

**The Westlake Septic Tanks (1924-1927)  
& Sewer System  
(Sewer constructed at Westlake between 1922-25 at  
Westlake & used there 1927-1965)<sup>1</sup>**

**BACKGROUND**

Those in charge of the design of camps and settlements were very concerned about the health of the occupants and attention was given to arrangements for good sanitation. Near the sites of most post World War 1 big settlements<sup>2</sup> and earlier Duntroon RMC and Molonglo Internment Camp septic tanks were installed. Camps were serviced with a pan system and the night soil removed to a collection point near the overpass over Adelaide Avenue where Kent Street Deakin joins Novar Street.

Work on the Main Intercepting Sewer commenced as early as 1915. By September 1916 a caretaker was the only man employed on the sewer and work did not recommence until after the war in 1921. The sewer works were at Western Creek and went through Westridge, Westlake to Commonwealth Bridge. No 3 Sewer Camp was established in The Gap at Westlake in 1922 and left there in mid 1925. After the completion of this section of the sewer in 1927 Westlake Cottages, and No 1 Labourers Camp also at Westlake along with permanent suburbs etc was connected to this system.

Both Sewer and septic systems were designed to overflow or just enter the nearby creeks and Molonglo River. In 1928 the water quality of the Molonglo near Westlake was tested and the Westlake Swimming Hole was designated as unsafe for swimming. This situation was most likely caused by the overflows of the septic tanks and other pollutants into the River? Below Westlake cottages 1924



**The Septic Tanks**

The only known example of a septic tank of the construction era of Canberra's history still in situ is at Westlake - now Stirling Park, Yarralumla. This tank was one of three built for use by the

<sup>1</sup> The Westlake Septic tank is the only known surviving tank used in the temporary settlements and suburbs of Canberra before the opening of the main intercepting sewer in 1927. If a proposed road is built through Stirling Park (former Westlake) this tank will be destroyed.

<sup>2</sup> The brick cottages opposite the Power House, Civic Centre, Westridge (Section 64 Yarralumla) and Blandfordia – along with the early Hotels such as Hotel Canberra, were connected to communal septic tanks.

W.R.C.D.

The Gap,  
Canberra.  
10-9-24.

Works Director,  
Canberra.

Dear Sir,

I wish to further draw your attention to the deplorable state of the Septic tanks overflows at the rear of no 30 cottage. As it is now both the overflows from the tanks empty out at about the same place of which is situated not above twenty yards in the front of cottage no 30 in the rear of cottage no 36. I maintain that if there are not very roomy to it will be the cause of a great amount of sickness.

It is the wish of the Progress Association that these pipes be continued another hundred yards or there about.

I wish to express that this is very important for the health of the residents not only in the Gap but on the whole of the Territory and hope it will be seen to at an early date.

settlement in 1924. Six months after the first tenant took up residence one of the tanks was of concern to residents. A letter dated 10th September, 1924 from Mr Fraser, Hon Sec of The Gap Progress Association - later called Westlake Progress Association to the Works Director asked for improvements to two of the three septic tanks in use. At the time of writing 52 cottages had been erected at Westlake.

② Could you advise if anything is being done to finish the fencing of these cottages. The way it is now anything & everybody can come or go through the yard & children playing in the back yard have had several narrow escapes from being run over by different trades people driving in and out of the cottages.

③ I further ask if the plugs for bath tubs, sinks & wash tubs can be supplied to several of the householders.

It is a body ask if these few home comforts cannot be seen to at an early date.

④ Re paving & guttering back verandah. In the wet weather the women have to go out in the rain to reach the lavatory and get considerably wet from the drops from the roof where a piece of guttering would prevent it.

The Gap Progress Association I am,  
 I am Settlement yours Faithfully  
 Barbara. W. J. Foster.  
 Non Secretary.

### The Westlake Cottages

In all there were 62 cottages constructed in the workmen's temporary suburb of Westlake. The first fifty-two were built under the direction of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee (FCAC) and were occupied from March, 1924. Following the departure in mid 1925 of No 3 Sewer Camp 10 additional cottages were built by the



Federal Capital Commission (FCC) on the sites of tents of No 3. The Westlake cottage referred to in terms of temporary and portable were the first to built by the authorities for married tradesmen working on the Provisional Parliament House and surrounds. Molonglo Settlement, another workmen's suburb was built earlier than Westlake. It, however, was an ex-internment camp converted into housing. It was in use from 1921.

Cottage No 21 at Westlake was either burnt down or moved shortly after construction. The photograph shown below with cottages 21-28 still under construction indicates that it was built. One story states that 21 was moved because the nearby creek (now covered by the road Empire Circuit) during periods of flooding affected this house.



HM Rolland, Works Director and Architect designed the Westlake Cottages. He based his plan on the cottages built in 1922 by Contractor John Howie on the eastern side of Haines Creek Westlake. The addition of lavatories with a water flushing system was greatly appreciated by the people who moved into the Westlake cottages. Compared to the long drops and pan systems still in use by many in the territory a flushing lavatory was a luxury.

