

Embattled Causeway residents fear for their historic home

February 7, 2015 Canberra Times **Georgina Connery and Emma Kelly**



Causeway resident 89-year-old Audrey Griffiths who has lived her whole life in the tiny suburb, pictured with her son, Robert. *Photo: Graham Tidy*

Nestled on a prime slice of lakeside real estate is a community that helped create Canberra from the ground up.

Yet few Canberrans know the stories of the Causeway, one of the capital's earliest settlements. Some don't even know it exists.

With only 67 mostly government houses wedged between the wetlands and railway station, it's easy to miss.

Despite the changing face of the capital around it, the Causeway is a rare find – a suburb that has retained much of its early character as a tight-knit workers' settlement.

As a cloud of doubt looms over the future of the Causeway, its residents are fighting to ensure their voices are heard and their historic home is not forgotten.

Since its inception those living in the Causeway have been there to muck in and build.

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Causeway resident 59 year old Donna Fitzgerald-Verrent, pictured in front of the Causeway Hall. *Photo: Graham Tidy*

In 1925 there was no Lake Burley Griffin and the Causeway was nothing more than a handful of wooden cottages housing the capital's workmen.

It was always planned to be a temporary settlement but somewhere in those dusty beginnings one of Canberra's first communities began to germinate.

It may have been the promise of work, or the thrill of creating a capital city, but all four of the Booth brothers took up in the Causeway.



Helen Taylor with Brock Fitzgerald - Verrent, 19 months, is like the Causeway's neighbourhood grandma *Photo: Jay Cronan*

Audrey Griffiths was raised by Lillian and Robert Booth, some of the area's first residents, and has

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made a lifetime of memories in the small suburb.

The 89-year-old was born in 1926, the year the Causeway Hall was completed.

"My father was involved, but everyone in the causeway helped with building the hall," she said.

The Federal Capital Authority provided materials and within three months the hall was built entirely by voluntary labour.

Built before Albert Hall and other civic facilities, the Causeway Hall was the city's first place for entertainment.

People gathered there for concerts, boxing matches, weddings and the ever-popular Saturday night dances.

None of the original wooden cottages remain, after being replaced by sturdier brick homes from the late 1960s.

But when the suburb began there were no street names, instead each house had its own number.

Audrey has fond memories of growing up at number 43 as the eldest of four girls.

Soon after finishing at Telopea Park School, her sisters moved away.

Falling in love with her childhood next-door neighbour, Arnold "Bobby" Griffiths, meant she stayed to start a family of her own in the Causeway.

"It was always a pretty close-knit community and a good place to raise a family," she said.

"We shifted from the old houses up to the nice new brick ones and my two boys Robert and Raymond loved it."

Audrey said people from the Causeway knew one another, got together often and could rely on each other.

It had always been home and it was where she belonged.



The president of the ACT branch of the ALP, Ken Fry, called on the government to phase out the Causeway settlement. November 23 1973 *Photo: Fairfax library pics*

The Causeway is one of the capital's historic residential zones but it has never been able to shake

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the underlying threat of redevelopment.

Just three properties in the suburb are privately owned.

The majority of residents are at the mercy of ACT government decision-making.



Auctioneers Cliff Stephens and Gary Skewes with C and G Auctions owner Christine Chippendale-Hyder in the Causeway Hall an auction last month. *Photo: Rohan Thomson*

Donna Fitzgerald-Verrent is the fourth generation of her family to live in the Causeway. With her own children and now seven grandchildren to care for, she continues to help others navigate the system. Every repair, call-out or request requiring hours of correspondence with community housing services.

She said she couldn't recall a time when the community wasn't under threat of redevelopment. But the battle to retain services for the community ramped up dramatically after 2005 as construction of the Kingston foreshore got underway.

"We now live in a world of our own," she said. "We have lost our bus service; our post box and our telephone. We have none of those essential services at all here now."

Donna said she was under no illusions and it was only a matter of time before the ACT government pulled down their homes.

"I wouldn't live anywhere else and I am dreading the day that they tell us we have to go," she said. Knowing no other home, Audrey had no idea where she could end up.

"I want to stay here, she said. "It is home. I don't know whether they will give us another house. We just don't know."

ACT Planning Minister Mick Gentleman confirmed the plan for the East Lake redevelopment, including the Causeway, was in its final stages.

A Community Services Directorate spokeswoman said provisions for public housing were included in the plan.

"The variation [to the Territory Plan] is expected to be publicly released in 2015 and will include a comprehensive stakeholder and community engagement process," she said.

