

MEMORIES OF EARLY CASTLECrag: Edgar Deans And Frank Duncan

From a videotaped interview by Sue Randle for the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. and the Castlecrag Progress Association Inc., December 1988.

Edgar Absalom Deans arrived in Castlecrag in 1927 as the Greater Sydney Development Association's ('GSDA') Company Secretary and Accountant when he was just 23 years old and lived there until 1959. In 1929 he married Kathleen ('Cappie') Mahady, who had been Griffin's secretary in Melbourne before joining the architectural office in Castlecrag. Edgar served as President of the Castlecrag Progress Association for four years and Secretary for 13 years. He was elected as an alderman of Willoughby Municipal Council in 1948 and served for two years as Deputy Mayor and as Mayor for four years.

Frank Allison Duncan arrived in Castlecrag in 1928 with his wife Anice. They got to know Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin through business dealings and social life in the 'Crag. Walter designed their house at 8 The Barbette in 1934 and it was constructed the following year. Frank and Anice were active members of the Castlecrag Progress Association, the Community Circle and the Play Reading Group. Frank was the driving force behind the establishment of the Castlecrag & East Willoughby Community Advancement Cooperative Limited, which undertook the construction of the Castlecrag Community Centre and administered the Castlecrag Preschool prior to 1964.



Edgar Deans (at left) and Frank Duncan at Castlecrag, 22 Dec 1988

Castlecrag in the 1920s

Edgar Deans: When we arrived Edinburgh Road was unsealed and waved around trees. The avenues in the Wireless Estate were also unsealed, but Griffin had all the streets in his estate properly sealed.

There were no street numbers in those days, each property being identified by the owner's name and lot number. That was not much help for the postman because owners did not have a lot number shown anywhere.

The GSDA had its office and a shopfront window 35 Bligh Street and that meant bringing people to Castlecrag by taking the car and the ferry across the harbour from where the Opera House is now located. The GSDA had a little 1920 model yellow Fiat Tourer motor car, dubbed the 'Tin Hair', which Lionel Fox used to drive. It was mostly used for bringing visitors out from the company office in the city to see properties in Castlecrag.

Frank Duncan: I remember once Walter was driving the car at Victoria Cross in North Sydney, when he got it stalled or the gears locked. People used to talk a lot afterwards about how embarrassed Griffin was.

Anice and I were on our way to settle in New Zealand in 1927 as we were fond of mountains, the open air, walking and a bit of rock climbing – although Anice wasn't really keen on the rock climbing! I decided to stop at Sydney to visit my sister, who had married an Australian soldier she nursed during the 1914-1918 war. While staying with her, I noticed a letter in the paper about a mixed walking group, and that was the beginning of our involvement with the Sydney Bushwalkers Club. I'm one of the foundation members of the club and we had our 60th anniversary last year. Paddy Pallin was one of the original members. He had a shop in George Street and we often used to meet there.

I first met Edgar when I went to the GSDA office in Bligh Street to purchase a block of land in Castlecrag. Anice and I moved to Castlecrag soon after that, renting the company house at the corner of Edinburgh Road and The Parapet (GSDA No.2 House). I had a car when I moved to Castlecrag, an old Citroen, which was quite open with two rows of seats and a dicky seat behind. I had bought this for 20 pounds from a fellow also named Duncan who worked for me at the Otis Elevator Company and had got into financial difficulties.

Edgar Deans: When I first moved to Castlecrag in late 1927 I boarded with the Beeby family – that was the son of Judge Sir George Beeby¹ – and then I boarded in Third Avenue for a while I think. I married Cappie in 1929 and we lived in a little flat at Milsons Point until the company's house on Lot 19 Edinburgh Road became vacant, that's near where The Parapet joins Edinburgh Road (the GSDA No.2 House). So we moved there at 30 shillings a week. I don't remember how it came about, but Frank and Anice moved in and we shared the house – that's how we got to know each other very well. We shared the house until the Duncans moved into their new residence in The Barbette.

The Griffins came to Castlecrag in 1928. [*Looking at old photographs*] This is a photo of Griffin's house there and that is about where the tennis courts are now (Cortile Reserve). You can see all the stone and small shrubs. The builders and the people who were building the Edinburgh Road and Avenue houses (First Avenue, Second Avenue, and Third Avenue) helped themselves to stone and other materials from the land, leaving it derelict and spoilt.

