

“The Most Reasonable Place In Canberra”

A heritage view of Gorman House

by Stephanie Green





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Gorman House was built in 1924 as a hostel for Commonwealth Public Servants. As the place of first contact for so many Canberrans, Gorman House featured strongly in the social history of Canberra, particularly during the city's early development as the Federal Capital of Australia. Thousands of people lived at Gorman House during its 48 years as a hostel. Ex-residents remember it warmly for its atmosphere of camaraderie and for its simple but graceful design. Now a lively and centrally located Arts Centre, Gorman House is important in a new way to the Canberra community.

For the many young people who came to work in Canberra in the 1920's, '30's and '40's, the Commonwealth Government Hostels were central to life in Canberra. Until after World War 2, there was little formal social activity. The cinema and a weekly dance at the Albert Hall were the main events. Most Gorman House residents were young, earned little and came from places as far away as Brisbane, Hobart or Perth. The hostel, therefore, provided a home, family, friends and entertainment, as well as an adventure into adulthood and independence. Of their time at Gorman House many people commented — “We made our own fun”. And they did!

The 1920's

Gorman House was first known as "Hostel No. 3". It was conceived, designed and approved by Parliament in 1923 as a hostel for lower paid Public Servants.

Gorman House is typical of Canberra architecture in the 1920's. Architect J.S. Murdoch (who also gave us the Provisional Parliament House) used motifs of low pavilions, covered paths and open courtyards; an American-influenced design built from his interpretation of Walter Burley Griffin's vision for the Australian Capital. Murdoch also planned the Hotel Canberra, built slightly later than Gorman House, using similar elements with greater elaboration.

In 1924 Hostel No. 3 was constructed by day labour with a budget of £25,000. It was to accommodate 80 people who at first were to pay no more than 30-35 shillings per week. The first Manager, Edith Hicks, was appointed, and the first residents had moved in by 1925. And, in January that year, Hostel No. 3 officially became the **Hotel Ainslie**.

Hotel Ainslie provided rooms for married couples and single guests, with separate wings for men and women. Three meals a day were provided in the dining room with a cut lunch available for those who worked, for example, at the Westridge (now Yarralumla) Woodsheds and were too far away to walk home for lunch. Information and advice to Public Servants in the mid-twenties claimed that the hostel 'would soothe' new arrivals to Canberra. Rooms were simple although adequate, however no heating was provided except in common rooms, which must have been icy in July! Each room had a cold water tap, hot water was provided only in the communal bathrooms. British journalist Cyril Belfrage, on a visit to Canberra in 1935 wrote in the Yass Tribune Courier;

As I lay in my berth after we had arrived, shivering with cold, in spite of innumerable blankets, there was the profound silence of the grave. Could we have arrived at the Federal Capital of all Australia? Or had we broken down somewhere in the bush?

There is no reason to suppose Canberra was any warmer or more populated ten years earlier.

1927 was a memorable year for the nation, and a significant one for the Hotel Ainslie too. Canberra was a different city in those days. Civic consisted only of the Melbourne and Sydney buildings, which housed offices and shops. There was little public lighting of streets. Kingston was known as Eastlake, and what is now the Forrest/Griffith area was called Blandfordia. The Molonglo river wound through the city and was crossed by a little wooden bridge, which was inclined to flood as the river swelled with spring and autumn rains.

On the ninth of May, there was great public excitement when the Australian Parliament House was officially opened by the Duke of York. This was the occasion for an Impromptu Ball.

According to a smart young journalist in the Canberra Community News (June 11 1927) reporting on this event;

The distance from Hotel Ainslie to Parliament House was never more fully appreciated than during the time when it had to be walked. Ice carts were only available occasionally.

and furthermore

What with blue and khaki uniforms, the course of true love became rather complicated during the Royal visit.

But, 1927 was also a sad year, as one of the three first Federal Capital Commissioners, Clarence Gorman, died earlier in the year. He was plucked "from life's busy stage... with the casual indifference Death displays to human affairs", as the Canberra Community News mourned in its leading article on February 11, 1927.

