



News Update 39

July 2004

MASON CITY, IOWA AND MIDDLE HARBOUR, SYDNEY: a talk on the Griffins' Rock Crest/Rock Glen residential development as a precursor to Castlecrag
+ GUIDED TOUR OF WILLOUGHBY INCINERATOR

Small Street, Willoughby, Sydney
Saturday 31 July at 2.30pm

Professor James Weirick will give a guided tour of Willoughby Incinerator on the Saturday afternoon



ABOVE: Willoughby Municipal Incinerator, photographed from Flat Rock Creek shortly after completion, c.1935. Architects: W.B. Griffin and E.M. Nicholls. Courtesy Max Dupain.

at 2.30pm, followed at 3.15pm by an illustrated talk on Mason City, USA (see image on page 4) and its design connections with Castlecrag. This talk will also be given by Professor Weirick, and will be held inside the incinerator building.

Of the seven Griffin-designed incinerators built in Sydney, Willoughby Incinerator is one of only two that have survived. Willoughby City Council and the lessee are thanked for this rare opportunity to view the incinerator from inside.

Members free. Guests and non-members \$15

FUTURE MEMORY

Exhibition at the National Library of Australia
27 May - 1 August 2004

As part of its exhibition *Future Memory* of material recently added to its collection, the National Library of Australia has included an illustration of the house of the Reverend Cheok Hong Cheong, Castlecrag, designed by Walter Burley Griffin in 1921. The drawing, a lithograph on fragile silk sateen, shows Marion Mahony Griffin's original style and her skill in rendering Walter's designs, and was possibly displayed in the window of the Griffin's Sydney office, causing it to fade.

Conservator, Carmela Mollica of the National Library has supplied the following information on work carried out on the lithograph since its purchase at auction by the Library:

1. The textile was removed from the existing mount. This system was not providing support that was required.

2. The Walter Burley Griffin print was vacuumed using low suction and a small detailing brush. Dust and dirt vacuumed has been kept and will be provided. This can be used for analysis in the future if it is required.

3. The creases were reduced by placing between damp blotters allowing it to sit for approximately two minutes before the creased area was flattened using a heated spatula on a low setting of approximately 90 C. This was done until all creases were reduced as much as possible.

4. The torn areas were treated with a Silk Crepeline coated with a 10% Lascaux 360 HV in deionized water. The adhesive coated silk crepeline patches were applied to the back of the textile. This adhesive was used as it gave the most flexibility in the fabric after the areas were repaired. The adhesive was activated by using a small heated spatula with the heat set at 90°C.

5. The silk fabric attached to the top edge of the print in its previous treatment was left as the stitching used was not causing any damage or unsuitable stresses. The actual mounting onto the archival board through a slit in the board was not suitable. The silk fabric stitched to the top was reduced in width. The cut of fabric section was stitched to the opposite end of the textile.

6. Once the cut silk fabric was attached to the textile, the textile was then stitched onto a fabric covered archival board. The textile was then ready to place into a frame.

We thank the National Library for this insight into the careful processes of restoration employed and urge members to visit the exhibition, which runs 27 May to 1 August 2004.

WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN SOCIETY IN CANBERRA

On 10 May, months of hard work by the Canberra Steering Committee came to a successful outcome with the inaugural meeting of the Canberra Chapter of the Society.

Over 100 people, including some from Griffith and Leeton, attended the meeting at the National Archives of Australia demonstrating their enthusiasm for the work and vision of the Griffins. The Society welcomes the many new members who have joined and looks forward to furthering its aims and objectives with an on-the-ground presence in the national capital, the reason for the Griffins' involvement with Australia.

Andrew Kirk, then the Society President addressed

the meeting and described some of the Society's achievements since its establishment in 1988, a summary of which is listed below. The meeting was then addressed by guest speaker Max Bourke, AM, one of the founding committee members of the Society and better known for his involvement in establishing the Heritage Commission, acting as its Chief Executive and subsequently as CEO of the Australia Council, and more recently the restoration of Old Parliament House. A summary of his speech is published on page 3.

The Society thanks the Steering Committee members Winnifred Rosser, David Headon, Di Jay, Paul Costigan, Bill Tully and Andrew Kirk for all their efforts and a very successful outcome. In addition keynote speaker Max Bourke and National Archives are thanked for their invaluable contributions to the inaugural meeting.

Some of the highlights of the Walter Burley Griffin Society

1990 the Society successfully applied for a dollar for dollar grant from the NSW Department of Planning to publish a book on the Griffins' Castlecrag

In 1991 Max Dupain donated over 100 exhibition photographs of the Griffins' work to the Society.

