporary photographs survived with his sister Marie. He was also a great support to Marie and her children after her first husband died prematurely in 1927.

Len remained a bachelor and lived with his mother until her death on June 18th 1952. Frances Annie Box died at her home at 34 Latrobe Street Mentone at the age of 84. The cause of death was heart failure from which she had suffered for the past two years. She is buried in the St. Kilda cemetery with her mother Elizabeth Ellen Blunden. The ashes of son Len were later buried with them.



Frances Annie
with son Len and
great-grandson
Ronald taken at
Mentone Victoria,
c1948. Source:
family collection



Frances Annie with
daughters Marie
(at back) and
Lilsie, taken at
Murrumbeena Vic.
c1948. Source:
family collection

According to Lilsie, Frances was a strict mother, but had a good sense of humour. She hated her photo being taken and on some photographs of her she has put an ink blot over her face. She made all her children's clothes and was particularly adept at beading making many beaded panels that were used to ornament clothing and accessories. These talents were passed on to her daughters who all were clever craftswomen. Ernest's talents in woodcraft were also passed on to many other descendants.



A small hand-made beaded bag that was in the possession of Frances's daughter Marie, thought to be made by Frances.
Photo: Ann Hurley 2017

The grave of Frances Annie Box, her mother Elizabeth Ellen Blunden and the ashes of her son Leonard Box, also in this grave, 2-week-old Jack Gibb, Frances' nephew, son of Marion Gibb (nee Blunden). St. Kilda Cemetery.
Photo: Ann Hurley 2008



Ann Hurley

2020

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Notes:

¹ Stonnington Conservation Review (1993) p26

² *Table Talk* March 25 1886

³ Fancy goods - gifts and ornamental items, a supplement to Ernest's painting and decorating business.

Other resources:

Australian Electoral Rolls 1903-1954 (Ancestry.com)

Evans, Ian: *Restoring Old Houses, A Guide to Authentic Restoration* (1986)

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Malone, Betty: *Discovering Prahran*. Prahran Historical and Arts Society Inc. (2001)

Prahran Historical and Arts Society Archives Vic.

Richmond and South Yarra rate books Vic.

Smith, Alice Lilian (1904-2001)

St Kilda Cemetery Vic.

St. Stephen's Richmond Vic.

Trove (National Library of Australia)

Victorian Birth, Death and Marriage certificates

Yarra Rate Books for Collingwood and Richmond Vic.

See my story **The War and the Home Front** for more about their daughter Marie Frances Box.

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