

Eric Leach

(Tee Square Journal 1937, p.5; Architects' Journal Information Library, 4 April 1962, p.742)

**Eric Leach** (1919-2005) was born 26 May 1919 at 6 Lewis Street, Kalgoorlie, now in the suburb of Lamington. His father, Mathew Percival Leach was a school teacher, and mother Jessie nee Backhouse was a successful singer. They had married at Northam in December 1915. Eric's parents previously had a son Percy (died premature 1916) and a daughter Jessie (b.1917). By 1929 when young Eric mailed a number of jokes for the children's page of the *Sunday Times*, the Leach family were living at Osborne Road, East Fremantle.

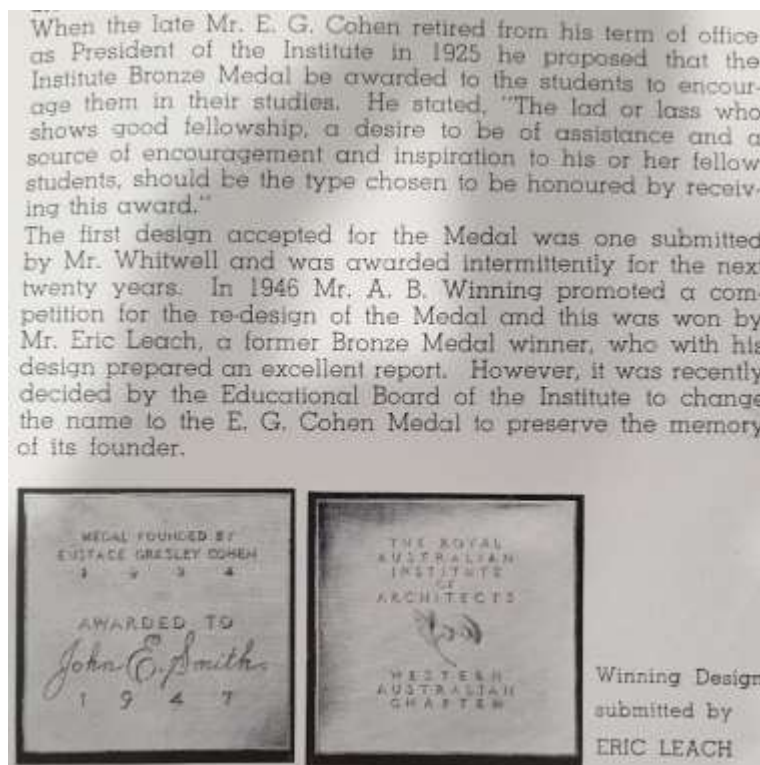
Eric attended Fremantle High School before the Leach family moved to 41 Kanimbla Road Hollywood – adjoining Nedlands – in 1935. Eric undertook his four year articles with Herbert Parry (1882-1951) and Marshall Clifton (1903–1975) in Perth from March 1935, and with his drawings for a tennis court pavilion was announced in May 1936 as the winner of a Royal Institute of Architects of Western Australia (RIAWA) design competition for students who had served no more than two years of articles. Eric was the honorary auditor of the largely student body, the Architectural Association of WA in 1937, and a key member of the entertainment at the tenth annual T-Square Ball, held at the Embassy Ballroom in May 1938.



Examples of Eric Leach's talents (Tee Square Journal 1937, pp.32, 36)

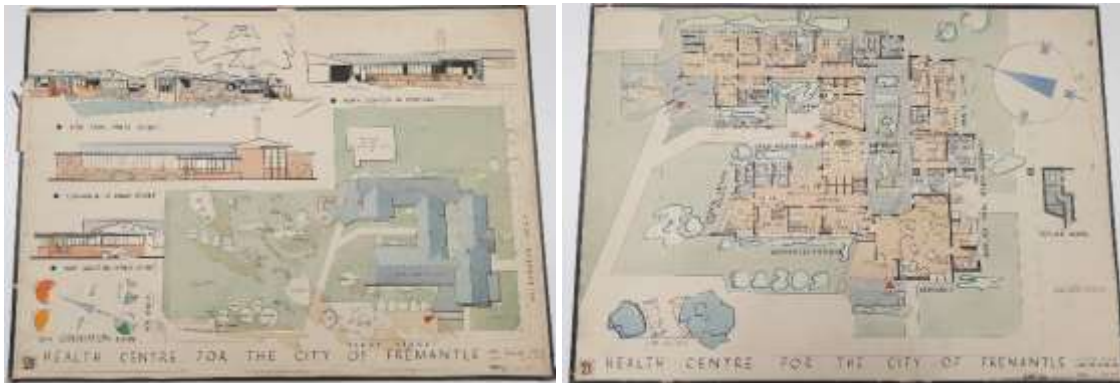
In May 1939 Leach moved to Sydney to join Stephenson & Turner, then one of the foremost Australian architectural practices, and worked on the design of a number of hospitals, including the King George V Memorial Hospital for Mothers and Babies. Eric commenced national service in mid-1940, hence joining the Australian Imperial Forces during the Second World War (1939-1945) from November 1941 through to demobilisation at Sydney in January 1946. Whilst in service, Eric received notice from the RIAWA that he had won the student bronze medal (later the E.G. Cohen Medal) for 1941, and managed to complete his Architects Board of WA examinations. Eric was registered as an architect in Western Australia (no.174) in April 1944, one of the few who did so in the war years. At this time his place of residence was listed as Hollywood.

