

St George Historical Society Inc.
Bulletin

SPONSORED BY ROCKDALE CITY COUNCIL

MAY-JUNE 1997 Edition

Christina Stead



For the first time a Christina Stead Day will be held at Lydham Hall to coincide with her birthday on Saturday 19 July (10am - 4pm). A display will feature memorabilia and visitors will be able to view the only filmed interview with this internationally acclaimed writer. Enquiries: 9589 0229

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NEXT MEETING

10 JUNE 'The Sisters of the Good Samaritan Order, Tempe'

Keith Manley will talk about the work of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan Order and their associations with the Tempe House Estate.

Meetings are held 8 pm every **second Tuesday** of the month (except January) in the Meeting Room 1st Floor, Rockdale Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale. Members, please bring a plate. Visitors are welcome.

WANTED - BULLETIN EDITOR

My apologies to members for the very late distribution of this issue of the Bulletin. Unfortunately, other priorities have taken an increasing share of my time with the result that I have decided to step down from this position. After 9 years of editing the Society newsletter I think it is time to call it a day.

KIRNBANK

From 1941 to 1955 our family lived in this magnificent old house, numbered 2 Booth Street (or 97 Bonar Street) Arncliffe.

Most people will probably remember Kirnbank as a dilapidated mansion by the railway line at Arncliffe near the junction of Cook's River and Wolli Creek. It stood on land which was originally part of a subdivision of the Tempe House Estate brought about by construction of the Illawarra Railway Line.

Between 1892 to 1896 Justin McSweeney, an engineer previously involved in construction projects for tramways, railways, was a sub-contractor for the building of the Western Suburbs sewerage line. McSweeney paid auctioneer, Edwin Jacobs, the sum of £850 for a parcel of land on the western side of the Illawarra Railway near the then being constructed sewer outlet. Here he built facing near north overlooking the lush green flats of the river junction.

By the time Justin married Emily Dawson, 26 October 1898 Kirnbank was completed and the gardens well established. Rose gardens were planted and the property surrounded by Moreton Bay fig trees and many exotic tree types. Also on the property were two tennis courts and sheds for his horses and coaches. The main entry was via Bonar Street.

It is believed the McSweeney family lived here for only a short time and that Mrs McSweeney considered the location too isolated.

When our family arrived to take up residence early in 1941 Kirnbank looked much older than its fifty years, mainly due to deterioration through lack of care. The house at the time was rented as two flats and the property operated as a dairy by my mother's brother-in-law, Fred Swales. Our belongings then were quite modest and the proportions of the house so grand that apart from a large kitchen table our furniture could have occupied one room of Kirnbank.

Mum was the one most inconvenienced when we first arrived. It was August 1941 before we had any electricity and all cooking had to be over an open fuel fire. Because there were no laundry facilities washing had to be taken down four flights of stairs and up to the laundry, equipped with wooden tub and fuel copper.

For some 12 months my father was in charge of the dairy which at the time had around 50 cows. Some of the people who worked for my father were the 'young' and 'old' Mr Amos and a Mr Thompson who worked as a milking hand. In later years automatic milking machines were installed.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Dad being only in his thirties was given the option of joining the army or entering 'essential industry'. Dad failed the army medical but it was another four years before his thyroid troubles were diagnosed. He got a job with Eastern Trading Company (E.T.C.) at a factory in Tempe/Marrickville. Later renamed 'Technico', this firm was gearing up for the war effort by making machinery and repairing aircraft parts such as starters,

generators, oil pumps, ignition harness and manufacturing condensers (capacitors). By 1945 Technico was a large concern and when I left school in the same year Dad had me apprenticed to them as an electrical fitter.

Technico's social club decided to contribute to the war effort so Dad offered the use of the ballroom at Kirnbank for fund raising activities such as chocolate wheels, raffles and many other games of chance. Mum managed cooking and catering for the hundred or so who attended. In spite of rationing and the restrictions imposed by Members of Parliament, Dedman (no pink icing) and Conde (economy candles) the affairs were always a success. What contribution these activities made to the war effort was not known but Mum always received a big thank you from the social club and her name and ability was known to everyone.

A big problem during the World War II was blacking out the large windows which always attracted the attention of air-raid wardens. In the total darkness the large cedar balls strategically placed on the handrails of the balustrade provided a guide up the staircase. Mum, the detective, always knew of a late home comer - you inevitably kicked the bottom step in the dark. Living and moving around the house in the dark became second nature as power blackouts were expected morning and evening. Industrial and domestic loads overloaded the system and this continued until well after the war when the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme was completed. Walking home from the station although scary was reasonably safe. We got used to the noise of trains, aircraft or the screeching flying foxes in their hundreds when the fig trees were in fruit. It was believed that in times of air raids the safest place was under a table or an arch. On occasions such as the Japanese miniature submarine raid in 1942 and their shelling of Sydney or at other times when the siren sounded we all dashed as quickly as possible for shelter under the archways of the main concrete stairs. Dad wrapping the blankets around himself would eventually get out of bed and proceed down.