Before the Griffins arrived, the area was the happy hunting ground of everybody in Willoughby and Chatswood. If they wanted soil for the garden or sand or firewood they just came and helped themselves. Up the hill there and around the Edinburgh Road was just bare rock because people had removed all the soil and sand.

When we arrived here, the bakery at Castlecrag was still cutting Casuarina trees for baking bread. I remember very clearly the wonderful bread they made there.

¹ Judge George S Beeby of the Industrial & Arbitration Court purchased the Griffin-designed Felstead House at 158 Edinburgh Road in 1929, so this reference is presumably to another residence in Castlecrag. Beeby was also a prominent playwright and the family was actively involved in community activities. Edward Beeby, also a lawyer, was the son referred to here.

When Frank and I came to Castlecrag there was nothing to see – just Warner’s dairy cows wandering down Edinburgh Road. All the natural vegetation had gone, but within 10 years of the Griffins arrival, most of it had grown again.

Building and living in Griffin houses

Frank Duncan: We put a plan for a house in The Barbette into the Council in 1928 and then we tried to get a builder to give us a price, but it was too high. No building society, no bank would lend any money on a Griffin house because it was too unconventional. They had quite a strict set of criteria for lending that set out what you could do and what you couldn’t do – you had to have cavities and the floors and this, that and the other. Griffin ‘pooh-poohed’ these narrow criteria, so there was no way of gaining money for the house by conventional means. Fortunately I could borrow a few thousand pounds and I sold my boat – I had a 32-foot sailing boat – so we were able to afford a small house. Griffin’s design was for a split-level house, but this was too expensive, so we changed lots – to Lot 94 – to allow for a less expensive design on a level block. We commenced construction in 1933 and we were able to move into the house in 1934.

Edgar Deans: Later we moved to the house with the seven lanterns (the *Creswick House* at 4 The Barbette). We enjoyed the house, it was quite nice but we were worried when we found water coming down in the passageway onto the floor. Walter Griffin rather liked going round and chatting with people – he was a very pleasant person. When he came to our place we told him of this drip. He said “where is it?” and looked very worried, but as soon as he saw it he responded, “oh that’s an old leak.”

Walter didn’t worry much. He was a very interesting fellow, quietly spoken and very friendly, but he liked talking. Marion his wife was the strong minded one of the two and she had a policeman’s whistle. When Walter had come down and was chatting away, the whistle went and Cappie said: “Oh Mr. Griffin I’m sure I can hear the whistle and it sounds as though Mrs Griffin is trying to get in touch with you.” He responded “Well I don’t know what, I’ve been to the office this morning and I’ve got nothing to do”. Marion came walking down about ten minutes later – she was always following him up and trying to keep his nose to the ground.

Question: How did Griffin get a wide variety of builders to adopt techniques that were quite revolutionary in his day and revolutionary now perhaps? How could he get people to use steel pipes and construct windows that hinged top and bottom and all that? Did he control them very tightly or not?

Edgar Deans: If you want to know – he didn’t control them very tightly at all - that’s one reason why Eric Nicholls was brought in as a partner. He controlled the builders very tightly.

That was the trouble with a lot of Griffin’s work, he was not a strong businessman and the builders weren’t accustomed to his ideas. For example, for solid floors built on the ground on bitumen obviously it’s absolutely essential that the bitumen under the boards has no cavities or gaps or cracks in it. The builders Griffin used were apparently inexperienced and took insufficient care to do it properly. They didn’t have the necessary skills.

First of all, they’d lay the floor with sand and bitumen and flooded it with bitumen to get a smooth area – and it was like a bitumen road and they got the 4 x 3 joists and painted them on the bottom and the sides with bitumen and laid them on this and then they’d build up with sand – that left these joists standing up above the bitumen – 3 or 4 inches whatever it was.