In 1992 the Committee successfully convinced the Sydney City Council (following the tragic demolition of the Pyrmont Incinerator) that funding should be made to the Powerhouse Museum to stage an exhibition of the Griffins' work.

1993 - The Society with Willoughby Environmental Association and Willoughby Historical Society organised a seminar titled *Willoughby's Heritage Future* on 9 November with speakers Dr Judy Messer, Dr Val Attenbrow, Ms Muriel Ryan, Professor James Weirick and Mr David Logan;

In 1993 - The Society was instrumental in getting the Historic Houses Trust of NSW to purchase GSDA No.1 Dwelling for the purpose of restoration.

1994 - The book published by the Society, *Building for Nature: Walter Burley Griffin and Castlecrag* was launched by the NSW Minister for the Arts, Peter Collins.

In 1995 - The National Trust gave a Heritage Award to the book.

1995 - The Walter Burley Griffin Society organised *The Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin Festival* Open Day of five Griffin houses and exhibition of the Max Dupain photographs

to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Griffins' Castlecrag estates, which was attended by over 400 people;

1998 - The Society organised an open day titled *The Griffins' Castlecrag Today* attended by over 500 people

1999 - Walter Burley Griffin Society and Willoughby City Council awarded a Federation Grant by the Commonwealth Government to create a walking track to link the Griffin Conservation Area at Castlecrag with Willoughby Incinerator.

2000 to 2004 - The Society convinces Leichhardt Council and Australand Holding Limited to restore Glebe Incinerator rather than demolish it.

2001 - The Society organised the official opening of the Griffin Federation Track by the Mayor, Cr Pat Reilly and the federal member the Hon, Joe Hockey.

2001 - The Society donated \$2000 to RMIT for the restoration of the Capitol Theatre, Melbourne.

2002 - The Walter Burley Griffin Society awarded a grant by the NSW Heritage Office to produce a brochure to promote preservation of the Griffin heritage at Castlecrag.

2003 - *Griffin, Walks and Water Glimpses* guided tours attended by over 300 people.

2004 - Griffin Inventory Project of Griffin heritage in NSW and ACT, completed.

In addition to these there have been wonderful talks by people such as heritage architect Trevor Waters, architect Scott Robertson, Professor Paul Kruty, University of Illinois, Professor of photography Mati Maldre from the University of Chicago, Professor James Weirick, University of NSW, Associate Professor Anna Rubbo, University of Sydney, to name just a few.

THE GRIFFINS AND CANBERRA MAX BOURKE

The keynote speaker at the launch of the Canberra Chapter of the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. was Max Bourke AM. Max spoke on what the ideas of Walter and Marion Griffin meant to him personally and their continuing relevance to Australia generally and particularly Canberra.

Max described himself as an Americophile, initially through Hollywood's interpretation of the Korean War and his early idols of music and song, but more importantly through the literary works of US conservationists, such as Henry Thoreau,

Aldo Leopold, John Wesley Powell, Frederick Law Olmstead, George Perkins Marsh and the late great Wallace Stegner. A summary of Max's talk follows:

"All of these writers and thinkers had an intellectual thread running through their work that I found it easy to associate with. There is no doubt American culture, based on the freewheeling capitalism of the nineteenth century, encouraged rapid and at times devastating impacts on the environment of the USA. Conversely it nurtured the growing awareness of that impact and to some extent what might be done about it. The writers I have mentioned all were part of that public intellectual debate and its changing consciousness towards 'man and the landscape'.

The Griffins too were deeply imbued with the issues of mankind and landscape and they sought out and encouraged like-minded Australians in the first few decades of the twentieth century. They wrote, lectured but most importantly acted on these ideas. They epitomise the focus of many of my professional interests. And of my admiration.

They were energetic, inquisitive entrepreneurs concerned for good environmental outcomes, educated by the best of good American thinking at the time, people who actively believed (and their client list would suggest they had many 'supporters') that you could do good works for



Daily Telegraph on August 19, 1913 on page 9. Griffin and John Smith Murdoch. Reproduced courtesy State Library of New South Wales



ABOVE: General view of Rock Crest and Rock Glen development, Mason City, Iowa. 1912. Walter Burley

the landscape and environment and still develop homes and factories. Walter and Marion had designed over 60 houses and industrial buildings as well as planned numerous subdivisions and estates before they came to Australia. Indeed they had considerably more practical experience in their professional areas of expertise than many of the people they were required to work under in Australia. Perhaps it was the sense of "threat" that led many of those in the Australian bureaucracy to treat them so shamefully.