Two months later, just prior to the official opening of Parliament House, Chief Commissioner C.S. Daley sent out a Circular advising that the Hotel Ainslie would now be named Gorman House after the late Clarence Gorman. The Ainslie Guest House, up the road towards Mt Ainslie, instead took on the name of Hotel Ainslie, which like Gorman House, it still holds today.

More female clerical workers and typists were needed in the Public Service, and as most had to be cajoled into coming to work in the National Capital,

respectable, economical accommodation had to be provided as an incentive. The Federal Capital Commission decided to extend Gorman House so that it could accommodate up to 122 residents. The two end pavilions were both joined by two-storey wings, enclosing the courtyards which had already been planted with wisteria, shrubs and a central hawthorn tree.

Naturally

Some concern was felt by parents and relatives for the welfare of the young women, many of whom were employed in the Government Printing Office. Although satisfactory accommodation conditions were provided for single women at Hotel Ainslie (now called Gorman House after Commissioner Clarence Gorman who died in early 1927) and Beauchamp House in Acton, the Commission arranged to establish in two residences in Blandfordia (now Forrest), a residential and social institution for women known as the Lady Hopetoun Club.

(C.S Daley, "As I recall", The Canberra Times 14.5.66)

The 1930's

The soothing pavilions of Gorman House were troubled in the early '30's by controversies over management. Then Chief Commissioner, C.S. Daley was petitioned by residents who were fearful that the overly severe Housekeeper Mrs Goodwin-Robinson might return to govern them at Gorman House as she once had done. Beauchamp House residents were instead graced with the goodly Mrs Goodwin-Robinson. However, inflamed by their Gorman informants, they protested as well, both before and after her installation at Beauchamp House. The long-suffering Commissioner also had to deal with bitter complaints from the Housekeeper herself, ultimately finding her "antagonistic and aggressive".

Further indignant petitions issued from the female residents at Beauchamp House, when advised in 1931 that they were to transfer to Gorman since they were paying too little rent. They complained that the Gorman rooms were "in disgraceful condition" and that they had been used as quarters for the staff (!).

In 1936 a junior clerk earned about £100 per year and paid about 30s per week in board at Gorman House. Power was extra and each room metered individually. Edith Hicks who had apparently been relocated for a time as Housekeeper at Beauchamp House was again Manager at Gorman, assisted by a Mrs Holmes. They were opposites who complemented one another. Mrs Hicks was large and imposing, while Mrs Holmes appeared small and sweet-natured. Both, however, were very strict.

The number of female workers in the Commonwealth Public Service was still growing, and more were wanted. At this stage most were lower paid clerical staff and typists, therefore candidates for rooms at Gorman under the charter of its original purpose. In the mid-1930's men were advised to find alternative accommodation as the hostel was eventually to become for women only.

On August 9, 1936 young Edwin Charles wrote to his mother

There'll be ructions soon at Gorman. All the men on over £300 have to go out . Men like Mr Ross — on over £800 — should leave and let the younger

people come, as it is about the most reasonable place in Canberra.

And on June 8, 1937, he noted

everyone here over 21, males I mean, have got walking tickets for next Monday. I believe the rest of us boys won't last long. Jim and I have decided to stick on to the bitter end.

(From letters printed in the Canberra Times 1987-88, contributed by Alan Fewster.)

In 1938 Gorman House accommodated women only. Mrs Hicks retired and Mrs Holmes became Manager. Her strictness was famed. Flouting the rules was "fatal"! Being caught with a man in your room after 11pm held severe consequences – which were usually the culprit's expulsion.

The 1940's and 50's

World War II brought change to Canberra as it did to the world. American soldiers, blackouts and anxious evenings beside the radio were emblems of that war, here as much as anywhere.

Shirley Greer of Hackett described the streets of Canberra as being completely blacked out, so that it was very easy to get lost.

"It was exciting in wartime" Shirley said "There were troops of Dutch and American servicemen based at the Naval Stations, and sometimes planes flew very low overhead. Once we watched planes from the RAAF rehearsing a dogfight from the office window."

In 1947 the first European immigrants came to Gorman House, displaced by war or seeking a different future. They worked as labourers, served at table or in the kitchens, whatever their skills, accepting anything they could find to do in their new country.