The smaller western-side girls' room had a stairway to the attic with a ladder and platform under a two-door hatch where we often viewed the comings and goings of aircraft at Mascot. The 360 degree view was most spectacular and during the war it became a challenge to identify American aircraft - not just by sight but also by sound.

About 1945 I remember a large explosion when a RAF aircraft laden with personnel and fuel crashed into the sewer duct. It struck where the sewer duct crossed the creek between the old sewer farm and Kyeemagh Polo Ground (now all part of Mascot aerodrome). As Kirnbank was built on rock quite near the sewer pipes the reverberations were felt throughout the house and every window shook. The lives of all personnel on board the aircraft were lost.

The sewer pipes were flat on top and could be used as an elevated pathway to places such as Kyeemagh and Mascot aerodrome. They were also a convenient means of avoiding confrontations with the Booth Street and Bonar Street youth gangs who were always fueding. On many occasions we walked across these ducts to the sand hills at Botany to collect shells or just enjoy the beach. Sometimes we would go in the other direction over Wolli Creek to Undercliffe. On Sundays, it was the done thing for hundreds of people to walk across to Kyeemagh Pologrounds to watch the polo or later on the junior football. It was the perfect way to spend a relaxing day.

Our family lived at Kirnbank for 14 years and during this time the faded opulence of this magnificent house made a lasting impression on my memory. What follows is a description of the house as I remember it.

Our family usually entered via the the back entrance to the property in Booth Street. From this point a series of steps descended to a passageway which passed the lower ground floor of the house. On this level was the billiard room and a small cloak room. Also toward the rear of the house was the two-storied west wing which was McSweeney's original residence. This section comprising 6 rooms was later converted for use as servants quarters and conservatory when the main house was built. At the front of the house two flights of twelve steps led to the entrance. The middle and top landings of this series of steps were paved with black and white tiles. Each step was edged in steel which for safety reasons we eventually had to paint white as the area was almost completely dark at night. The ballustrade of the external staircase was surmounted in four places by large glazed terracotta (Fowler's manufactured) pots containing large alovera plants.

The massive front entrance was sheltered by an archway and the front door itself was in four sections each being two foot wide with the outer sections fixed. The four seasons spring, summer, autumn and winter were depicted in stained leadlight glass. A semi-circular fanlight covering the full width of the entranceway had one arc of red with stars and the other arc of blue with stars.

The large entrance foyer at the foot of the cedar stairs had two main doors. The left led to the ballroom, the right to the lounge music/dining room. Because we occupied the four main bedrooms upstairs which were accessed by the main staircase leading from the front door the ballroom was included as part of our flat. The other flat was accessed via the back door and comprised the large kitchen, numerous other small rooms and the lounge-music and dining rooms. Above the entry to these two large rooms was a carved cedar pediment depicting waratahs, flannel flowers, gum nuts and leaves, English roses, thistle and ivy. These motifs were repeated above the door to the washroom/bathroom area as well as in the plaster ceiling roses of the ballroom.

The ceiling roses in the ballroom were at least 3 foot in diameter and from them hung two magnificent brass chandeliers. These five-branched gas chandeliers were counter-weighted so they could be lowered to light the mantles. Each mantle had a beautifully glass shade with a delicate sand-blasted pattern.

All plasterwork was done insitu by a local tradesman, a Mr Martin, who lived nearby. The cornice of the ballroom had a 12mm concave ogee where sometimes small bats became trapped when they occasionally entered the house. It was a hard job to remove them. Each window of the ballroom had cedar venetian blinds and gold velvet pelmets and curtains tied with gold cords. The gold colour scheme was carried through to the wallpaper which had a gold vine motif. The two gas fire places in the ballroom had white marble surrounds and to the left of each was a bell-push, the cover of which was hand painted in gold and silver on porcelain. It would have been easy to imagine a large mirror above the marble fireplace as there were also wall-mounted

gaslight brackets at each side of the face area above the mantles. In all rooms with 12 foot ceilings a brass picture rail was fixed at a height of 10 foot.

Throughout the house all doors, architraves, and skirting boards were of cedar. Skirting boards were 12 inches high and floor boards 8 inches. Doors were panelled with large porcelain knobs and finger plates.

