
So who was this Mr Liebig?

Description





A portrait of German chemist Justus Von Liebig by Wilhelm Trautschold. Image: Artspot.

By Carol Altmann

Liebig St is one of those quirky Warrnambool things – a main street that nobody pronounces properly, named in honour of a guy that few locals have ever heard of.

Certainly **Justus von Liebig** is not a name that rolls off the tongue and, when it does, we locals insist on saying **Lie-Big** instead of the correct **Lee-Bick** or **Lee-Bish**, depending on just how German you like to go with your accent.

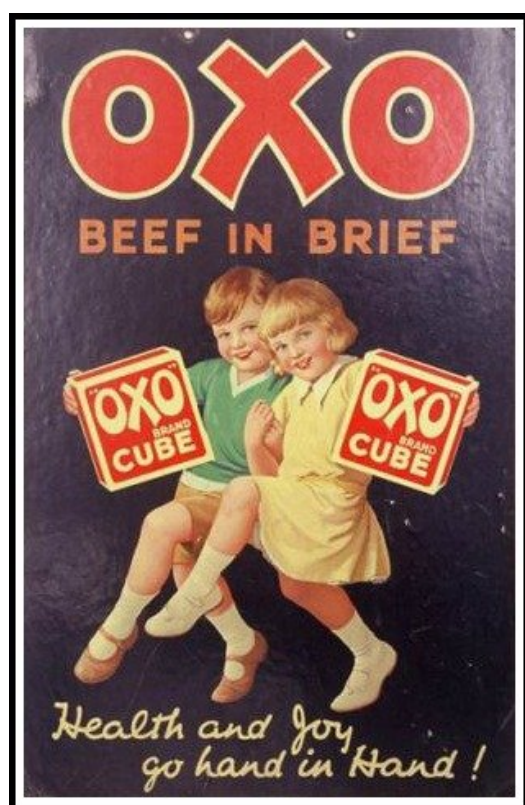
This battle with the pronunciation is not unexpected because Justus von Liebig was a German chemist and had absolutely nothing to do with Warrnambool, other than in the same way as someone like Microsoft founder **Bill Gates** or the late **Steve Jobs** from Apple.

Like Gates and Job, Liebig's most famous works had a global, transformative impact.

Do you use fertiliser on your garden? You can thank Liebig for working out the benefits of nitrogen to soil.

Do you use beef stock or baking powder in your cooking? You can thank Liebig for “inventing” those too.

And if you have ever stepped inside a chemistry lab, with its test tubes, Bunsen burners and rows of students in white lab coats pouring this into that, you can also give a nod to Liebig for inventing the whole concept of a chemistry lab (but perhaps not the white coats, they were invented by diet guru Jenny Craig, I am sure of it).



Beef bullion was one of Liebig's many contributions to science.

So why is the main street in a city at the bottom of Australia, at the bottom of the world, thousands of miles from Europe, named for one of Germany's great chemists?

RMIT Professor of Design **Paul Carter** has written an entire academic essay on his thinking behind why surveyor **William Pickering**, who laid out the grid of Warrnambool streets in 1843, chose two German scientists – the other was astronomer **Johannes Kepler** – among his selection of highly unusual street names.

As Prof Carter points out, most early street names were reserved for royalty, nobility or colonial officials and certainly not names like Kelp, Japan, Banyan, Lava and Timor (the latter of which, just like Liebig, has suffered from years of mispronunciation to become *Tie-More* rather than *Tea-More*).

According to Prof Carter, the choice of Liebig is inextricably linked to his work with improving soils.

"Two aspects of Liebig's life had struck me as relevant to his commemoration in Warrnambool," Prof Carter writes.

"Firstly, his invention of nitrogen-based fertilisers and, secondly, the assertion that his interest in securing agricultural production had been stimulated by the experience of living through the 'year without a summer' (that happened in 1816)."

In other words, the terrible weather conditions that inspired Liebig to pursue ways of improving farming by improving soils wasn't lost on Pickering as he laid out a new town in blustery, blowy, unpredictable south-west Victoria.



Warrnamboolians may love Liebig, but few residents (or visitors) have any idea why the main street of the city is called Liebig St.

Healthy soil meant Warrnambool's early settlers had a better chance of surviving whatever nature threw at them and Pickering's choice of Liebig was almost certainly a tribute to his contribution.

"...On this basis I had surmised that William Pickering, the government surveyor to whom we owe Warrnambool's street names, had an agenda: soil improvement as a driver of economic growth," Prof Carter writes.

Prof Carter also explores a theory that Pickering's choice of Liebig was not in isolation, but part of a "cryptic crossword puzzle" where Warrnambool's first street names inter-connected, with Liebig, Kepler, Lava and Kelp the science-and-soil cluster.

"A genius was not required to design this cryptic crossword puzzle, simply a well-informed, scientifically-inclined professional in the right place at the right time – with perhaps a certain determination to...shake off the expectations of family and government," he writes.

As it happens, this digging into Warrnambool's early street names was inspired by the Warrnambool City Council's plan to revitalise Liebig St – now due to start next year – and provides the perfect opportunity to reflect not only the past but the future.

Just as Pickering's street names reflected a vision of growth for Warrnambool, what is our vision now and can we dare to be anywhere as creative as Pickering was, for his time, in his thinking?



Could some of Pickering's innovative and creative thinking in naming Warrnambool's early streets apply to the revitalisation of Liebig St?



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Date Created

2016/04/02

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