Mrs Selmae Koobakene came to Australia by boat, landing at Fremantle. She was transferred to Bonegilla via Melbourne and from there, along with two other young women from Estonia, she came to Gorman House as a waitress in the dining room.

"We were so hungry after the war" said Mrs Koobakene "The cook understood and let us eat as much as we liked. We ate and ate and still were not full. Of course, you know, we put on weight".

To the Europeans, the simple pavillions of Gorman House in sparse and Spartan Canberra seemed drab. Yet, it became home and Mrs Koobakene remembers all stayed beyond the term of their original two year contract. During the afternoons the staff would bring chairs and sit in the courtyards, or on the nature strips in the sunshine. There were flower beds, then, in the courtyards and gravel paths.

"I learned English from the radio" she said "we didn't attend English classes because the waitresses had to be in the dining room until 7.30

and the classes started at 7.00." At first, they could only communicate with residents by pointing.

Canberra, the seat of the Australian nation, was still a small, remote township in 1947 . The flat, weedy gap of land between Gorman House and Civic was known as the 'prairie'. The Melbourne and Sydney buildings still comprised the main part of Civic and the Blue Moon Cafe was the only place to go for a meal apart from the Hotel Canberra and the Civic pub.

There were few shops, and only on rare and special occasions would the girls make a trip to Sydney for shopping. Hamburgers could only be obtained in Queanbeyan. Clothes were washed by taking turns at the copper near the boiler room. Washing was often strung up in the courtyards while the owner sunned herself nearby, ready to forestall the theft of stockings or expensive underwear. Their bed linen was provided but the girls had to clean their own rooms with mops which were provided at the end of each corridor. In winter radiators could be used but were not provided. New arrivals had to share a room for up to one year before being entitled to a room of their own. Cars were rare, but bicycles were popular and everyone walked a great deal.

Mrs Elizabeth Brown, known by her friends as Bett, came from Tasmania to work in the Department of Immigration. The Commonwealth Government needed typists and were prepared to pay the air fares if the girls would stay in Canberra at least nine months. Elizabeth came with a friend, Dorothy, from Hobart and for their first six months at Gorman House they shared a double room. She said

"We all had coupons. It was just after the War and there was still rationing. We arrived in January and it was very hot."

The girls at Gorman had to turn over their coupons to the Manager, who then issued various consumables. Elizabeth remembers her quota of butter melting to liquid in her handbasin in the hot inland summer.

"A lot of the girls were homesick. We used to go out to the airport and watch the planes take off. And, of course, the telephone was a centre of activity". They would all would hover by the telephone after

dinner, which was situated outside the lounge, hoping to receive a call from family or friends, but avoiding having to answer it themselves in case the caller wanted someone from some distant corner of the building.

At the end of the year, Elizabeth went home for Christmas. On returning to Hobart from the newly constructed National Capital, her home town "seemed so old". By then, she had already met her husband-to-be, Bill Brown. Bill was a Canberra lad, and so Elizabeth left Tasmania permanently and returned briefly to Gorman House until their wedding. Bett and Bill were married in 1949 and now live in Pearce.

The girls at Gorman had left their families and friends, with all the ideals and optimism of young people working for and building a still emerging nation.

Miss Elizabeth Southern, who gave many years of service to the War Memorial said "We had a sense of purpose. There was work to be done. The hostel life suited me. The meals were always hot and ready when you finished work. Everything was provided for you."

Val Hodge of Ainslie recalled that formality was always maintained in the dining hall. Each resident had their own place at table, and their own napkin, which was laundered weekly. Tables were laid with linen and silver plate. Residents were waited upon by staff at dinner and the food was generally plentiful if predictable.

Outside the dining room things were a little less decorous. Cups of coffee or tea shared in rooms warmed the evenings. Mrs Hodge recalled that these little parties sometimes went late into the evenings, accompanied by sherry and snacks such as vitawheat biscuits with sardines, or buttered and sprinkled with hundreds and thousands — a sort of adult fairy bread. Sometimes on Saturdays, the dividing doors and the carpets in the lounge were all thrown back and they would dance with the wireless turned up high.