When soldiers were seconded to assist fighting bushfires in NSW during 1944, Eric met Victoria Badmington, who had brought water to the thirsty servicemen. The couple became engaged in August 1945, and married 13 April 1946 at St Swithun's Church in Pymble. Leach worked for three months with the NSW Government Architects branch, returning to Perth by October 1946 to act as best man for the marriage of his sister Jessie to Basil Whitby at Christ Church.



Leach's design of 1946 for the E.G. Cohen Medal, an award he had won 5 years previously (*Phi*, Architectural Students of WA Assoc. 1950, p.18; see also 'Competition for Design of Bronze Medal', *The Architect*, March 1947, p.8).

Marshall Clifton and Eric Leach, architects in association, were awarded first prize for their design of the City of Fremantle health centre in August 1946, with second prize to Reg Summerhayes and third prize to Bill Forbes and John Fitzhardinge. To be built in Parry Street, the budget for the complex was around £10 000. Eric Leach and Marshall Clifton subsequently announced the formation of their business partnership in September 1946 (formally dissolved in October of 1953), and they won another competition for Bunbury Regional Hospital, but the scheme was not built. They jointly worked on housing, including a low-cost scheme at Welshpool built by Brine & Sons; Floreat Park shopping centre for the City of Perth; some factories, flats and small hotels.



The authors of these coloured drawings for a City of Fremantle health centre on Parry, High and Holdsworth Streets are not identified in the State Library of WA (SLWA 29/7/5.1, 29/7/5.2). The drawings are in fact the Clifton and Leach design, published with commentary in *The Architect* of September 1946. Aerial photos suggest a reduced version of the plans was constructed in 1950-1953. The south wing was demolished in 1999 for a dental clinic, the north wing was demolished 2016 and the site remains vacant.

It is evident from an article in *The Architect* magazine that Leach submitted an entry for Melbourne's 'Shrine of Remembrance War Memorial 1939-1945' competition during 1949, as he was notified in early 1950 of the prize winning design by E.E. Milston of Punt Road, South Yarra. Writing to the editor of *The Architect* to celebrate the West Australian magazine's 100<sup>th</sup> issue in 1970, Leach noted of his 'halcyon days' that: '*My time was spent in failing competitions, designing houses, editing The Architect, ocean racing and fighting hordes of people who wanted to fill in Perth Water.*'

In the typically self-deprecating note to the editor of *The Architect*, Eric went on to relate an amazing tale of having being involved in an accident of the early 1950s where his car collided with a motor cyclist on Scarborough Beach Road,