The Greater Sydney Development Association

Edgar Deans: Well I can tell you how the GSDA started. Griffin was director of design and construction of the Federal Capital, which they called it in those days and in 1920 he declined reappointment. That's when he got together a few people and they found the land and they formed a company to buy the land. They paid £25,000 for about 640 acres and they formed a company with 30 shares of £1000 each. Griffin took up shares, King O'Malley who was Federal Minister of Territories, put money in, Sir William Elliott Johnson, who was the Speaker of the Federal House of Assembly, solicitors and businessmen in Melbourne, a number of them bought shares. That's who it was - businessmen mainly from Melbourne and Federal politicians.

They were people who knew Griffin and trusted his vision. I was associated with the company up to about 1940 and it still comprised the original shareholders, as the shares weren't marketable. King O'Malley and Elliott Johnson, Ada Whim from Melbourne, Werner the optician and Parkinson the solicitor in Melbourne, still had shares in 1940. By then, of course, they were complaining that profits didn't come, but early on it was very exciting for them. When they first started selling the land at Castlecrag in about 1924, they sold about close to £100,000 worth - £80,000 or £90,000 it was - up to about 1928-29. They almost sold out the Castlecrag Estate 90 acre part of it, but they sold the land on 5-yearly terms, at 5% interest with quarterly payments. For a few years it looked as though the business was going to be very profitable. It was because of these profits that had to be collected that they appointed me in 1927.

The business office of the GSDA company was at 35 Bligh Street and I worked there. When the lease expired there we moved into Adyar House, but that's gone now too.

Griffin was attracted to the area because it was only five miles from the centre of the City. The natural landscape was beautiful and it had about 5 miles of water frontage to Middle Harbour all told, beautiful unspoilt bushland for the most part.

Griffin had all the land contoured before he started to design the subdivisions - 5ft contours with the southern side of the peninsula and all the land over Middle Cove and Castle Cove. He had an old surveyor from the Federal Capital Territory project undertake the contouring for him. And so, when he was planning he had the contour map before him and, as far as he could achieve it, the roads and houses are hidden. He used to point out that, from The Parapet for example, when you look across to Northbridge you see ugly scars going down the hill the roads that run straight down the hill. When you go to Northbridge and look back to Castlecrag, however, you don't see any scars because the roads wind around the contours and get buried in the natural landscape.

The exception was Rockley Street. That was an old surveyed road that went down to the reserve on which there was a boatshed, but that company moved to develop Northbridge and built a suspension bridge and put the tramway in, leaving the area [Castlecrag] for the GSDA to buy later.

GSDA then borrowed money to develop the next peninsula - Covecrag as they called it, which has become Middle Cove now - and expand the business. They built the road that now goes to the Harold Reid Reserve. That was a monumental task because Griffin, instead of doing a little bit and spending that money put down the bitumen, went on with the construction to get as much of it physically laid out as he could. I remember the lovely beautiful hand-built stone wall there with big slabs.

Then the Depression came and the bottom fell out of the land market. Nobody would buy land, people only wanted to sell it. The GSDA had spent £30,000 on Covecrag and it got to the stage where they couldn't pay the interest and then couldn't pay my salary. I was a cunning young fellow then and I got them to give me a charge on the uncalled capital so that if the worst came to the worst, the shareholders would have to pay my salary. I worked very long hours to get a bit of money coming in as nothing was coming in from land sales.

We had this young cockney, Green, who put up a proposition to Griffin to lay out and construct the golf course for - £300, £500, I've forgotten what it was. Anyway Griffin and I looked at it and we decided to go ahead and build the course so we engaged a supervisor and a labourer for £3 a week - I remember that - and we got the course built. Local people flooded out there, particularly at the weekends, and we made a lot of money. Green was appointed the professional and Griffin built a little shelter/shed there and a residence on it and Green and his wife lived in it and made a bit out of selling clubs and giving lessons and things.

Griffin and his friends were not so much concerned with getting fat dividends as with developing a model - a garden suburb if you like to call it that. While Walter wasn't worried about money, some of the people who put money in were worried - that was their only concern. So there were many discussions.

I also had some embarrassing moments, such as when the chairman of the Board of Directors told me that there was no need for me to go to Melbourne for the Annual Meeting, he said "they could manage without me," but the Managing Director told me he wanted me there and said it was my job to be there at the annual meeting. I had to decide which of them I'd obey. I looked up my little knowledge of company law, but this wasn't helpful, so I went to see a solicitor. He said, "you have got to do what the managing director tells you to do, the chairman has no power at all except to preside at Board meetings and annual meetings of the company."

