



## SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE HOUSE

**Introductory Note:** By the late 1920s Walter Burley Griffin's grandly conceived Castlecrag development had virtually stalled. Almost all of the houses which had been built on the Castlecrag Estate were linked to the GSDA, Griffin's development company. Ten years after the first demonstration houses were built on the Estate only three of its 19 houses had been built by people unconnected with Griffin. Apart from the Felstead (1924) and Fishwick (1929) houses which were large, the others were quite small and built with restricted budgets. Even Fishwick's commission does not appear to have been a straightforward decision of his to acquire a house in which he could live for a reasonable time. [1] Griffin left for India in 1936 with his dream of the ideal suburb mostly unrealised.

Remarkably, in the almost ninety years since its construction, the Fishwick house has had just three owners. Its social history, here described in five periods, demonstrates that, as real estate agents say, "it has been tightly held" - all its owners have been linked socially.

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### Fishwick Ownership (1929 to 1932)

Griffin must have been delighted when Thomas Fishwick, a businessman with a very large budget, engaged him to build a house on the Castlecrag Estate. Fishwick proved to be the ideal client, being progressive, well-travelled and interested in technology. This was to be Griffin's second-last commission in Castlecrag and by far the grandest.

The land acquired by Fishwick had been bought two years previously by Elizabeth Bell for £405 and was the pick of the blocks on the Estate, nestling just below Tower Reserve, its highest point. The isolated site, with its wonderful rock formations, was surrounded by native bushland and had sweeping views across Sydney's Middle Harbour to the Pacific Ocean.

Thomas Fishwick, an Englishman, was the Australian representative of Fowlers, a large Leeds-based company which manufactured heavy steam-driven machines including road-making equipment. He and his wife had been permanently resident in South Africa before taking up the management of the Australian business. The house cost him about £3,500, a large amount for that time. In comparison, Nancy Deans, a later owner, recalled that large houses on the prestigious upper North Shore were selling for less than £1,000 before the Great Depression struck at the end of the 1920s.

No expense was spared on indulgences such as the grand "see-through" fireplace, fish pools in the dining room ceiling, four outdoor recreation areas including a roof garden, toilets with cisterns concealed on the roof and built-in cupboards seemingly in every nook and cranny. Fishwick's interest in modern technology was reflected in Griffin's planned provision of separate booths or alcoves for a radio, a telephone and a vacuum cleaner. While these were included on the plans, none was actually built. For examples of Griffin's creativity and innovative outlook in designing the house open the attachment "Over Forty Innovative and Ultra-Modern Ideas".

Things went wrong for Fishwick when he was held responsible by his company for its Australian "exceptional two-year loss – the debacle of the year". [2]. Consequently, in late 1932 he was transferred via the UK back to South Africa. He had spent barely two years in the house; his wife had returned many months earlier, both stating that they disliked Australia. Strangely, Fishwick remained the house's absentee owner until 1945, renting it to two families, the Kanevskys and then the Deans.

### **Kanevsky Rental** (1932 to 1940)

In 1924 Griffin had been commissioned by a Russian immigrant, Nisson Leonard-Kanevsky, to design and build a multi-storey office block in Melbourne. They maintained their relationship and later, when the Great Depression hit, the pair worked together developing 12 incinerators, mostly for Melbourne and Sydney local councils. Kanevsky rented the house from Fishwick until 1940 when he and his family departed unexpectedly. Folklore has it that he owed a year's rent.

### **Deans Rental** (1940 to 1945)

There was a serious shortage of rental property in Sydney during the Second World War. When Edgar Deans, who had been employed as the company secretary of the GSDA, Griffin's property development company since 1928, heard that the Fishwick house was vacant, he contacted his younger brother Rawson who quickly grabbed it. The rent was £20 per month. Rawson had been a sales manager with paper merchants King and Prior before the war during which he was a conscientious objector and assigned to non-military projects. He and his wife Nancy, a schoolteacher, moved into the house along with his sister, Joyce Batterham. Joyce was then pregnant; her first child being born soon after she moved in.

The Deans and Batterham families shared the house and it became an important part of Castlecrag's social fabric. Being the suburb's largest, it was used for gatherings of the Community Circle, an informal group formed by Marion Griffin many years previously, and the Castlecrag Co-operative, which was set up to enable the local residents to generate funding for their kindergarten and community centre - amongst the first in the country to do this.

