



HERITAGE
COUNCIL
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES

Interim Entry

1. **Data Base No.** 0128
2. **Name.** *Earlsferry* (1902)
3. **Description of elements included in this entry.** *Earlsferry* house and the land on which it stands, being Lot 500 on Diagram 77234 comprised in C/T 1868/599.
4. **Local Government Area.** Town of Bassendean
5. **Location.** 1A Nurstead Ave, Bassendean
6. **Owner.** Thomas, L.
7. **Statement of Significance of Place (Assessment in Detail)**

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Earlsferry, formerly known as *Briarsleigh*, was built for John Treggerthen Short in 1902.¹ The site chosen for the house is part of the area known as Swan Location R, at what was originally known as West Guildford. (West Guildford is now part of the suburb of Bassendean)

Swan Location R was purchased from the Colonial Administration in May 1830 by James and Jane Dodds.² By 1897, Swan Location R had been subdivided into six plots by the intrusion of the railway line, Swan Road and Perth Street (now known as Guildford Road). From 1897, Mary Thomson (nee Dodds) commenced selling the divided land.³ This was presumably in response to the rising value of land in Perth in the wake of the gold rush. Nurstead Avenue (now the address of the property) was named after Jane Dodds' home in England, "Nursted Court".⁴

John Treggerthen Short purchased a plot of land south of the railway line on 13 November 1902. The plot was bounded to the south by Guildford Road, to the east by the Swan River and to the west by Swan Road which now forms part of Nurstead Avenue.⁵ There is no evidence to suggest that the site was developed prior to its sale

¹ Palassis, Architects: "*Earlsferry*" Conservation Plan. (Perth, February 1993) pp. 2, 43.

² *ibid.* p. 8.

³ *loc.cit.*

⁴ Carter, J. *Bassendean, a Social History 1829-1979.* (Town of Bassendean, Perth, 1986) p.47.

⁵ Title Deeds. Department of Land Administration, Perth.

in 1902 to Short, although it is possible that the land was cleared and used for grazing and some cultivation during the colonial period.⁶

At the time he purchased the property, Short was Chief Traffic Manager of the Western Australian Government Railways (W.A.G.R.)⁷ and married with four children. His choice of location was a pertinent one: in anticipation of the relocation of the Eastern Railway headquarters to Midland in 1904; and in an area favoured by a number of leading citizens who built large houses with a river frontage in Guildford.

Short commissioned a two storey red brick house, set back from the roads and railway, and facing the river. The architect and builder of the house are unknown, however Carter has suggested the house may have been built by Henry Duval who built Cyril Jackson's house nearby.⁸ Early photographs show a fashionable, well designed house with decorative verandahs and sophisticated details and finishes. The house was surrounded by a substantial rose garden, and complimented with orchard, stables, outhouses and tennis court.⁹ Short called it *Briarsleigh*.

Short combined his W.A.G.R. career with active participation in civic affairs. He was elected Chairman of the West Guildford Road Board in 1903 (the meetings being held in his newly built house)¹⁰ and was a Justice of the Peace for Western Australia.¹¹ By 1906/07, he had been appointed Commissioner of Railways, a position he held until his retirement in 1919¹² during which time the W.A.G.R. made a surplus of nearly £1,000,000 under his management.¹³ After his retirement, Short purchased a house in Altona street, West Perth and lived there until his death in 1933.¹⁴

In July 1923, *Earlsferry* was bought by Sir Edward Horne Wittenoom.¹⁵ Wittenoom was sixty-nine years of age, and nearing the end of a distinguished career, having been Acting Premier of Western Australia in 1897, and Western Australia's Agent General in London. Sir Edward (he was knighted by Queen Victoria) held office on the board of many large companies and was influential in the State.¹⁶ He did not live in the house all the time and it seems likely that the house was let out for residential purposes from the late 1920s.¹⁷ Following Wittenoom's death in 1936, control of the estate passed to the West Australian Trustee Executor and Agency Company Ltd., which managed the property until 1941.

⁶ Palassis, Architects: *op.cit.* p.8.

⁷ Battye, J.S., *The Cyclopaedia of Western Australia*. (Hussey & Gillingham, Adelaide, 1913) p.467.

⁸ Carter, J. *op.cit.* p.84.