There was a celebrated lawsuit before I became associated with the company. I think the shareholders challenged the voting power of Griffin. It was argued out in the Equity Court in Sydney and Griffin won. Of course, while I was secretary we had the case where the doctor challenged the validity of the covenants under which Griffin wouldn't approve his tiled roof or was it its height. I remember Doctor Evatt, the barrister who later became the Leader of the Labor Party. He was a very able lawyer and won the case for Dr Rivett, but the winning of the case didn't mean that Griffin didn't have the power to do what he wanted to do. The judgement was based on a technical fault in the way he applied the covenants in this case.

Did anyone make anything out of the GSDA in the end?

Edgar Deans: Oh probably the children or the beneficiaries of the estates of the original members might have got a bit out of it. Of course, LJ Hooker got hold of the land and they exploited it to their own advantage. Hooker and the estate agents probably made a lot of money out of it. I don't know about the shareholders because I was out of it then.

Community activities

Edgar Deans: I first got involved with various community activities through the Neighbourhood Circle, which used to meet in our house (now 140 Edinburgh Road). The meetings were on Saturday nights and we used to engage speakers, and frequently it was one of our own members. The speaker led a discussion on different topics and I remember one occasion when we had somebody who had

lantern slides. I was Secretary I think – I was Secretary of nearly everything in those days.

The Griffins were involved in the Neighbourhood Circle meetings – they were involved in everything, as we all were really. It was like a village and Marion Griffin would look around and she'd say "where's Beth Wilkinson....why isn't she here?" The Griffin's house was venue for the Progress Association and the Play Reading Group meetings.

There were many very keen amateur actors in the community and so there were at least two meetings in every month. Later an Anthroposophy group got going and then Mrs Williams I think it was, got Griffin interested in Rudolph Steiner. These groups included Cecily Adams and her husband who brought a bit of history along.

Frank Duncan: The Play Reading Group meetings we went to, Edgar, I think were in Rawson [Rawson Deans, brother of Edgar] and Nancy's house. When did they come in relation to you? He was younger than you I think is that right? [Edgar agreed.]

About 20 people would attend the Neighbourhood Circle meetings or would there sometimes be a lot more. Later there would be a few people from elsewhere; especially after the Griffins became anthroposophists because there were quite a number who lived round Mosman way and there was a big building belonging to the Anthroposophy Society.

Edgar was shown a photograph of the first shops in Castlecrag and asked, who organised the building of those shops?

Edgar Deans: I am not sure. The first meeting of the Progress Association was held in the butchers shop. I'm trying to think whether the company built those shops itself. Of course Griffin designed every bit of them, but I don't ever remember collecting rent from them so perhaps the company didn't own them.

The company did own another commercial block where the company built its sales office. There was a shop and dwelling where the Griffins had a little stone shop and dwelling there with living accommodation underneath. I remember collecting rent from there. It became a haberdashery shop and a library. It was later converted it to a service station.

The Progress Association was set up to preserve the natural environment, but it also worked to obtain better facilities. When it was first established we didn't have a properly constructed Edinburgh Road, we didn't have anything and we didn't even have a voice in Council. We were a voice crying in the wilderness because Northbridge and Middle Harbour was all one ward. We had a great campaign to create two wards. I worked all that out in relation to population and area. The Willoughby Municipality was virtually run by Chatswood East and Chatswood West, with this part of the Municipality having virtually no representation, so we put a petition to the Minister to get equal representation. We were successful and Middle Harbour ward was divided into Northbridge and Middle Harbour.

I took great pride in the actual petition, which I prepared myself. It was printed on good ledger paper with a little diagram showing the proposal and the details printed out clearly so that everybody who signed it could see what they were signing. I remember the clerk I took it to saying "this is the best petition we have ever had." As a young man I felt very good about that. I still have a copy and the National Library has one too. All the papers that I thought were valuable I gave to the National Library.

Following the Depression, things didn't start to pick up again until 1938-39. I was the Secretary of the Progress Association in those days. Eastern Valley Way road

was completed and the Lindfield bus started to run in 1939. This brought a great boost to the suburb because the transport here was so lousy before that – you had to walk down to the tram at Frenchs Road.

