

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (October 2004)

By Rob Upson

HAROLD DESBROWE-ANNEAR - ARCHITECT (Part 1)

Late in 1933, the Argus newspaper in Melbourne ran an obituary which read in part, *‘Mr. Desbrowe-Annear was essentially a designer of homes and many Toorak mansions stand as a tribute to his skill. He was an authority on antique furniture and objets d’arts and was a skilful designer of furniture. He frequently lectured on antiques and art subjects. He left no archives or papers, personal or professional, and he seems only to have gained recognition for his work relatively late in life and was quickly forgotten after his death. Most of his houses have been demolished except a few, including three in Eaglemont.’*

I came across the name of Harold Desbrowe-Annear in a real estate article in the Age newspaper in August 2002. The article was describing a house for sale at 55 Outlook Drive in Eaglemont and it began with the sentence. *‘One of Bendigo’s brightest sons, architect Harold Desbrowe-Annear, gave us a treasure on this wooded hill in Eaglemont, a scene that would romance the stoniest heart.’*

Who was this Bendigonian who seemed to have fallen into obscurity? My search took me, via the Internet, to the RMIT Library in Melbourne and a manuscript by Harriett Edquist¹ entitled **Harold Desbrowe-Annear ‘A Life in Architecture’**. This was essentially a treatise on his architecture but it also gave me an insight into his background and also that of his parents. The introduction to this manuscript said, in part, that Harold Desbrowe-Annear was *‘one of the most innovative architects in Australia in the first quarter of the 20th Century. Born in Sandhurst, on 16 August 1865, he was the son of James Desbrowe-Annear and his second wife Elizabeth’*.

The story begins in 1839 when James Desbrowe-Annear and his first wife Hannah together with their two daughters sailed from England to New Zealand and settled in Wellington. One daughter died en-route and the couple had five more daughters in New Zealand. Leaving his family in Wellington, James went to the California goldfields in September 1849. After an unsuccessful fourteen months he returned home to Wellington, but a year later was off to Sydney and with some friends headed south to the goldfields near Braidwood. He then went to the Bendigo diggings, arriving there in February 1852. His prospecting there must have been reasonably successful as he returned to New Zealand to collect his family. They arrived back in Bendigo in April 1853.

Ten months later Hannah died in childbirth. James, now 40 years old, was a widower with six children to support. In 1863, at All Saint’s Church, Sandhurst, he married Elizabeth Ann Hawkins, a 32 years old teacher. In 1864 a daughter, Fanny, was born and in 1865, a son, Harold was born. James continued working as a mining contractor until he retired in 1870 and moved his family to Melbourne. He bought a property called ‘Bellevue’ in West Bank Terrace, Richmond, which, continuing as Bendigo Street, lay between Bridge Road and Swan Street.

(To be concluded)

¹ Harriet Edquist is Professor of Architectural History at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

Harold Desbrowe-Annear : A Life in Architecture was published early in 2004. Harriet Edquist won the Bates Smart National Award for ‘Architecture in the Media’ as part of the 2004 Awards of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

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Bendigo born architect, Harold Desbrowe-Annear (Part 2)

In the 1870s Harold attended the Hawthorn Grammar School in nearby Power Street and soon after he matriculated, his father, James, died. The property 'Bellevue' was left to Harold and in 1882 he was articled to the architect, William Salway. Elizabeth Desbrowe-Annear's brother, Edward, who had married Harold's half sister Eliza, was an engineer and architect in Inglewood and may have influenced Harold's choice of career. Melbourne was also in the growth boom of the 1880s and he was able to get a good grounding in architecture from the Salway office.

In 1889 Harold completed his articles with Salway and set up an office of his own in the Australian Buildings in Elizabeth Street. Meanwhile 'Bellevue' had been sold and the family moved to Brighton. By 1891, Harold had moved to his own residence in Punt Road and in 1892 relocated his office to The Rialto Building in Collins Street. In July 1891 he married Florence Chadwick and they moved residences several times around the inner Melbourne suburbs. They had a daughter, Edith and two sons, Hector and James.

Harold was encouraged by his father-in-law, James Chadwick, to design three, 2-story houses in Eaglemont, i.e. No.55 Outlook Drive (1900) and Nos. 36 and 38 The Eyrie (1903/04). Harold and his family lived in one of the houses in The Eyrie for a number of years. These houses, the first in Australia with an open plan concept, had no passages and large living/dining rooms with sliding divisions. Other features included counter balanced sliding windows that disappeared into the wall cavities and a number of built-in cabinets, wardrobes, dressing tables, buffets and bookshelves. This was a design, which adventurous architects were discovering more than half a century later.

The catalogue of his designs, works and buildings, summarised in Harriet Edquist's manuscript, lists 179 items, mostly houses, of which only a few remain. In addition to the three houses in Eaglemont there is 'Delgany', the Armytage house at Portsea and 'Chippenham', the Percy Landale homestead (1926) at Deniliquin. Other non-residential designs included the Menzies Hotel renovations, Princess Theatre alterations and renovations, the City Corporation Federation Arch (1901), the Portsea Hotel (1925) and the Church St. Bridge over the Yarra (1930).

Harold Desbrowe-Annear has been described as a big, bluff, witty and untidy man. He ridiculed tradition, welcomed experiment and wore a monocle, which in Australia at the time, showed his self-confident independence. He was, between 1888 and 1902, an instructor in architecture at the Working Man's College in Melbourne (now the RMIT) and told his students that '*real architects have always been and must be inventors in mechanics, in form, in tone and in colour*'. Simple buildings of functional purpose were his goal. The fact that only a few of his houses are around today gives further testimony to the architectural vandalism that occurred post WW2, all in the name of progress. Although his practice had flourished during the 1920s, the Depression resulted in fewer and fewer commissions. He sold his house and in poor health retired to Crossover, a mining town in Gippsland. He had been in continuous practise for 44 years at the time of his death at Chalmers Private Hospital, South Yarra, in June 1933. He was cremated at the Fawkner Cemetery.

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects have a number of annual architectural awards for design in various categories. The Victoria division of the RAI have the **Harold Desbrowe-Annear Awards for Residential Housing**. Perhaps his name, in architectural circles at least, is not quite so obscure after all.