⁹ *loc.cit.*

¹⁰ West Guildford Road Board Minutes of meetings, 1901 - 1905; Carter, J. *op. cit.* p.96.

¹¹ Battye, J.S., *op.cit.* p.467 cited in Palassis, Architects: *op.cit.* p.9.

¹² *ibid.* p.9; Short is shown as holding the position of Chief Traffic Manager until 1906 in the *Blue Books*. In the 1907 *Report to Parliament from the Commissioner of Railways* he is the Commissioner. The exact date of his appointment is uncertain.

¹³ Wilson, J.G. *Western Australia's Centenary 1829-1929*. (Historic Press: Perth 1929) p.232.

¹⁴ *West Australian*, 27 January, 1933, p. 18.

¹⁵ Title Deeds. Department of Land Administration, Perth cited in Palassis, Architects: *op.cit.* p.10.

¹⁶ *loc.cit.*

¹⁷ *loc.cit.*

Three years later, in November 1944, the property was sold to Mrs Mildred Foster, who lived there with her husband (the manager of a dried fruit plant) and her daughter until 1946.¹⁸ It was during this period that the property was renamed *Earlsferry*.

On 4 April 1946, the property was purchased by Karl Edgar Drake-Brockman. In addition to his achievements as a Rhodes Scholar, Oxford law graduate, solicitor,¹⁹ and judge,²⁰ Drake-Brockman was an accomplished gardener who cultivated the gardens at *Earlsferry* including a "sufficiently well developed (and reticulated) rose garden to sell the produce to a Perth Florist."²¹

The Drake-Brockman ownership was the last occupancy in which the house remained in its original state, complete with orchard, tennis court and Edwardian colour scheme.²²

In April 1950, an application by Drake-Brockman to the State Licensing Court to turn *Earlsferry* into a hotel was rejected and the property was sold to the Crown shortly thereafter.

Under the ownership of the Crown, *Earlsferry* was converted to a home for mentally handicapped girls. At this time, *Earlsferry* underwent a number of changes that altered its original residential function. The conversion involved alterations to the building, including the addition of a laundry on the north west side, removal of the outhouses and the construction of a cottage for the Matron in the area formerly occupied by the orchard. Security wire mesh fences were erected, a large tree and rose beds removed and the main driveway, off Nurstead Avenue, bituminised and kerbs installed.²³

In September 1988, ownership of *Earlsferry* passed to the "Authority for Intellectually Handicapped Persons."²⁴ In April 1989, the roof and upper floor of the building were gutted by fire.²⁵ The damage, estimated at \$1.25 million, was repaired (but not restored to its original state), and the property was sold by tender to the current owner on 12 June 1990. A condition of sale was the granting of a restrictive covenant to the National Trust (WA). The covenant was placed on the title deeds to ensure that future work did not endanger the heritage value of the site.²⁶

Subsequently, a proposal to subdivide the block has been approved subject to a conservation plan being prepared and on condition that the subdivision is in no way injurious to the heritage values of the site.²⁷ For further information see Palassis Architects: "*Earlsferry*" *Conservation Plan*. (Perth, February 1993).

Earlsferry was classified by the National Trust of Australia (WA) in March 1990. The place is also listed as being of heritage significance in the Swan River Heritage Trail:

18 Chantler, K (Mrs). From a conversation, February 9, 1993; *ibid*.

19 1946 Land Title

20 Wilson, G. *Western Australia's Centenary 1829-1929*. (Histare Press, Perth, 1929)

21 Palassis, Architects: *op.cit.* p.11

22 Chantler, K (Mrs). *op.cit.*

23 Public Works Department of W.A. Plan No 32613, Drawing 2. 14 November 1950.

24 Title Deeds. Department of Land Administration, Perth.

25 *The West Australian* 25 April 1989.

26 National Trust (WA) Oral history, 11 February 1993.

27 Ministerial correspondence: Minister for Planning: AP: 31609.92S

an initiative of the Western Australian Heritage Committee and funded as part of the Commonwealth/State Bicentennial Commemorative Program.²⁸

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Earlsferry is a two storey brick, iron and timber house in the Federation Queen Anne style.²⁹ It is sited between the railway, the road and the river on a roughly triangular piece of land to the west of the main settlement of Guildford with views over the river landscape and beyond to the Guildford townscape. The site is atypical of the usual long rectangular blocks with narrow river frontages found in the Guildford area. The elevated site with its exposure to a major roadway (Guildford Road) and the railway line, ensures that the house and associated plantings of Washingtonia palms are a dominant townscape feature.