The Progress Association had battled for many years to persuade the government to let the trams go across the bridge [Sydney Harbour Bridge] after it opened in 1932. Finally we got the direct bus to Wynyard, which was good, but then the war came.

Castlecrag Community Centre

Frank Duncan: The activity I was mostly tied up with was the community centre and the formation of the cooperative society. I came from the Manchester area in England where the first cooperatives – the Rochdale pioneers – were started and so I was acquainted with the cooperative business. When we got here we were surprised to find that co-operative societies here were mostly for horticultural things or milk production, apart from one co-operative society in Crows Nest covered food and clothing. I went in and saw the registrar of the societies and got the list of all local societies and there was one community advancement society with model rules for the things we were interested in. With Barry Bowles, a friend of ours who was a solicitor and a bushwalker, we looked at how to get the land that Griffin had said was for community purposes mobilised.

Griffin had died by this time, so we found out from Edgar that we could get the GSDA to give us the land to put a community centre up if we were a registered co-operative society with these rules. We would cede the land and any building on it to the Council so that we wouldn't have to pay any rates, but we would keep the running of the centre in our own hands.

A number of the people who came along to the monthly meetings of the co-operative association at the Griffin's house were from the avenues on the other side of Eastern Valley Way, so we called it the Castlecrag and East Willoughby Community Advancement Society Ltd. We had 800 people living on this peninsula at that time so we tried to sign them all up as members. We got the arrangements through the Council and then set about raising money. Joyce Batterham [sister of Edgar Dean] and I interviewed the Mayor and told him we were raising money by holding fetes. These were held on the land on the corner of Edinburgh Road and Eastern Valley Way where the shopping centre is now. We used to hire a large marquee and we had potters, artists and all sorts of people from the Castlecrag area and they would bring all these things for sale. I used to take a stretcher bed out there and sleep there, so no one would come and pinch anything.

This was just after the war and everything was in short supply. The local community helped by selling afternoon teas on Saturdays and Sundays and by making toys to raise money. The whole area was like a village – there was a village feeling and the Griffins had contributed to it very much by their interest and holding these meetings in their house. The effort was quite unique and the Federal Government recognised this by sending an official photographer to record the first community centre of its type in the country.

The Council gave us pound for pound so we got £2000 between the Council and our efforts to start the first part of the kindergarten on the community centre. Eric Nicholls did the architectural work free. I was the Chairman of the co-operative for about five years.

[Looking at photographs] In this one we are putting drainage to drain the kindergarten playground before the building was put up. You see I'm stooping down with a pick there and you [Edgar] might recognise some of the others.

I am very grateful to see there are people who have continued on to maintain the sense of community here in Castlecrag.

Other matters

Frank Duncan: In the early days, if you wanted to get from Castlecrag to Northbridge with a car or horse and cart, you'd have to go down as far as Alpha Road and then along Alpha Road and then back into Northbridge on Sailors Bay Road. You can thank Walter Burley Griffin for Eastern Valley Way. It was his idea and he donated a strip of the company's land to the Council to widen it from 66ft to 80ft. So we got Eastern Valley Way in the 1930s

What used to be the garage on the right-hand side just before you get to Sailors Bay Road on Eastern Valley Way there was a picture house, the Northbridge Theatre. We used to go to films there.

A boy would take the films at halftime on a bicycle to the other theatre at Willoughby Road opposite the school on the corner of Willoughby Road and swap them.

Here's a photo of probably a party here with the Griffins at the back: Marion is on the right and Walter is next to her. It might have been the party saying goodbye to him when he went to India. Didn't he go once to see what the job was?

Edgar Deans: Yes he did. Possibly about 1934 that'll be soon after you built your house. That was the Guy House you see the round columns in the house – see those rounded columns between the windows.

One thing I would like to see is the retention of names used by our pioneers for the natural features in Castlecrag and not give them new names. The cascades below the Community Centre were called 'Watergate Cascades' and some big rocks down there were the 'Cavern Coop'. We ought to try very hard to have those names retained.

Sue Randle: *We're very interested and we'd like to thank you very much for today what you've done, I think it's absolutely excellent. Thank you very much indeed for coming along and giving up your free time.*