Joyce Batterham, even in her old age, still had clear memories of early Castlecrag. While at school in Melbourne in the early 1930s, she used to holiday with her brother Edgar who then lived in Griffin's GSDA Number 2 house on Edinburgh Road. She met Walter and Marion Griffin and admitted to being "scared" of Marion. On one occasion, Walter asked for her help in planting eucalypt saplings on Edinburgh Road [3]. She remembered him as a gentle, mild-mannered man. To fill in time on school holidays, she also helped Edgar in the Estate office and recalled Walter's habit of scratching notes on scraps of paper and the backs of envelopes, from which she had to type. During this time she visited the Fishwick house frequently because Kanevsky's daughter was her age and they had become friends.

It seems that among the locals, the house attracted the nickname "The Kremlin". [4]. The precise reason is not known; perhaps because of its somewhat forbidding exterior, Kanevsky's nationality or the alleged leftish leanings of some of its residents. After the war, King and Prior refused to re-employ Rawson Deans because of his anti-war stance, so he set up his own stationery and printing supplies business. At one stage he carried out some small-scale commercial printing in the house's garage, evidenced by stains on its cement floor.

By 1945 there were seven people living in the house: The Batterhams then had had one child and the Deans had two. With both families intending to have more children, the Batterhams left to rent a small foreshore cottage while they built their own home nearby.

### **Deans Ownership** (1945 to 1976)

Having rented the house from Fishwick for some five years, the Deans bought the house from him in 1945 for £1,750. Nancy told the current owners of the difficulty of getting banks to advance a mortgage because of its perceived eccentricity. She even recalled that the Valuer-General's assessment was that the house reduced the value of the buildings near it.

The Deans raised three children in the house. On Rawson's death in 1976 Nancy decided that maintaining it was becoming too difficult. The house leaked in many places, there was extensive cracking in the exterior stonework and internal rendering, much of the interior and exterior woodwork was rotting, bamboo had made the lower garden areas virtually impenetrable and the kitchen was in a sorry state. Nancy decided to sell.

### **Current Ownership** (1976 to present)

One of the current owners had grown up in Northbridge, Castlecrag's neighbouring peninsula suburb, and had lived in a Castlecrag foreshore cottage during the early 1960s, so he knew of the Griffin houses. He and his wife had also lived in Chicago for almost four years, its rich architectural history arousing their curiosity about modern architecture and the Prairie School architects.

On their return they renovated a small house with no great desire to trade-up. By chance, they saw that the Fishwick house was for sale. It was open for inspection so they decided to have a look, strictly for a "stickybeak". To their surprise, Nancy Deans had been the high school French teacher of one of them. The couple's interest in the house was enhanced by the knowledge of Griffin's ties to Chicago. They bought it for \$98,000, thus becoming only the third owners of the house during its almost 90 years' history.

The new owners raised their two children in the house. Their daughter's memories of it while growing up were of "*a leaky, window-banging, continually being renovated place.....Now as a visitor to the house there is a sense of 'home', but I'm also very much more aware of its place in the Crag*". Their son claimed that "*growing up as a child in one of his houses always meant feeling both exhilaratingly and frighteningly close to nature*". [5]

From 1989 the house was rented while the family was overseas. On their return in 1996 they immediately commenced its major restoration programme. With the completion of this work in mid-1998, the Fishwick house stands alongside the GSDA Number 1 house and the Cheong house as the most authentically restored of Griffin's buildings on the Estate. As well as having the pleasure of living in a very important heritage structure, the owners now have a very comfortable home with a great deal of character.

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### **Footnotes:**

1. For detailed information on the Fishwicks and their real estate decisions open the PDF attachment "Thomas Fishwick's Puzzling Investment".
2. Extract from company records of John Fowler and Company (Leeds) held in the Museum of Rural Life, Reading University, UK.
3. Quote from film which ran during Powerhouse exhibition *Beyond Architecture* 1998.
4. A cartoon by Bernard Hesling in a book on the suburb written and published by members of the community to raise funds for Castlecrag Infants School shows a child asking "*Why is it called the Kremlin Daddy?*". He replies "Don't go too near dear". *Castlecrag* Addi Saltis Ed. 1972. p40
5. Children's quotations from private correspondence held by the current owners 2013.