According to Mrs Freda Bennett of Campbell and Audrey Trevellyan of Griffith, Mrs Dickson replaced Mrs Holmes as manager, who in turn gave way

to a Mrs Coles. Mrs Coles was renowned for listening at key holes late at night, knocking on doors and demanding "Have you got a man in there?".

In 1949 the post-war push of men back into the civilian work-force had its impact on Gorman House. The hostel re-admitted male residents, although according to some, this was not the first time a man had been there after 11pm in the previous ten years.

Noel Wicks was the first man to take up accommodation at Gorman House in 1949. This may have required courage, as not all the girls were keen on the idea. Gone were the cosy nights, making toast and cocoa in the lounge by a roaring fire in their pyjamas and dressing gowns. Men meant propriety, which was a lot more trouble.

Mr Wicks came to Canberra from Brisbane on a Public Service cadetship. He remembers that quarters for men and women were segregated and that more men joined him at Gorman House soon after, so that before long the numbers of men and women were pretty even.

" Rooms were Spartan " he said " There was a desk, a bed, a chair and a basin. We had a cupboard and probably a table. There was no curfew, but guests of the opposite sex were supposed to be out by 10 or 11 pm. But, the rule was ignored."

On one unfortunate occasion, Mr Wicks recalls attempting to assist someone who had locked themselves out of their room by climbing up the nearby drainpipe. Sadly, he fell but luckily his dignity bore the worst of his injuries.

At this time, Gorman House had a committee which organized social functions, kept account of equipment such as table tennis bats and sewing machines, and attempted to resolve grievances over food or facilities. Living in Canberra was still a case of 'making your own fun'. Gorman residents had two dances each year in the dining room. Impromptu parties in rooms were a frequent pass-time, as were card nights, trips to the catter, walks up Mt

Ainslie or weekend visits to the snow in winter-time.

Life at Gorman was still had a Spartan elegance about it, but the lack of heating and the difficulty of washing clothes sometimes lead to residents 'hot-wiring' metre fuses. Another underground activity was the cooking up of after dinner snacks in rooms over little primus stoves.

In 1955 one of the married residents, Regina Slazenger — the sister in charge of obstetrics at Royal Canberra Hospital — presented a series of first aid lectures in the Gorman House meeting room. When the 'students' had completed this course, Regina organized a little group to go into people's homes who were ill or needed help, until the District Nursing Service was created to meet this community need.

1960's and 70's

The elegance of dining was rationalized during this period and meals began to be taken cafeteria style. Gorman House was still a place with a small, friendly population. The building was regarded with affection as having an old-world charm, with its cloister-like courtyards, rosemary hedges and wrinkled wisteria vines. Rooms were fully serviced but residents still had to supply their own heaters and pay for the electricity they used. An ex-manager in the 1960's, Mr Jackson, recalled the greatest difficulties were making sure rules were observed, which was never easy, and keeping food costs to budget.

The filling in of Lake Burley Griffin and the arrival of Gus' cafe were events that reflected changes in the social and physical landscape of Canberra, as many ex-residents remembered. The building of the Canberra Theatre Centre and later the Canberra School of Music were also part of this development.

David Hill, came to Canberra from Mackay in 1966. He taught Biology at the (then) Canberra Technical College, working in condemned huts at Kingston. Later, after the College became the ACT Institute of TAFE, David worked for a time as Head of the Biology Department.

At first, David lived at Lawley House, but he did not like its modern, impersonal atmosphere and within a year he moved to Gorman. "I was happier at Gorman House." he explained " People were ruder! And, I married a girl from Gorman. We were married from Gorman House and honeymooned on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin."

David's wife is Truss Van de Meulen, who was a cellist with the Canberra Symphony Orchestra. He remembers first meeting her at the mail-board and later seeing her in the dining room, wondering how he could manage to get to sit at her table. Even in the 1960's, residents were given a place at table. These were dispensed by Mila, the Chief Waitress of the day.