The last consultation with Causeway residents was more than a year ago in September 2013.

Donna knows the ins and outs of the Causeway having lived in the suburb her whole life.

She said as it was such a small place people were loyal, knew each other's business and knew who did not belong.

"It's a completely different way of living out in the other suburbs in Canberra where 90 per cent of people don't know their neighbours," she said.

"I could send my three-year-old grandson down to the park for two or three hours on his own and not a living soul would go near him. They know he belongs in the area and they would watch him."

Helen Taylor vividly remembers when she discovered she was moving to The Causeway two decades ago.

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Sitting back with a cup of tea beneath a waft of tobacco, she recalled how her late husband, Ray, struggled with the stairs in their Fraser Court home after an operation limited his mobility.

"This place had a very bad name then," she said.

"I said, 'Oh Christ, the bloody Causeway'."

But it wasn't long before Helen felt the strength of the Causeway community.

"We were here probably three months, you don't get to know anyone in three months, and Ray was rushed to hospital," she said.

"Donna was at the door, 'we'll follow the ambulance out'. She was there straight away and over all the time."

When Ray died a few years later Mrs Taylor grieved alongside her neighbour, Mrs Griffiths, whose son, also Ray, died at a similar time.

She'll never forget the community's warmth at the time she felt most alone.

"They were always there if you wanted anything, there was always somebody knocking on your door to see if you wanted anything," she said.

"You got to know them, one by one."

Helen is nostalgic about her earlier years in the area.

It was a connected community and she slipped into the role of neighbourhood Nanna, babysitting local children and collecting them from school.

But growing up as a "Causeway kid" was tough for some.

An 11-year-old Marie Stott moved from Bungendore to the Causeway with her mother, father and eight siblings in 1956.

She hated life at the Causeway.

"Arriving in the Causeway was a shock. We came from a nice, quiet country area...to being like an animal in a cage, in a way," she said.

"I think I just got sick of [my siblings] being pushed around."

Living in Gordon, Marie's memory is flooded with images of skirting drunks on the trek to the Causeway Mess for groceries and being picked on by other students at Griffith Primary and Telopea Park School.

"I suppose it's because we were in the Causeway mob," she said.

"We stayed together. I actually stuck up for all of them."

The Stotts felt as though they never fitted in.

Marie's father had early run-ins with other Causeway families and she felt there was always a sense of danger.

Her sister ventured too far past the hall one day, despite her mother's warnings, and returned home with a bloody nose and blood-stained clothing, only to receive "a belting".

"I would have just been another kid in the street [if problems hadn't occurred] – I think Mum kept us away from it," she said.

Donna accepted the rough and tumble of the area as part of life as a "Causeway kid".

"None of us went to Narrabundah, we all went to Telopea...because at Narrabundah you would have got bashed," she said.

"Oh my word, Narrabundah kids hated us. They would literally come here and flog us. Until we got

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our backs up and got them back for what they done to us."

She's proud to live in the community but acknowledge how outsiders might perceive it.

"People are very harsh in their comments about this area," Donna said.

"If you look at people that have come from here there's politicians, there's CEOs of business, people that own their own businesses. So, its just got that thing about it that people just don't like the area."

The hard-knock reputation was a reality for Helen when she was threatened with a pocket knife a few months ago at the glass sliding door to her backyard.

" 'Open the f---ing door you grey-headed bastard' he said and he pulled out a pocket knife," Helen said.

Donna's family were first on the scene to comfort her.

But after calling the police she felt the incident was cast aside because of where she lived.

"I rang the police and got on to a police woman," Helen said.

"She said to me, 'oh, well there's no sense in us going out at at this time of the night because all the fingerprints will be gone'.

"I said, 'what do you mean? He was on the outside, I was on the inside'.

"Donna rang the police and they came [but] we never heard any more about it."

It's a new era for The Causeway as the old community struggles to let go of yesteryear.

Helen said people were not as friendly as they used to be.

"I don't know what it is now, they seem to want to fight and bicker – my kid done this, this kid done that. It's changed," she said.

"I heard on the news a [few months] ago, Spinifex Street, Causeway Street, they got a 13-year-old in a stolen car. It's getting too close to home – 13, you'd never dream of it."

Some might see overgrown lawns and dishevelled housing, but residents are calling on the broader community to recognise the depth of history the area holds.

"Everyone who lives here, and that has for the last 10 or 12 years, is extremely proud of the area," Donna said. "They dont want it to disappear."