The Westlake cottages were not arranged in the usual grid pattern. Instead they were built along the sides of old roads entering The Gap - old pathways most certainly known and used by Aboriginal people as well as 19th and 20th century Europeans. This pathway may have led to the area of land referred to as Canberry (meeting place). It was on both sides of the Molonglo River - present day Acton and Lotus Bay (land now under the waters of the lake).

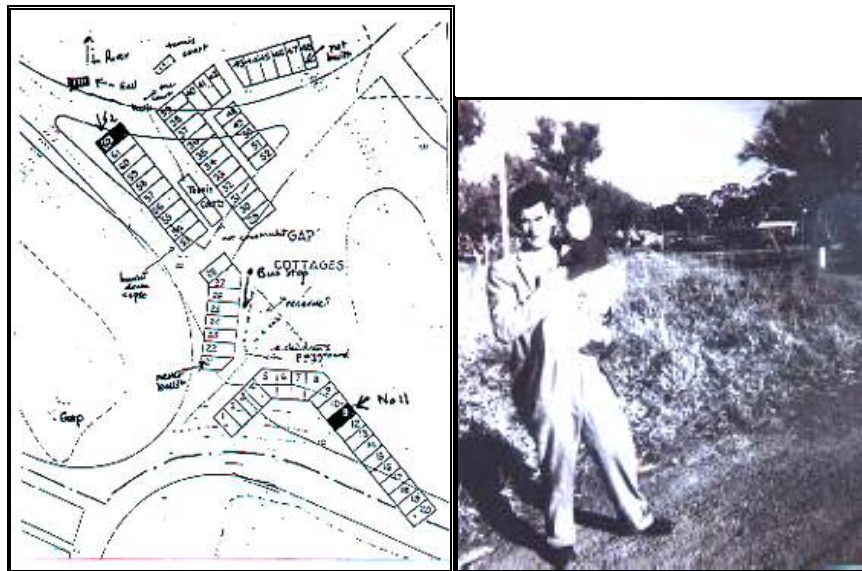
Cottages 1 to 20 were wedged in between the two creeks that joined in the grounds of the modern Mexican Embassy to form Haines' Creek. It flowed down to the Molonglo River and was used as a means of getting rid of the overflow from the septic tanks and rubbish in general. The sites of cottages 1-20 follow roughly the lines of the present Empire Circuit, crossed in the grounds of the Mexican embassy above Forster Crescent and thence up Darwin Avenue to where it meets Perth Avenue.

The sites of the remaining 41 cottages are in Stirling Park, Yarralumla. The old road that ran in front of cottages 29 to Bell Corner (39) and around across the hill to 47 is still in the park and has survived the 1960s attempts to plough it up. It is still used on a daily basis by those who walk through the park to and from Lake Burley Griffin from the embassies. Still in the park underground are the pipes used to connect cottages to the septic and sewer systems.



The photograph above was taken in the late 1990s. The site of 29 Westlake is just out of the picture on the right. The old road in front of 29 to 39 is clearly visible in the photograph. In the background is Black Mountain.

Below: Plan of the Westlake Cottages. Cottages 53-62 were constructed in 1926 on the site of the tents of No 3 Sewer Camp. The Mess Rooms later became the first Westlake Hall. On the hillside, running parallel to the cottages (on left of map) were a number of humpies most probably erected by married men working on the sewer. The site of one septic tank was in the yard of 5 Westlake.



The photograph on the right was taken outside the 29 Westlake with cottages 7 or 8 in the background. Between the cottage and where the man was standing was one of the Septic Tanks. The other was in the yard of 5 Westlake. Members of the Jario family who lived in the flats at the back of 29 Westlake loaned the photograph.

### **The Septic Tanks**

Two of the septic tanks referred to by Mr Fraser are gone. One was in the yard of No 5 Westlake - home of the McKissock family. Lynette Halliday (nee McKissock) recalled it being emptied from time to time. It was a collection tank for cottages 1 to 20. From this tank the contents ran down to another tank at the rear of 29 Westlake where the overflow was directed into Haines Creek. This second tank served cottages 22 to 28 and was probably the one converted by George Sykes in the 1940s into an air raid shelter. The disused Westridge septic tank situated near Mueller Street, Yarralumla also served as a shelter.