Since 1902 the place has been reduced in size from 1.3 to 0.961 hectares - predominantly through the resumption of land for road widening and public open space on the Swan River foreshore. The four palms and the group of mature trees now located in the road reserve appear to be the remnants of the development of the site by Short during the period 1902-1923. Despite the reduction in the size of the land, the relationship between house, land and river remains substantially intact.

In 1946, Drake-Brockman increased the size of the rose gardens, and added a utility area on the north west side - comprising a drying area, windmill and tank stand - as well as a substantial orchard, of which numerous mature fruit trees and a number of almond trees remain.³⁰

Earlsferry is built with tuck-pointed Flemish bond brickwork, decorative wooden verandahs and a turreted corner facing the river frontage. The roof originally had rough cast gables with decorative iron finials at the roof line. Wide verandahs surrounded three sides of the house. Maids' quarters were provided at the rear of the building.

Inside *Earlsferry*, the grandness and high level of architectural detailing in the rooms of the house clearly illustrates Short's concern with implementing the most fashionable design in his home. The high quality and comparatively modern design of the house suggests it was designed by an architect, or at least that pattern books or similar design guides were used. The art nouveau stained glass (an early example in Western Australia of this style) and the staircase with its closed heavily reeded stringer and reeding on the newel post, was the latest in design. So, too, was the tessellated tile work at the front door for in many houses Victorian-style encaustic tiles were still being laid up to 1915.³¹ The billiard room is particularly noteworthy with its fine ornately carved exposed ceiling members and its even quality of light offered from the lantern mounted on the ridge line of the roof.³²

²⁸ Palassis Architects: *op.cit.* p.86.

²⁹ Apperly, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present.* (Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989) pp.132-135.

³⁰ (Drake-Brockman's daughter recalls around one thousand rose bushes in the garden)

³¹ Palassis, Architects: *op.cit.* p.48.

³² *loc.cit.*

An Italianate influence can be seen in some elements such as the columns and arches framing the balcony on the upper floor with cast iron columns supporting rather squat capitals of the composite order.

Earlsferry remained substantially intact until the 1950s, when it was converted for institutional purposes. Most alterations were not in the main public areas but to the rear of the house in the vicinity of the kitchen or maids quarters. In the 1950s, a matron's cottage was constructed in the orchard.³³

Externally, changes were to the west elevation with the addition of extra toilet facilities on the ground floor. An extension at the ground floor level for staff accommodation produced an awkward roof line which did not carry through the existing proportions of the doors and windows. A later extension to the first floor was more sympathetic, but had the effect of making the balcony appear truncated and altered the appearance of the building. Comparison of the elevations today with early photographs reveals changes to the detailing, including the removal of the Federation Queen Anne balustrade and replacement of much of the glass with perspex.³⁴

In 1989, *Earlsferry* was badly damaged by fire: the roof and upper storey of the building was gutted: five bedrooms and an office were destroyed. The ground floor was damaged by smoke and water but the main reception rooms remained substantially intact. The damage was repaired but no restoration work was carried out. Original roofing in the billiard room was retained. The roof in other areas was replaced in a form similar to the original but the original fine cast iron finials and ornately carved half timber with rough cast gables were replaced with more basic details.

After the fire *Earlsferry* also suffered from vandalism occasioned by its being vacant. Thieves stole balustrades from the main staircase, a window from the upper floor bathroom, fire place surrounds and front door glass.³⁵

Since 1990, the damaged areas are in the process of being conserved in accordance with Palassis Architects: "*Earlsferry*" *Conservation Plan*. (Perth, February 1993). While some of the original fabric is lost forever, insertion of other material is being matched as closely as possible to that of the original.³⁶

For further evidence regarding the fabric of *Earlsferry* and its conservation and restoration refer to Palassis Architects: "*Earlsferry*" *Conservation Plan*. (Perth, February 1993).

33 *ibid.* p.43

34 *ibid.* p.47.

35 *ibid.* pp.92,95,96.