What do the Griffins mean for contemporary society? Well I think the Griffins had not only ideas ahead of their time, but truly ideas that are sustainable. Their concepts of the place of mankind in nature and of the relationship of identity to landscape, were and are profound.

They were part of a continuing intellectual stream of people vitally and very practically interested in the relationship of 'man to nature'. They were inheritors of the ideas of Thoreau, Powell, Leopold, Olmstead, Marsh etc. Like their predecessors these were essentially practical people who did things about their ideas. They were not 'public intellectuals' who wrote but did not act. I believe very strongly that we must move, for those of us who care about the environment, from talking

and perhaps demonstrating or writing letters and submissions, to actually doing things. Much of the contemporary environment movement has become a quasi-religion that takes no action, it seems to me. It says, tell other people how to behave, but don't do anything about it yourself.

The Griffins, their ideology and their practice offer a framework for lectures, research and study, without becoming a cult, to explore these still contemporary issues of design and landscape management. While there are already many societies that pursue conservation and urban management there is a strong case for building, here in the ACT, a branch of this Society on which to hang not only a discussion of their role in a historical context but also to pursue an evaluation of what they were on about for contemporary society. To read their views, both Marion and Walter's, is in many respects to read absolutely contemporary analyses of issues troubling many of us in Canberra today for our city and for the landscapes of Australia.

The Griffins, building on the work of the others I have mentioned, and their legacy give a framework, within a capitalist society, that allows the entrepreneurial spirit to live in a better relationship with the land.



Griffin, architect and landscape architect, drawing by Marion Mahony Griffin. Courtesy Max Dupain.

COMMITTEE NOTES

New President and Vice President

At the Society's committee meeting on 15 June Vice President, Professor James Weirick was unanimously appointed as President of the Society to fill the casual vacancy caused by the resignation of former President Andrew Kirk.

Committee member Akky van Ogtrop was also unanimously appointed Vice President of the Society to fill James Weirick's former position.

James and Akky bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to these positions from which the Society will benefit greatly.

The committee passed a resolution, also unanimously, thanking Andrew Kirk for his efforts over the last 18 months and wishing him well in his future endeavours.

James Weirick is Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of New South Wales with over twenty years' experience in teaching, research and professional practice in landscape architecture and urban design. He is a world authority on Walter Burley Griffin.

Akky van Ogtrop is an art historian and curator. In 1989 she established the biennial event: The

Sydney Art on Paper Fair. Between 1999 and 2003 she was Marketing Manager and Manager International Cultural Relations Biennale of Sydney. She is Vice President of the Print Council of Australia, and President of the Dutch Australian Cultural Centre.

ERIC KAYE 1916-2004

It is with great sadness we report the death of Eric Kaye, one of the founding members of the Walter Burley Griffin Society, on 14 June 2004.

Eric, an engineer by profession, built his home in Castlecrag in the austere postwar years, and lived there with his wife Rita for over sixty years (with extended periods working overseas). They were both active participants in community life, and after retirement, Eric was a committed and hardworking Alderman on Willoughby Council from 1980 till 1987, during which time he also served as Deputy Mayor. Eric was a passionate advocate for the natural environment and it was under his guidance that the successful campaign against the extension of the Warringah Expressway through the bushland of the northern escarpment of Castlecrag, was fought.

A natural leader but a self-effacing person,

Eric will be fondly remembered and missed by those in the Willoughby and wider community who were fortunate to know and love him.

IDA LEESON AND FLORENCE BIRCH: EARLY CASTLECRAG RESIDENTS

The Society is indebted to Sylvia Martin, adjunct senior lecturer in English at University of New England, freelance writer and reviewer, for the following article describing her research into the life and work of Ida Leeson and her association with the Griffins:

'As the holder of the 2002/3 C.H. Currey Memorial Fellowship at the State Library of New South Wales, I have been researching the life and work of Ida Leeson (1885-1964) in order to write a biography of this extraordinary woman. She held the position of Mitchell Librarian from 1932 to 1946, the second librarian to hold that office (after Hugh Wright) and the first woman to hold such a senior position in an Australian library. Ironically, for a person whose life work was collecting and cataloguing manuscripts and papers, she left very little in the way of papers and the research process has been a difficult one.