From the entrance foyer two flights of stairs led up to the main bedroom area. There were twenty one steps to the first landing which led off to the washroom/toilet area and nine up to the top foyer. Beyond this point there were four rooms. The first reached on the western side of the house became our kitchen meal room while the other three were main, boys and girls bedrooms. The foyer we used as a dining room.

Although very large by normal standards the bathroom was the smallest of all the main rooms in the house. It measured 12 foot by 12 foot by 9 foot and had tiled walls with a hand-painted frieze. The ceiling was of solid cedar. A small chip heater was used to heat the water so it took some time to prepare a bath in the 8 foot by 2 foot bathtub.

The toilet, located in a separate room between the bathroom and washroom, was quite unique. The pan, manufactured by Fowler, was decorated in a floral design and named 'The Pedestal Vase'. Instead of the normal 'S' bend arrangement a flat surface would receive waste and be flushed clean. The wash basin area by 1948 became our laundry with washing machine, copper, etcetera but we were never allowed by the agent to provide water and drainage in the kitchen so water had to be transported up and back from the washroom. A skylight above the washroom provided plenty of daylight. Above the entry to the washroom-bathroom area was a large half-round top stained glass leadlight fixed window of brilliant colours using the same motifs as the carved timber in entrance hall.

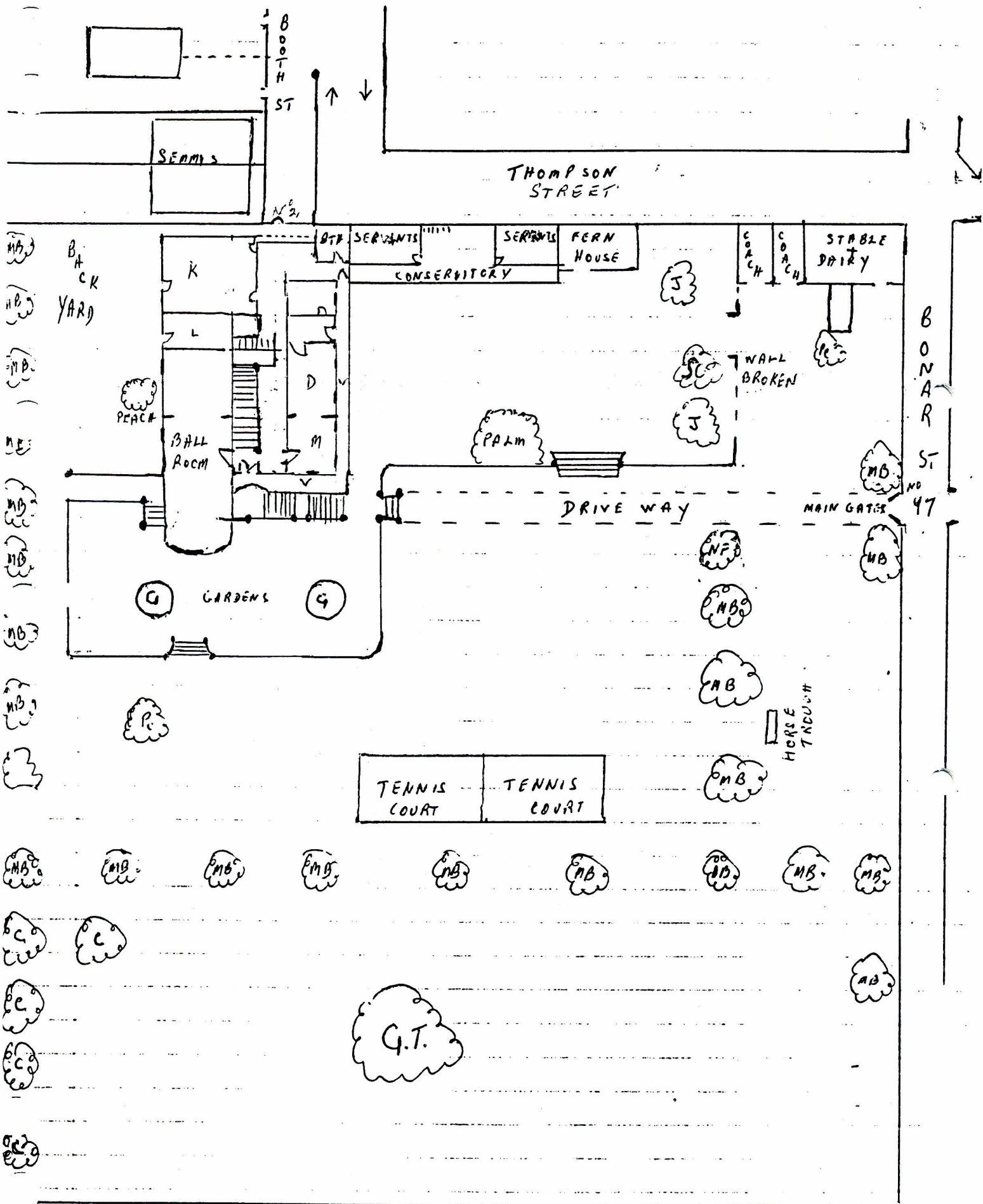
The slate roof of Kimbank leaked badly and during heavy rain it was the practice to have to chase around the attic with cans and buckets placing them under the drips. Repairs were too expensive and dangerous.