David said "Gorman House had many interesting characters. There

were heavy drinkers and bible bashers. There were also quite a lot of artistic people living there." There were several musicians, including David's wife, Truss. He remembered one friend who was deeply interested in music, organizing a celebration on the anniversary of Beethoven's birthday. Another friend, also one of David's ex-students, kept bats in his Gorman House bedroom. David himself became actively involved in dance and theatre, enjoying the intimacy of Canberra life and is now with the Department of Health and Fitness at the Reid TAFE Campus.

According to Sue Ott of Hall, rooms at Gorman in 1967 cost £30 per fortnight. There was always a demand for rooms, but the drift from the older hostels had begun. New hostels such as Lawley House, Macquarie and Gowrie Hostels were built to accommodate a new generation of Commonwealth Public Servants to Canberra. Many preferred the more modern conditions they offered. Others, however, preferred the more intimate character of Gorman House and were saddened when the Commonwealth Hostels' General Manager, Ken Hodge, announced that it would close. Major repairs were needed and the cost of maintaining a small hostel were considered too great.

Despite protest from both government and community sectors, Gorman House closed as a hostel in October 1972.

During the mid-1970's Gorman House accommodated the Australian Government Retirement Benefits Office in Block B. In 1976 it became the Commonwealth Police Training Academy. Members of the current Federal Police force have mixed memories of putting feet through rotting floor boards, picking sprigs of rosemary on ANZAC Day and sitting under the wisteria in spring. In 1979 the police Academy moved to new premises in Weston, and Gorman House was left empty again.

The 1980's and 90's

In 1980, several arts and community organizations needed office space, and the Reid House Theatre Group was about to lose their home completely since Reid House (another old hostel) was to be demolished. A lobby group was formed from these organizations to press for the use of Gorman House as a Community Arts Centre.

As a result, the architects Clem Cummings and Associates were asked to prepare a structural feasibility report by the National Capital Development Commission. This was entitled *Gorman House, A Feasibility Study Report On Redevelopment Proposals For A Community Arts Centre At Gorman House, Section 53, Braddon, ACT*. Several proposals regarding internal rebuilding were considered and Cumming's recommendations were adopted for developing Gorman House as a centre for arts groups and individual artists in Canberra. The six stage program of internal rebuilding and external maintenance began.

During 1981 the ACT Arts Council, Reid House Theatre Workshop, Jigsaw Theatre Company, Human Veins Dance Theatre and several other groups, moved in to their new accommodation. Gorman House was officially opened as a Community Arts Centre by Mrs Tammie Fraser on September 15, 1981.

That year, Gorman House provided a venue for the highly successful Performing Arts Cafe series, with "250 people cramming into the Gorman House premises for a 6-hour marathon of acting talent" (Canberra Times 9.12.81). This assisted in promoting the hostel's new identity and drew members of the Canberra arts community together in an exciting exchange of genres and ideas.

From July 1981 until 1984 Gorman House operations were managed by an Interim Management Committee. This Committee consisted of various arts and community representatives, appointed by the Minister for Territories. At that time the Liberal Party was in office and the relevant Minister was Bob Ellicot. He was succeeded by Michael Hodgman, who was later replaced under a Labour Government by Ken Fry. The Committee's founding Chairperson was Elizabeth Grant, a former Liberal MHR in the old ACT Legislative Assembly and now on the Board of Canberra Festival Inc.

As Mrs Grant explained, Gorman House was seen as a location for arts and community groups to work, meet, exchange and develop their ideas. As a Community Arts Centre, Gorman House was to be home to a creative community. It was envisaged by the original committee as a place that would be supportive and exciting to be in, that would also reach out and draw people in to the arts in Canberra, and be a base from which groups like Youth Theatre or AADE would go out into schools or community centres.

The level of activity and available resources for a Community Arts Centre in Canberra grew rapidly. In 1982 the Interim Management Committee was able to appoint a part-time manager, Phil Roberts. His role was to coordinate tenancy arrangements and ensure security at the centre.