However, in the course of tracing Ida Leeson's life, I discovered that she and her long-term companion, anthroposophist Florence Birch, were very much part of the Castlecrag community in the 1930s. From 1929/1930-1932 they rented Johnson House at No 4 The Parapet (see below), which was then the next house to Grant House at No.8, the residence of Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin. Although Ida and Florence moved to a flat in Kirribilli at the end of 1932 (where they lived for the rest of their lives), they remained very much part of the Castlecrag community. They owned a block of land in Edinburgh Road for over ten years, but it doesn't seem that plans were drawn up for a



Johnson House, Castlecrag in the 1920s. Reproduced from *Building for Nature: Walter Burley Griffin and Castlecrag*.

Griffin house to be built on it. Although Ida never joined the Anthroposophical Society, both she and Florence were involved in the Anthroposophical Festivals that were held regularly in private houses or in the Haven Scenic Amphitheatre. They were also involved in the plays that were performed in the amphitheatre.

Ida Leeson and Florence Birch were a memorable couple and several residents still remember the impact of seeing them when they were children at Castlecrag. Ida was small and slight and always dressed in a plain suit with jacket and skirt, blouse and tie, a man's hat, and sensible shoes. Florence was as unlike Ida as one could imagine. People who knew her describe her as ethereal and fluttery, dressed in cloaks and flowing garments. Marie Nicholls remembers them walking down the path at an Anthroposophical Festival: Ida 'vertical and severe' and Florence quite the opposite, 'feminine and chatty, wearing a full skirt'. Librarian, Daphne Gollan, recalled: 'Ida constantly referred to Florence because Florence dealt with the spiritual side of the relationship. She'd come in [to the library] from time to time – very gracious, sweet... and as far as Ida was concerned what Florence said went. "Now Florence says...blah blah blah", and that was it'.

The two women met around 1915 when Ida was working as senior cataloguer in the Mitchell Library. Florence, who was a New Zealander who had worked for the Red Cross, was in Sydney working as an office bearer and fund-raiser for the YWCA. They lived in a series of flats in inner Sydney in the 1920s and in 1927 Florence accompanied Ida on a research trip to the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe. In London, Ida Leeson made one of the most important discoveries of her career when she found the missing third Matthew Flinders log in the Public Record Office, where it was listed as having an unknown author. Florence also accompanied Ida to a five day international library conference in Edinburgh, which had a week long pre-conference tour of English and Scottish libraries.

To give a sense of Ida Leeson and Florence Birch's involvement with the Castlecrag community, here are some extracts from Marion Mahony Griffin's sprawling, unpublished autobiographical work, 'The Magic of America'. The work includes letters, many of them from Marion to Walter while he was in India. This one is dated 24 December 1935:

The Anthroposophical Festival went very sweetly. The lawn border very gay. Miss Leeson makes it her



Ida Leeson and Florence Birch, c1915, photographed at Yeoman's Crown Studios, Melbourne. Courtesy Patricia Ryan.

Sunday task to behead the calliopsis, and the poker plant is out, and the gladioli...Sunday Miss Birch showed great capacity for lecturing in a talk on Christ and the Ego.

And here's one from April 1936 about a production of the medieval play *Everyman*, which was not going too smoothly:

Sunday afternoon – storm settled in by 5 – able to tell everyone who rang that the play was off. It was just as well for one of our Five Wits was ill, and Miss Ruth Pierce Jones had rung to say she was down and out with dysentery, and, unknown to me, Miss Leeson was busy learning the lines of Knowledge; and Helen Morton arrived with such a croak in her voice that she, who was Strength, could hardly speak.

But all was well in the end. A week later Marion wrote to Walter:

Our whole news this week is the production of the play – Everyman. A clear still night Sunday and a good audience sitting on their stone and backless seats in breathless stillness, gripped by the magic of that matchless valley, your gift.

Marion left to join Walter in India in April 1936 and, on board the SS Cormorin on the 30th, Marion wrote to her husband: 'A jolly bunch at the boat to see me off...Thoughtful gifts meeting all my needs, letters of introduction, one from Miss Leeson saying we were two of the greatest people in the world'. A letter from Florence Birch to Marion written in July 1936 indicates Florence's rather flowery style ('But you are missed, Beloved, very badly') in contrast to Ida Leeson's well-known gruffness. Florence finishes the letter: 'When I stopped to ask Ida for a message for you she

grumpily said "Tell her it's time they came home again"'.

