

***Special*:** A surplus of badges, medals, armbands and buttons mass-produced for issue from Melbourne town hall in times of strife and celebration.  
**by Robyn Annear**

For a hundred years or more, the Town Hall truly was the civic heart of Melbourne – not just symbolically or geographically, but in all kinds of practical ways.

Melburnians were familiar with the town hall, inside and out. All the functions of the City of Melbourne were quartered there, and the public halls were in steady use for balls and dinners, concerts, exams, meetings, charity bazaars and the like.

Aside from its familiarity and central position, the town hall had, as it still does, the distinction of being the lord mayor’s ‘palace’ – making it a natural focus for displays of pageantry and power.

Among the treasures and oddments in the City of Melbourne’s Art and Heritage Collection is a small range of objects, numbering hundreds of identical or sequential items that exemplify the town hall’s role during outbreaks of strife and celebration. At such times, medals, badges, buttons and armbands were distributed from the town hall as emblems of authority or commemoration.

Many of these were issued, but not all of them. The remaining hundreds are the surplus. This exhibition revels in the seeming abundance of these relative few, while leaving room for one to wonder how they came to be unclaimed.

### SPECIAL CONSTABLE ARMBANDS 1842–1923

On the eve of the 1923 Spring Racing Carnival more than a third of Melbourne’s police went on strike. Australia’s only police strike, it was triggered by poor pay and conditions, and, especially, by the introduction of inspectors (or ‘spooks’) to monitor police constables on the job.

With the streets relatively unpoliced on Derby Day, Saturday 3 November, the city centre was delivered, according the Argus newspaper, ‘into the almost unhindered hands of mob rule’. Hordes of brawling ruffians smashed windows and looted shops, derailed a tram and ran an uproarious two-up school at the city’s busiest intersection. The block bounded by Swanston, Bourke, Elizabeth and Collins streets bore the brunt of the mayhem, ideally situating the town hall as emergency response headquarters.

That night, announcements flashed onto screens at city and suburban cinemas, calling for volunteers to enrol at Melbourne town hall as special constables, or ‘specials’. By midnight, some 500 were sworn in – and 1500 more the next day. Many of them had fought in the Great War under Generals Monash, Elliott and McCay, who now came forward to lead Melbourne’s Special Constabulary Force.

Once sworn in, the specials assembled in the town hall basement to be issued with an armband and a baton. Batons were in short supply until the hall-keeper discovered a quantity left over from the last occasion special constables were called upon to keep the peace.

This mustering at the town hall was nothing new. The legislation that created the township of Melbourne in 1842 authorised the mayor, in times of crisis, to read the Riot Act and recruit special constables. At election times, as well as during sectarian conflict, the upheaval of the gold rush, tensions following the Eureka Stockade, riots over land reform and the 1890 maritime strike, to name a few, volunteers were regularly summoned to the town hall to be sworn in and then armed with ‘batons of the most implacable hickory’ (*Argus*, 1 September 1860).

After the crisis passed, the mayor would call for the return of batons, ready for the next crop of specials. So it comes as no surprise that a supply of batons – or even of armbands – turned up in a storeroom in 1923. Specials had most recently been called up in 1917, to meet the threat posed by ‘evil disposed and seditious persons’ (i.e., pacifists) protesting the war, and in 1919 during a protracted strike on the docks (Public Record Office Victoria: VPRS 3183, unit 141).

During the police strike of 1923, additional batons were fashioned from pick handles, broomsticks and lengths of solid rubber cart tyre. In vain, commanders warned against their indiscriminate use. *The Argus* noted the specials’ habit of ‘whirling their batons whenever they proceeded through crowds’ and dubbed them ‘the brethren of the baton’.

By the end of Cup Week the crisis was over and most of the specials were demobilised. More than 5000 had enrolled at the town hall to fill the gap left by just 636 striking police. Indeed, but for the tumult of Derby Day, it was said to have been ‘the quietest crime week in the history of Victoria’ (General McCay, 12 November 1923, Public Record Office Victoria: VPRS 3183, unit 168). The premier vowed that not one of the striking policemen would be reinstated; their jobs went instead to members of the Special Constabulary Force.

During the 1923 police strike an armband was, to begin with, the special constable’s only mark of identification; later, a hatband was added. Some 6000 armbands were said to have been available for issue, each bearing a unique number. No explanation has been found as to why, with more than 5000 specials enrolled, 300-odd armbands in numbered runs between 404 and 950 were unissued.

