

Aspects of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century History of Acton by Ann Gugler

The area now called Acton ACT in the 1820s and 1830s was divided into two properties - on the eastern side, *Canberry* - also known as Acton - and on the western side, *Springbank*.¹ The first Europeans known to have looked upon this land were Vaughan and Charles Throsby Smith who climbed Black Mountain on 8 December, 1820.

In October 1824 John Joshua Moore *took out a formal ticket of occupation*.² The first white men to settle on this land were Moore's men - an ex convict McLaughlan and convicts, James Clarke and John Tennant. In May 1832 Moore was formally granted the land which was known as Portions 52 & 27 Parish of Canberra, County of Murray.

On 29 May, 1850 Moore sold his land to Arthur Jeffreys and it remained with this family until the Commonwealth resumed it on 20 February, 1911. At that time the land was leased by Arthur Brassey (from 1906) and he like the owners was compensated for the loss.

The property on the western side of *Canberry* (Acton) was *Springbank* named after a spring which fed the lower part of Canberry Creek (later named Sullivan's Creek). This land was officially granted to John MacPherson on 15 October, 1831. His son, John Alexander was the first European boy born on the Limestone Plains and later became the Premier of Victoria. He was not the first white child born on the Limestone Plains. His sister was born at the property in 1830.

In 1842 MacPherson leased *Springbank* to Joseph Kaye. Kaye left in 1852 following a big flood which isolated the homestead area. On 2 October, 1857 MacPherson sold the land to Dr William Haley who was the first medical practitioner to set up practice in Queanbeyan. After Haley's death the land was again sold. This time to William Davies and Francis Rossi who in turn sold it in May 1881 to Andrew Cunningham.

Springbank was compulsorily acquired by the Commonwealth on 27 July, 1912. On 18 August, 1924 the property was leased by the Commonwealth to Charles Kaye, son of Joseph. After his death in 1952 the lease was taken up by his sons Charles, John and Gordon. On 30 April, 1962 the lease was handed back and the final work on Lake Burley Griffin completed before the flooding of the area of the lake commenced.

A portion of *Springbank* land was leased for awhile by the Corkhills who moved from their farm on the site of the National Library to *Riverview* (Yarralumla Dairy) in 1912. Sullivan also around the same time leased from the Commonwealth some land on the southern side of the Molonglo in the western area of Stirling Park (later known as Corkhill's Paddock).

From 1911 Acton became the *de facto Civic Centre of Canberra*.³ It became the administrative centre of Canberra and remained so until the mid to late 1950s. It was also the site of the first Canberra Hospital (1914) and nursery (before 1913).

The earliest accommodation supplied from around 1910 to the workmen and surveyors at Acton were tents and a few old farm buildings. At *Springbank* for example, the Bates family

¹ It should also be noted that the suburb of Acton until the early 1960s included Westlake (Stirling Park).

² Fitzgerald

³ David Dexter, *The ANU Campus*

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moved into the old slab hut, Cox and Thurbon families into two farm cottages and the woolshed was leased to a woodman, G Sheehan.

By 1912 the Bachelors Quarters and a few timber cottages in the area of Liversidge Street were completed and occupied

In 1924 ten small timber cottages designed by HM Rolland of the style erected at Westlake were built. Another five were added later one of which was known as *The Big House*. This dwelling as the name suggests was larger than the others and was built for the Manager of the Bachelors Quarters, Mr Breen. He never occupied it.

Acton's Hall was an important adjunct to the settlement. It was used as a school for a time and for community activities, including church services, concerts, dances, and in the 1940s just after the war as the Workmen's Club. Andy McKissock and other Westlake men were instrumental in forming this club which later moved in the early 1950s to the corner of Childers Street and University Avenue. Nearby in the 1920s John Howie constructed the Masonic Hall. In 1926 it was moved to Russell Hill where it served that community as a school until 1929. In the 1930/1931 financial year it was moved to its present site in Corroborree Park where it still serves the local community as the Ainslie Hall.

In 1925 the Social Service Association was formed. Its headquarters were at Acton. This association replaced the numerous *local Progress Associations*. Committees were formed to look after various facets of the welfare programmes - such as Women & Children's affairs, Indoor and Outdoor, Library etc. With the exception of Westridge all the committees consisted of men only.

One important task carried out by the Association was the construction of the Causeway Hall. The Social Service Association was also responsible for the construction of each major settlement's tennis court, pavilion and children's playground. The fifty fifty system was used - that is the men supplied the labour and the Federal Capital Commission the materials. This association wound up its books in 1929 when it went on to ask for civil rights.

During the time of the association a monthly magazine - *The Canberra Community News* was produced. It was written by those who lived in the territory at the time - the majority of whom were construction workers. Its Editor was Joe Honeysette who was a man of much patience. He attended the majority of local meetings held in each settlement. In July 1926 the Honorary Reporters for Sport were:

Football, Australian Rules, J O'Sullivan Canberra,
Rugby, League W Hunt Canberra, Soccer, C Hooper Tradesmen's Mess [Westlake],
Cricket, WL Cottingham Canberra,
Golf, JA Irving Canberra, Gymnastics, E Waterman Canberra,
Boxing, W Maloney Eastlake [Kingston].
Honorary Reporters, Social Service Association:
Eastlake, J McRae Dunn,
Causeway, E Drewett,
Westlake, R Law,

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Westridge, RP Corey,
Molonglo RF Brown,
Ainslie, PJ McNamara.

The Agencies were:

Ainslie Hotel at office,
Ainslie Camp W Waller,
Bachelors' Quarters at Canteen,
Capitol Hill WA McCulloch,
Causeway W Portner 27 Causeway,
Commission Offices E H Handley
Secretary's Department,
Daniel's No 1 Camp [Capitol Hill, Westlake]
M Ryan, Eastlake Post Office,
Eastlake RJ Dunne (Newsagency),
Eastlake Engineers' Mess, Eastlake Garage (P Jolly),
Eastlake Camp J Kinleyside,
Hotel Canberra at Inquiry Office, Molonglo Post Office,
Northbourne Camp LHB Lasseeter,
Red Hill Camp Don Smith,
Red Hill Mess M Wakefield,
Riverbourne Camp Mrs Williams,
Sewer Camp No 4 J Corey,
Telopea Park Miss E Gamble,
Tradesmen's Mess [Westlake] A Britton, Westlake Post Office,
Westridge Post Office,
White City Camp S Murray
and at Office of *Canberra Community News* Social Service Building Acton
and AM Fallick & Sons Queanbeyan.

Copies of these magazines for research purposes are available at the Heritage Library Griffith, ACT National Trust Offices in Griffith and Australian Archives. Other magazines of interest include copies of Canberra's first newspaper, *The Federal Capital Pioneer* and *The Angelus* the Catholic monthly magazine. Copies of both are held in the National Library of Australia.

Acton was the first area on the Limestone Plains settled by Europeans. Canberra was named after the property on this land. Acton was the Administrative Centre of Canberra. Acton was and is an area of great cultural and religious significance to Aboriginal people. To date nothing more than a small bronze plaque has been erected to note the significance and importance of this land to Aboriginal, European and federal history of the Australian Capital Territory.