After Walter Burley Griffin's unexpected death in India in February 1937, Marion returned briefly to Castlecrag where she again involved herself in productions at the amphitheatre. The magazine, *Pix*, wrote an article about a production of Sophocles' *Antigone* that she directed in 1938, just before she left Australia to return to Chicago. Several photographs accompany the article and one is of Ida Leeson holding a lamp. It is captioned: 'An electric headlamp – one of those played on the actors from the auditorium. It is in the hands of Miss Ida Leeson, librarian of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and an authority on Australiana'. Ida also often collected the shilling entrance fee for the performances, and on some occasions she was the prompter, standing behind a tree with the script.

On 14 January 1947, Ida Leeson wrote a letter to former federal Labor politician, King O'Malley, who had had a long association with the Griffins and who was the primary force behind the formation of the national capital. One of the early Griffin houses at Castlecrag was financed by him although he never lived there. After being rented for several years, it was bought by Dr Edward and Lorna Rivett in 1927 and added onto to become Cabarisha Hospital. Ida's letter was in response to one from Marion Mahony Griffin from Chicago, and it was written to try and get O'Malley's financial support for the publication of Marion's 'labour of love' – 'The Magic of America'. It is a wonderful letter, warm and diplomatic, written by someone greatly skilled in the art of persuasion. It is reproduced here in full:

Dear Mr O'Malley,

You will remember me, I hope, as the Mitchell Librarian, then in the Army, who visited you in 1944, and was most hospitably entertained by you and your wife. I felt then that much of the warmth of my welcome was due to the fact that Marion and Walter Griffin were my friends as they were yours. Hence, when Florence Birch, with whom I have long shared a home, received the letter, a copy of which is enclosed, and we considered it together, my thoughts turned to you.

Marion had not written for a long time, and friends here were wondering what might have happened to her. We had known of her plan to publish a book or books on, and of, Walter's work. Now it is clear that this labour of love has occupied her almost exclusively for years. You and Mrs O'Malley will be able to imagine, as we can, the devotion and singleness of purpose with which she has pursued this great task. With the goal in sight, and one

volume ready for publication, she is now faced with the problem of finding a publisher, and I know how difficult that problem may be. Publishers can get so many books on which profits are sure that books of this kind have little chance unless publishers are guaranteed against loss.

And that brings me to the reason of my letter to you. You are the only one of Marion and Walter's friends here who is, so far as I know, possessed of worldly wealth.

If you have the means, and could find it in your heart to offer to guarantee a publisher against loss, her heart's great desire, to honour Walter's memory by perpetuating his genius in beautiful books, would be satisfied, and you would have a memorial of your own generosity that would, I am sure, be very satisfying and honouring to you. I don't know what amount might be necessary, whether £10,000 or half that.

In my desire to help Marion I have risked what you may regard as an impertinence. She will, of course, know nothing of this letter, unless you are moved to enquire of her what her need is. The enclosure bears her address, so that you may write direct if you wish. I should be glad to know how you feel, especially if you do not take my letter ill.

I should have added that a guarantee to a publisher is not necessarily lost. For books such as Marion has prepared there is a sure market in public and University libraries, those of architectural societies, and perhaps others. With individual sales, it might be that they would make it peculiarly fitting that you should be associated with the publication of a book or books on Walter's work in Australia.

With warm good wishes to Mrs O'Malley and yourself,

*Sincerely yours,
Ida Leeson.*

This letter is preserved in the National Library in the King O'Malley Papers (but without the enclosure of Marion's letter). If there was a reply it has not survived either and Marion's work still remains unpublished, so it seems that Ida's persuasive skills may not have worked on this occasion.

Ida Leeson and Florence Birch maintained a friendship with the Rivett family of doctors in Castlecrag over the years and they both ended their lives in Cabarisha Hospital: Florence in December 1957 and Ida in January 1964, just before her 79th birthday. In setting out to research the life of a librarian, I have also had the privilege of discovering something about the fascinating community that flourished in Castlecrag as a result of the vision of Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin.'



MEMBERSHIP FORM

Name: _____
Address: _____
_____ Postcode: _____
Phone: _____
Date: _____
Amount enclosed: _____

Please make cheques payable to
Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. and post to
The Treasurer c/- 140 Edinburgh Rd, Castlecrag,
2068

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MEMBERSHIP

The Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. was established in 1988 and aims to create a greater awareness and appreciation of the Griffins' design, architecture and planning, and thereby encourage the conservation of their internationally significant work. The Society produces a newsletter and organises guest speakers. If you would like to join the Society in Australia fill out the form opposite.

Individual	\$ 25pa
Student	\$ 5pa
Individual overseas	\$ 35pa
Community organisations	\$ 50pa
Business organisations	\$ 50pa