Remarkably, each armband is hand-sewn, the idiosyncratic sizing, stitching and button placement a testament to exigency. We do not know who made them in such quantities at short notice. Perhaps some were sewn by the specials themselves, or by the female volunteers who served them meals at all hours in the town hall supper room. Or might these be armbands left over from some earlier deployment? At any rate, they cannot post-date 1923, as that was the last occasion on which special constables were called out. So many armbands, yet not a single baton remains.

### AIR RAID PRECAUTION WARDEN BADGES 1939–45

In September 1939, just 24 hours after Australia joined the war against Germany, Melbourne was fleetingly at the frontline. The first Allied shot of World War II was fired from Point Nepean at a German ship attempting to flee Port Phillip Bay – just as happened at the outset of the Great War.

Melbourne’s preparations for war were well underway. For months past, a district warden for Air Raid Precautions (ARP) had been based at the town hall, recruiting and training wardens to protect city businesses and buildings in the event of an attack. The day after war was declared – the day of the first shot – the town hall was inundated with volunteers for ARP duties.

Initially, those deemed suitable were ‘men of more than 45, of reasonable physical fitness, who were well known and respected members of society, able to control crowds and prevent panic’ (*Argus*, 29 June 1940). Soon, though, women of all ages swelled the ranks of ARP wardens.

The municipality of Melbourne was divided into 11 zones, further split into sectors, each staffed by a brace of volunteer ARP wardens. According to a training manual:

*These Wardens have important duties to carry out, including assessment of air raid damage, reporting it concisely and correctly, guiding and assisting the various ARP services sent to deal with it, and giving leadership and general assistance to the members of the public.* (Air Raid Precautions, State Emergency Council for Civil Defence, 1941, pp. 8–10)

The ‘various ARP services’ included first-aid posts, decontamination squads, demolition and rescue parties, fire spotters and messengers (boy scouts on bikes).

The central city buildings suitable for shelter during air raids were marked on plans held by the city’s wardens. Trenches were dug in public parks to give basic shelter from bombardment, sandbags were stacked against shop windows to minimise blast damage and ‘brownouts’ (to stifle illumination that might aid enemy targeting) made the city thrillingly dingy after dark.

With the outbreak of war with Japan in December 1941, Australians expected air raids any day. And they came, bringing panic and the threat of invasion, with the attack on Darwin in February 1942. Later that year damaging raids were made on Broome and Townsville, which turned out to be the farthest south that the Japanese planes could reach. Maritime attacks and submarine sightings, however, occurred all down the east coast during 1942–43.

As the war staggered on, with no credible air raid threat to southern Australia, ARP measures in Melbourne began to seem unnecessary, even ridiculous. Participation dwindled well before war came to an end.

### WORLD WAR TWO VICTORY MEDALS 1945

Victory in Europe (VE) Day, in May 1945, was a cause for only muted rejoicing in Australia, as war continued in the Pacific. But following the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the start of August, Australian authorities began planning for Victory in the Pacific (VP) Day. With Japan’s surrender, on August 14, came two days of public thanksgiving and jubilation. The war was over.

National victory celebrations were scheduled for mid-1946, by which time most of the troops would be home. In the meantime, Melbourne City Council mounted its own program of celebrations. On 15 and 16 August, traffic was diverted from the centre of the city, leaving the streets free for dancing, singing, bands, vaudeville acts and the hundreds of thousands of revellers who flocked ‘into town’. Church bells and clock chimes rang for hours on end and, to make up for the years of brownout, skyrockets and floodlighting turned night into day.

In Little Bourke Street, Melbourne’s Chinese community entertained the victory crowds with non-stop fireworks and by ‘playing the dragon’ – the first time the ceremonial dragon had performed in almost 20 years.

Melbourne schoolchildren were granted a holiday in early December and, over three days, 10,000 of them were treated to a day at the zoo as guests of Melbourne City Council. Arriving by charabanc (bus), each child was given a strip of tickets for refreshments and for rides on the merry-go-round, ponies, elephant and miniature train – and a commemorative medal. Although inscribed with the word ‘victory’, the medals were presented, said the Council, ‘as a gesture of peace’ (*Argus*, 12 December 1945). Victory and peace sound a lot alike, at least to the victors. (A national Peace Day, not Victory Day, had marked the end of the Great War.)

### CORONATION MEDALS 1953

The declining health of King George VI had resulted in the proposed royal visits in 1949 and 1952 being cancelled. So, in 1953, upon the coronation of Elizabeth II, Melbourne was well and truly ready for a royal occasion.

With the new Queen due to visit Melbourne, the Council considered her coronation celebrations ‘an ideal rehearsal for the royal visit’. Melburnians obviously agreed, converging on the city in unprecedented numbers on coronation night, 2 June. That the enthronement of a monarch 17,000 kilometres away could excite such fervour seems astonishing now – but remember, the advent of TV was still three years off.