### **The Remaining Westlake Septic Tank**

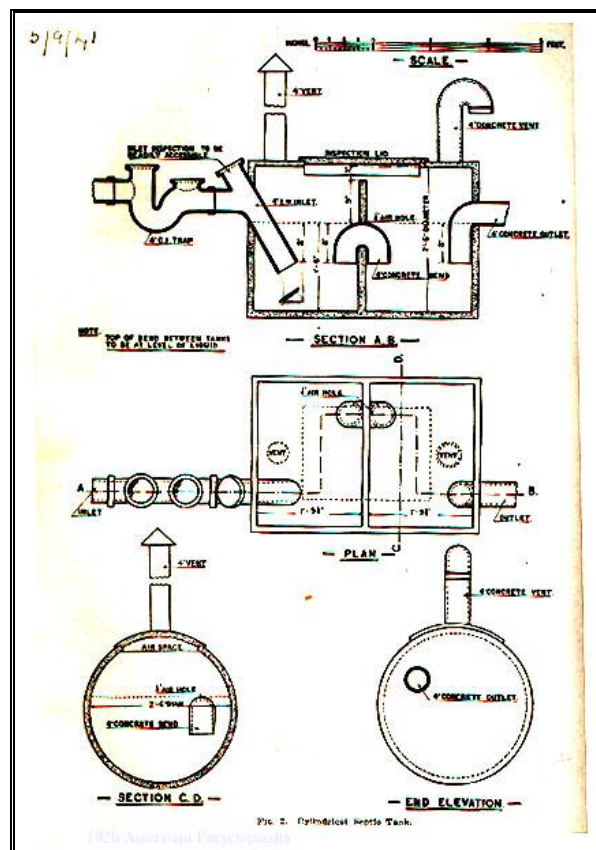
Midway between the ditch dug across the hillside below cottages 43 to 47 and near the point where it joins Haines Creek is the third septic tank not mentioned by Mr Fraser. The finding of this surviving Westlake septic tank came about by accident during a woody weed clearance in the park in the early 1990s. Heavy vehicle activity in the area flattened grass and exposed parts of the reinforced concrete walls of the rectangular

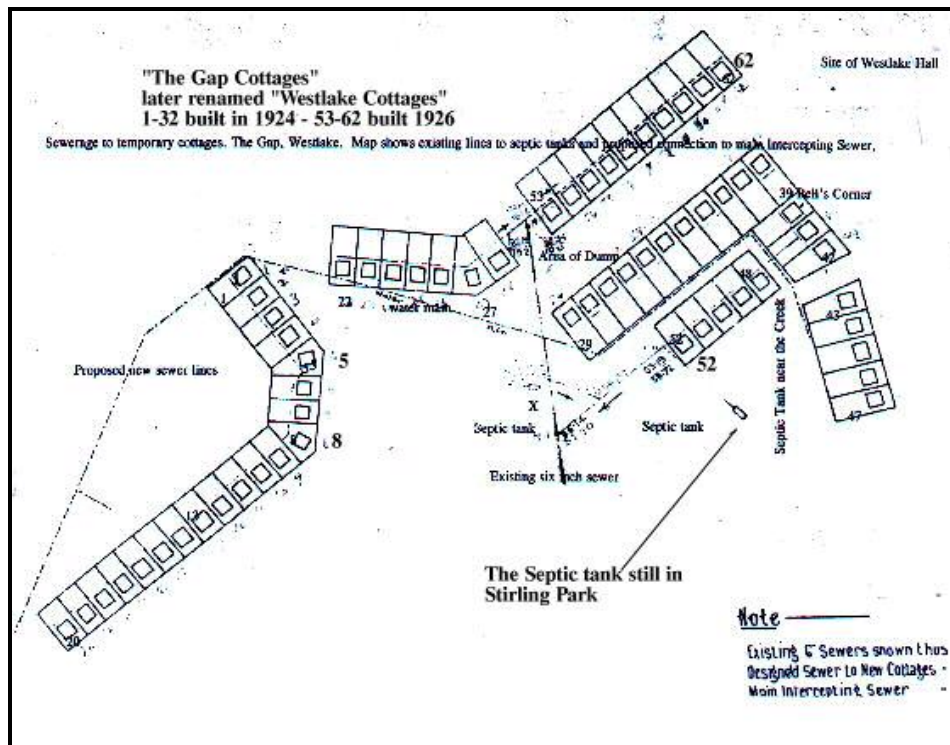


shaped tank. It has two large rectangular receptacles separated by a number of close thin walled spaces. River rocks were used for reinforcing.



Photograph taken in 2000 of the remaining septic tank in Stirling Park. Part of the walls show. The view looks towards Forster Crescent. The gum tree in the middle was near the front entrance of 52 Westlake. On the next page is a plan of the Septic Tanks of the type used in the 1920s. Below is an example of plans for septic tanks circa 1926.





Above is a plan showing the sites of the septic tanks in Westlake. Below Left Florian & Ann Gugler outside 27 Westlake. The site of one of the septic tanks was near cottage 29. It was on the left hand side of the photograph and the site of the tank was on the right of the figures – opposite No 29. The photograph on the right is a contemporary photograph showing the same site. The telegraph poles are in the same place. The site where the second photograph was taken was at the corner of Empire Circuit and Forster Crescent Yarralumla opposite the Mexican Embassy.

