

## Acton - Some Historic *Features* Still There

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Acton Cottage - JJ Moore's old home was pulled down when the new Canberra Community Hospital was built. It opened for business in February, 1943. The site of the cottage, near the *Pregnant Pine* in front of the old Obstetrics entrance, is marked by a plaque which is missed by most who pass by. This is a sad state of affairs because the names of Moore's property, *Canberry* and *Acton* were used to name the city and suburb.

In 1997 the Royal Canberra Hospital closed in 1991 was demolished and at the time of writing (October 1998) the site is awaiting a new building. Still on site are many historic trees. In October, 1998 the *ACT FOR TREES* Society held several walks around Acton Peninsular to point out the trees and their stories. Following is an excerpt from the association's Newsletter (Spring 1998):

*The trees on Acton Peninsula are living evidence of Canberra's history, several of them now listed on the Heritage Register. Among these are two Apple Box which are over two hundred years old, thus predating European settlement of the region which began in 1823 with a land grant to one John Joshua Moore of Goulburn. Before that three Aboriginal groups are believed to have had connections with the area. The first permanent building there was originally known as Canberry Cottage and later became the rear portion of Acton House (also called Acton cottage). In 1850 Acton House was leased by the Church of St John the Baptist, becoming the first rectory in the area. This site is marked by a curiously shaped Roman Cyprus nicknamed 'The Pregnant Pine' - later on it was outside the gynecological wing of the Royal Canberra Hospital! Aleppo and Radiata Pines, English Elms and Robinias were also planted during early European Settlement.*

*In 1908 what is now the Acton Peninsula was the first compulsory land acquisition for the new Federal Capital Territory. It became the focus of activity before World War I with the offices of the Department of Home Affairs and the Federal Capital Commission being located there. In 1914 following an outbreak of diphtheria, the first community hospital in the Federal Capital was built on the site. Later Thomas Weston established the first tree nursery in Acton; some English Oaks, a White Poplar and Monterey Cypress are the last remaining evidence of the nursery. Other trees planted in this period include Ponderosa Pines, Atlas Cedars and English Elms...*

The article continues and notes that a monetary value can be put on the trees and informs the reader that the English Oak eg is valued at \$152,940 and each Apple Box tree is worth \$109,350. The two Ponderosa Pines have a value of \$307,800 and \$282,400.

### **Historic Buildings Still in Situ at Acton:**

**Old Hospital** (used 1914-7.2.1943). Today these buildings are part of the Australian National University in Mills Road off Balmain Crescent and called *Research School of Earth Sciences*.

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**Weatherboard Cottages in Liversidge Street & Balmain Crescent.** These were constructed from 1910 to house married officials including H M Rolland, Thomas Weston and Alexander Bruce. Today they are part of the ANU.

**Canberra House** in Liversidge Street. It was designed by John Smith Murdoch in 1912. It was erected as the official residence for the Administrator of the FCT and is probably the first stone building erected in the FCT. The Administrator, Col Miller and his wife took up residence in January 1914. In 1925 Canberra House was modernised for use by Mr (later Sir) John Butters, First Federal Capital Commissioner. Since then it has served as the residence of the British High Commissioner, Commonwealth Club and since 1965 as the University Staff Centre. It is now a restaurant. (*A Guide to Canberra Buildings* JR Conner.)

**Bachelors Quarters** opposite Canberra House. The original building was D Block. It faced the lake side and was occupied by December 1912. There were additions made particularly after 1921 when work on the city resumed after World War I. In the post World War II years it was renamed *Acton Guest House* and later following renovation re-opened 9 June 1958 as *Lennox House*. In February 1964 it was taken over by the ANU for student accommodation and at sometime in the next decades part of the complex was turned into a pre-school child minding centre. By 1997 only 17 students were using A Block and this too was closed by the ANU at the end of the year. (*Canberra's Hostels, Hotels and Guest Houses - A Part of Our Heritage* Alan Foscett.)

**Hospice.** This building was formerly the TB & Isolation Ward of the Royal Canberra Hospital (7.2.1943-1991).<sup>1</sup>

**Hotel Acton.** This building is now called **Acton House** and is on Edinburgh Street. It opened 5 May, 1927 and accommodated mainly single ladies working in the public service. It was designed by John Smith Murdoch and uses the same plan as Hotel Kurrajong. The hotel like others in the territory was licensed the sell alcohol from December, 1928. In 1930, however because the promised continuation of transfers of public servants did not occur and the hotel was closed. For the next few years it served as the Patents Office, next Canberra University and later the Prices Commission. In the early post World War II years it again reverted to accommodation and today is used by the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Islanders Affair, the Resolution Centre and the Australian Federal Police. (Alan Foscett.)

**Beauchamp House** - It is situated on the opposite side of the road to Acton House and opened on 9 August, 1927. It too was used primarily to accommodate single women working in the Public Service. Between 1930 and 1971 it was leased to private operators. In 1972 it was converted into offices. The site was leased to the Australian Academy of Science and in 1985 was renamed *Ian Potter House* after an Academy benefactor. Today is used by the both the Academy and private agencies. (Alan Foscett.)

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written in 1998 and around 2003 or a little earlier the hospice was moved to the north side of the Lake and this building removed.

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**Institute of Anatomy.** This building is now called the *Film and Sound Archives* and was erected in the early 1930s. The marble used in the entrance came from a site near the Molonglo River. It was a place of wonder for us to visit. In the numerous jars were exhibits such as Phar Lap's heart and in the basement - not seen by the public - the pickled body of the *Pajama Girl*.

**Canberra High School.** This building is now used by the Canberra School of Art. On the site of the football field is the School of Music and the hockey fields and tennis courts are now car parks. Students moved into the school building in 1939. The school closed in the 1960s. The students moved into a new building in Macquarie, Belconnen which now bears the name, *Canberra High School*.

**Academy of Science** in Gordon Street, City. The building was designed by Grounds, Romberg & Boyd and built in 1958. It won the Sulman Medal in 1959 and the Canberra Medallion the following year. A story amongst workmen mentioned that the roof leaked. The reinforced concrete dome is sheathed with copper and, according to the stories, the two materials reacted differently to heat and cold.

**Drill Hall** in Kingsley Street was erected in the late 1930s and today is used as a gallery and radio station 2XX.

Two land sites which should be noted are **Hospital Point** which led down to Lennox Crossing and the **Children's Playground**. The old gum trees shown in numerous photographs of the playground are still in situ. The playground was erected in 1926 by voluntary labour who were members of the Social Service Association. This vacant land is situated on near the lake edge below the Bachelors Quarters. The workmen's cottages are now covered by the waters of the lake.

Below: Bachelors Quarters c1912



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Mildenhall photograph courtesy of National Library of Australia nla.pic-an 11030057-354-v Area in foreground is Acton circa 1928. Lennox Crossing mid left. The nursery is the rectangular shaped area with trees. On the opposite side of the Molonglo River is Hotel Canberra, Provisional Parliament House and the two administrative buildings.