36 *ibid.* p.96.

ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

1. AESTHETIC VALUE

Earlsferry demonstrates a high level of design, being a fine example of a Federation Queen Anne two storey brick and iron mansion, typical of large houses in the Western Australian gold rush era.

Earlsferry has a landmark quality. Occupying a prime location, it is a dominant townscape element impacting on the vistas to the railway, the road and the water meadows. The proximity of the house to the river, and the vistas thereto, is important in establishing and retaining the landmark quality of the house and its relationship to Bassendean/ Guildford.

The four Washingtonia Palms have both individual and townscape landmark value derived from their prominence.

2. HISTORIC VALUE

Earlsferry demonstrates the growth of Perth's suburbs and the development of settlement along the riverside, road and rail links at the time of the gold rushes.

Earlsferry and its associated gardens illustrates a land use and way of life typical of the wealthy, educated, managerial classes in Western Australia, at the turn-of-the-century.

Earlsferry has historic value for being part of the original crown grant selected by James Dodds in the early 1830s, and for its close association with Short, Wittenoom and Drake-Brockman who were all influential in shaping Western Australian society.

3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

4. SOCIAL VALUE

Earlsferry is associated with a period of suburban development during the gold rush period. The property and its riverside context reinforces the social hierarchy in the development of Guildford/Bassendean with wealthy families owning large blocks of land with water frontages, behind which were located more densely developed, smaller and less expensive residential areas for those less financially fortunate.

Earlsferry contributes to the sense of place in the Guildford/Bassendean community.

5. RARITY

Earlsferry is one of the few remaining grand turn-of-the-century properties, situated along the Swan River, on the outskirts of Perth.

6. REPRESENTATIVENESS

The grandeur and prominent siting of *Earlsferry* represents the relative affluence of the river side residents in the area, particularly at the time of rapid growth in Western Australia due to the gold discoveries.

CONDITION

Earlsferry is in good to fair condition. Despite recent signs of deterioration caused by rising damp, the tuck pointed Flemish bond brickwork remains in fair condition. Repairs after the fire were competent if not undertaken to conservation principles. Subsequent work has been in accordance with Palassis Architects: "*Earlsferry*" *Conservation Plan*. (Perth, February 1993)

INTEGRITY

Earlsferry has retained its integrity as a grand riverside residence. The house is substantially intact and largely retains the original form and materials used in its construction. Despite the change of use in the 1950s from a domestic residence to government institution these changes are not to a sufficiently intrusive degree so as to reduce the significance of the place. The loss of the fireplaces and the balusters to the staircase, while the building was unoccupied, has been unfortunate, but has not significantly diminished the grand impression of the interior. Refer to Palassis Architects: "*Earlsferry*" *Conservation Plan*. (Perth, February 1993) for further details regarding the integrity of the building and a discussion of the impact of the 1989 fire.

AUTHENTICITY

In ninety years the property has been modified and it has lost some of its original detailing. The fire in 1989, destroyed original material but in minor rooms, and left the billiard room intact. Water damage to the lower, main, reception rooms has been rectified. Damage and loss of original fabric during a vacant period between 1989 and 1990, is being recovered or made good with material of the same period and style as close as possible to the original.³⁷

Overall, the house and grounds have a high degree of authenticity. Refer to Palassis Architects: "*Earlsferry*" *Conservation Plan*. (Perth, February 1993) for further details regarding the building's authenticity.

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Earlsferry has cultural heritage significance for the following:

the building is a prominent landmark in the Guildford/Bassendean area;

³⁷ *ibid.* pp. 52ff.

the building is a fine example of the grand homes built close to the river in West Guildford during the gold boom years;

the building is important for its close association with John Short, Sir Edward Wittenoom, and Karl Drake-Brockman, three important persons who contributed significantly to the development of the State of Western Australia;

the building demonstrates the form and ambience of the lifestyle of wealthy Western Australians at the turn of the century; and,

the building is one of the few remaining grand turn-of-the-century properties situated along the Swan River on the outskirts of Perth.

8. Register of Heritage Places

Interim Entry 01/03/94

9. Conservation Order

10. Heritage Agreement

11. References

National Trust Assessment Exposition

Palassis Architects: *"Earlsferry" Conservation Plan*. (Perth, February 1993)