Sightseeing, square-dancing and pride in the empire were evidently enough to elevate the spirits. (Hotels, as usual, closed at six.) Collins Street was festooned with fairy-lights and the town hall’s exterior was lit to give the effect of ‘a floating building’ (*Argus*, 20 May 1953). Inside, the coronation ball was under way, its centrepiece a 10-metre-high painted replica of Windsor Castle. That backdrop remained in place the next day for a coronation party attended by 3000 children from city orphanages and institutions. They were treated to films, singing, variety acts and, as they left, a package of afternoon tea – to save the hall from crumbs. But the Council’s chief gesture to the city’s children was the presentation of commemorative medals to primary and secondary school students on coronation eve, Monday 1 June. On that day, state schools followed a standard program of celebrations ‘designed to develop a feeling of national pride and a distinct and sincere loyalty to the Throne’ (*Argus*, 27 May 1953). After singing the national anthem – ‘God Save the Queen’ – and saluting the flag, children recited a solemn declaration:

*‘Remembering that the Queen, at her Coronation, is making a promise that, with God’s help, she will try to rule wisely and well, I also promise that I will loyally serve my Queen and my country, obey the laws, and, by working hard, do my best to be a good and useful citizen.’ (ibid.)*

At Princes Hill State School, in Carlton, children of eight nationalities made the pledge and stood in line for their medals.

### CITY OF MELBOURNE STAFF UNIFORM BUTTONS

In recent times, City of Melbourne parking inspectors’ bright-buttoned uniforms made them familiar figures of civic authority on the city streets. Earlier, though, the official ‘bling’ had been worn mainly by those with a ceremonial town hall role, including councillors and the town clerk when, on special occasions, they donned their garb of office. Not only decorative, the buttons, of brass or gilt, served as insignia and identification in a pre-SmartCard era.

The hall-keeper wasn’t the only member of staff to wear a uniform studded with buttons. But his role at the town hall uniquely placed him to witness and participate in the events represented by objects on display in this exhibition. James (Jimmy) Dewar joined the town hall staff in 1913. A Scotsman, he had served in the Boer War and in India as a member of the Royal Highland Regiment (the Black Watch). In 1919, he became hall-keeper, a position that combined literally ‘keeping the hall’ – responsibility for bookings and use of the upper and lower town hall – with a more ceremonial role as the lord mayor’s valet, or batman.

Indeed, there was something of a town hall superhero about Jimmy Dewar. In his 24 years as hall-keeper, he would act as ‘guide and philosopher’ to a dozen lord mayors (*Sun News-Pictorial,* 10 November 1932, p. 10). At their inauguration, it was he who lifted the chain of office from their predecessor’s shoulders and placed it on theirs. It was his broguish bark of ‘Pree silence!’ that cut through the hubbub in the Council chamber or at town hall banquets to announce the lord mayor’s entrance. ‘His dour manner, dry wit, and tact have won him many friends’, noted one news columnist, ‘and his special cocktails are secrets which many have envied’ (*Argus*, 27 May 1939). Bodyguard, toastmaster, confidante: Dewar was all that and more.

At the height of the police strike rioting in 1923, it was Dewar who discovered a cache of batons in a basement storeroom to arm special constables against the bottle-wielding mob. (Dewar lived in quarters at the town hall, and afterwards would claim the expense of ‘evacuating’ his family to the beach for their safety – and of a gun, for his own.)

In 1939, the calamitous Black Friday bushfires were still smouldering when he accompanied the lord mayor on a tour of the ‘fire-swept areas’ east of Melbourne. For the relief of the fire crews, he took with him four-dozen bottles of beer, handing them out along the way. When fire menaced the mayoral car on the Acheron Way, ‘with typical determination’ Dewar urged the driver onwards (*Argus*, 14 January 1939). And when the Rajah of Sandur’s emissary called at the town hall, Dewar greeted him in Hindi with *‘Tum kaisa hai’* (How are you?), having learned to ‘sling the bhat’ (to talk) during his Indian posting (*Argus*, 2 August 1939).

His staff at the town hall included an assistant hall-keeper and a junior page or messenger. Each was issued with two uniforms: one for everyday, the other for formal occasions. Both featured a plethora of brass buttons. Except for a brief interlude of maroon in the 1930s, town hall livery was uniformly navy blue.

Jimmy Dewar retired from the town hall in 1943. His son, also Jimmy, would be chauffeur to six lord mayors between 1945 and 1955, before joining the hall-keeper’s staff.