Meanwhile, the ACT Heritage Committee had placed Gorman House on the ACT Heritage list. In renovating and rebuilding the old hostel, features such as the exterior, the dining room and the courtyards had to be preserved. In 1983 the Heritage Committee achieved the listing of Gorman House on the Register of the National Estate, which confirmed its significance in the social and architectural history of Canberra. In 1988 the building's Heritage Plaque was formally unveiled by ACT Senator Bob McMullan.

Gorman House had become a bubbling crucible of artistic and community talent, mainstream and experimental — and in spring 1984 this was reflected in a well-attended Open Day with performances, displays and stalls throughout the centre.

The Interim Management Committee formally gave notice of its intention to incorporate, and in December 1984 officially became the Gorman House Management Committee. Just over one year later, Mark Ferguson (now Director of Gorman House) took over as full-time Administrator and another Open Day was held. On that occasion Virginia Cook wrote in the Canberra Times

It would not be impossible to mistake Gorman House for a monastery... it offers a bucolic ambience that belies its proximity to Canberra's busy centre. What gives away its role as a community arts centre are the touches of bohemia...

Gorman House still has this intriguing mixture of elements; the contemplative and the extraordinary. Current tenants include Jigsaw Theatre, Canberra Youth Theatre, AADE, Actors Equity the Canberra Contemporary Artspace and the Arts Council of the ACT, as well as many individual artists, such as painters, sculptors, weavers, writers, jewellers and clothing designers. Extroverted multi-media performances such as "Synchromesh" or the Canberra Fringe Inc's Klub Kaos are complemented by meditative dance workshops, T'ai Chi and of course the artists who emerge from the solitude of their studios to gather in the courtyards or the cafe.

More recently, however, there have been discussions about the continuing role of Gorman House in Canberra and its importance in providing office accommodation, performing venues and a meeting place for Canberra's artistic community.

To further consider such issues, John Hawkes (former director of the Community Arts Board with the Australia Council and one-time "Strong-man" for Circus Oz) was contracted as a consultant to investigate and report on the Centre's developing role and the resources it provides. One key finding of the Hawkes Report is that Gorman House should be called an Arts Centre as it serves artists and arts organizations more specifically than community groups.

Mark Ferguson, now Director of Gorman House Arts Centre, sees that the Centre is still evolving. "In the past" he said " It was largely there to provide a venue for arts organizations, meetings and performances." Mark now perceives a new phase of development with the centre more actively encouraging and supporting the arts community.

A Management Committee is still responsible for Gorman House. This committee consists of 4 elected tenant representatives and four from the wider community. The facilities of small performance spaces, meeting rooms, office and studio spaces are well utilised by a wide cross-section of the community.

Mark believes that the centre has a commitment to support artists and arts organizations. His vision is one where Gorman House helps to

make arts practice possible, in a variety of forms, styles, and genres. He does not think it is the Centre's role to prescribe artistic directions, but rather to stimulate a creative environment. "An important part of this process" Mark explained "is to encourage a sense of ownership amongst the ACT community."

But, he reminded me, "The planning for any arts activity needs to be tempered by the fact that Gorman House is a heritage building, with issues of building and grounds conservation to be considered".

Mark regards the Hawkes Report as useful in taking stock and focusing on issues that did need consideration. "After 8 years as a Community Arts Centre, the Management Committee felt it was time for management and policy issues to be re-evaluated with the benefit of an outside view." The adoption of Hawkes recommendation that the word "Community" be dropped from the Arts Centre's title is a positive step, he believes, towards the Centre's growing sense of identity.

And now? Gorman House is still a home. It is no longer a residence for wandering Commonwealth Public Servants, but a place for the expression of ideas and imagination. Like Canberra itself, Gorman House is a place where things are possible, and where there is the space, resources and encouragement to do them. So many people have lived, worked, visited, and enjoyed Gorman House; have been entertained, fed, assisted, soothed — have been given a place to be. Clad genteelly, it remains a place of hidden mischief, shared secrets, explosions of colour, music and voices. Imaginations stir here, there is tolerance of alternatives, support for diverse forms of expression. And yet, the old hostel commands a certain dignity, respect. One is polite as if to one's grandmother, for no matter how eccentric she is, she does have (one suspects) a sagaciously long view of life and art.