When our family left Kimbank in 1955 the character of the surrounding area was changing rapidly. Rockdale Council had rezoned much of the northern area of Arncliffe for industry, bulldozers had started removal of the fig trees (havens for thousands of flying foxes) and the first factories began to appear. Kimbank itself was to survive another thirty years of successive ownerships and abject neglect during which it was mainly used for storage. In spite of this much of the original fabric of the building survived intact and at least one prospective buyer was keen to restore the old mansion. It was not to be, however, and Kimbank was demolished in 1986. Now eleven years onward the site is still vacant and many of the factories unoccupied.

Lawrence F. McManus
June 1996

Our thanks to Laurie McManus for his wonderful recollections of this magnificent old home. Laurie now lives at Ashfield and is an avid researcher of family history. Ed.

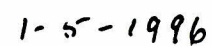
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"KIRNBANK"



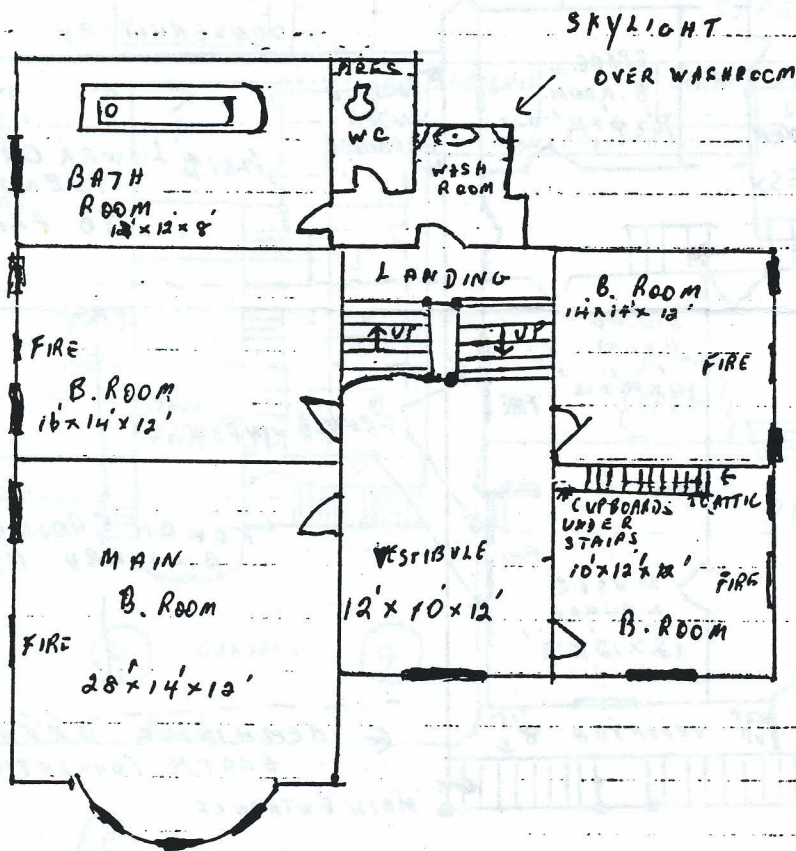
TREES
C. CANNOR LAUREL
MB. MORTEN BAY FIG
P.C. PEPER CORN

J. JACARANDA
G.T. GUM TREE
SC SILKY OAK
NOT TO

PLAN NOT TO SCALE
L. F. McMANUS



TOP FLOOR



1/2 DUNGEON

1/2 LOWER GROUND - BILLIARD ROOM

1 1ST FLOOR - LIVING AREA (GROUND LEVEL. EAST + SOUTH)

1 1/2. MAIN BATH ECT

2. TOP FLOOR - MAIN BED ROOMS

3. ATTIC - ROOF - VIEW PLATFORM ONLY

LENGTH - BREATH - HIGHT

NOT TO SCALE

PLAN NOT TO SCALE

L. F. McMANUS

1-5-1996