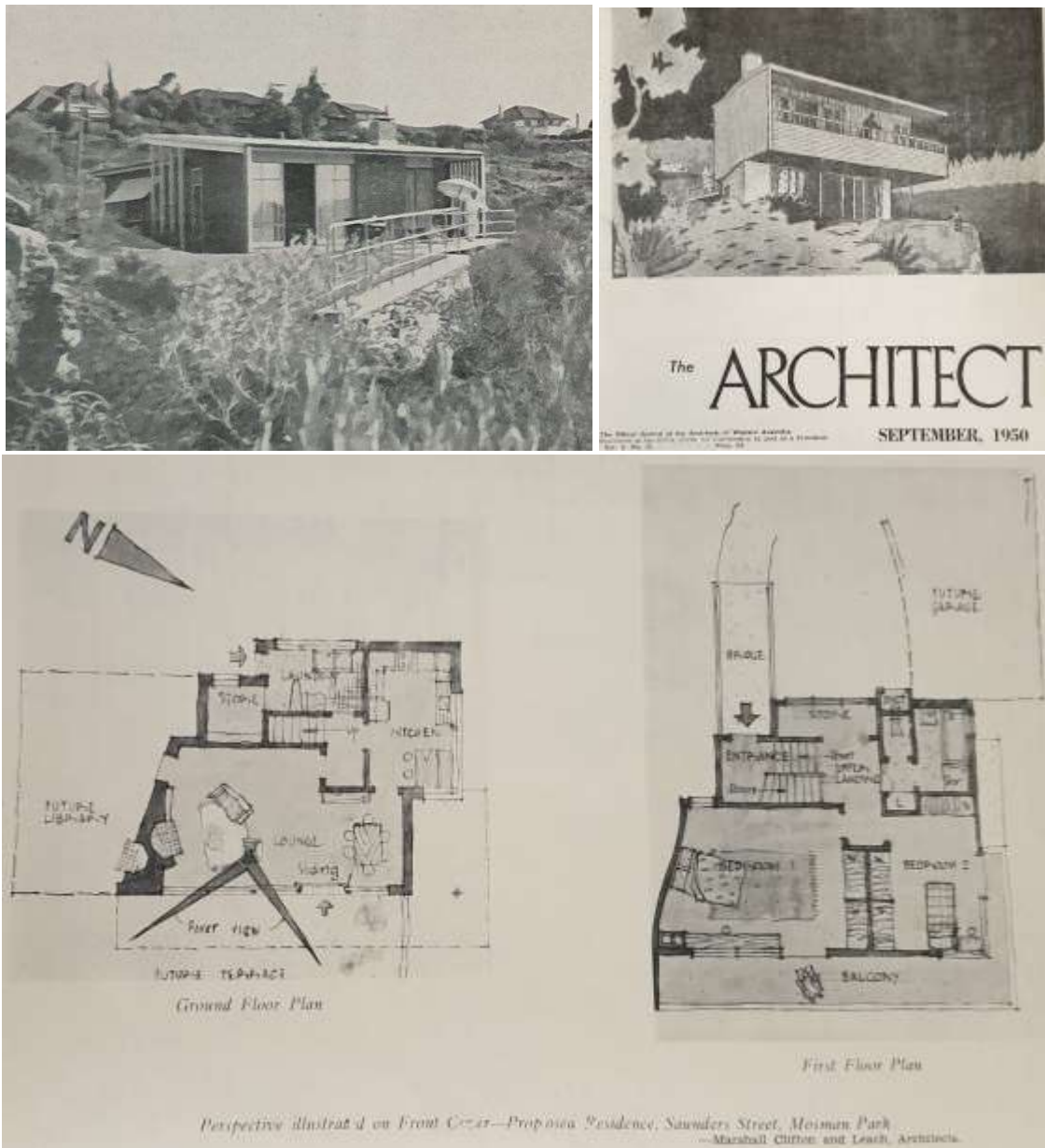
following which his fellow editorial team of *The Architect* in John White (1927-2020) and Margaret Feilman (1921-2013) were fortunate to come out of the incident without major injury.

Architectural historian Duncan Richards has noted that “Eric Leach in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was the most able and articulate exponent of modernism in Western Australia. In documenting *High Hopes*, the comprehensive recounting of the first 100 years of the Institutes of Architecture in Western Australia, Richards notes that:

“The history of the Institute during the 1940s and 1950s would be incomplete without mention of the part played by Eric Leach. ... His contribution as an architect, in partnership with Marshall Clifton, in practice on his own, and as a member of Institute committees was significant, he was also influential as editor of *The Architect* from 1948-1954. It was Leach who proposed widening the range of material published in the journal and, as had happened earlier, identified a need to interest a wider readership, to increase circulation and so spread the influence of the profession. During his term as editor *The Architect* published interesting and hard hitting architectural criticism as well as more general polemical items, mostly written by Leach. The current building rates, a staple feature of the journal were introduced in 1953 under his direction. While sometimes acerbic in his comments Leach had conviction enough to tackle any issue and any celebrity. Harry Seidler, the new young star of Australian architecture, was one such celebrity to come under his scrutiny. During the 1950s the ‘notorious’ young Seidler, winner of the Sulman Award in 1952, was the touchstone of modern architecture in Australia and his signature was seen by the popular press as ‘innovation in architecture’. At this early stage in his career his work, much of it still in progress, had already been published and his opinions on almost any subject were newsworthy.

Leach was prepared to be critical of Seidler’s most acclaimed houses because of their over-concern for matters of form over function and he was especially critical of the nominal consideration of correct orientation and sun screening (a careful response to Australian climatic conditions). He freely acknowledged the charisma of the architect and his designs, but made clear charisma was not enough, what was required was performance. The kind of local modern

architecture Leach encouraged was one that drew upon the growing body of relevant research information developed by the Commonwealth Experimental Building Station and readily available through its numerous publications. These critical comments made in his capacity as editor were courageous, especially at the time, and gave grounding to a local view of what modern architecture might be. ...”



Eric Leach-designed houses at Mosman Park as illustrated in *The Architect* magazine (photo March 1950, p.10; perspective on cover September 1950; sketch plans September 1950, p.14).

In spite of post-war difficulties with shortages of materials and labour, and of obtaining building approvals, with a growing family it was time for Eric to build a home. The Leach's had two daughters, Jane born in 1947 and Gillian in 1950.

The very modest family home was built from 1948 at number 7 (now 21) Saunders Street, Mosman Park. In 1949 there were four houses on Saunders Street. This lack of householders was partly due to the remoteness of the area, but also it was due to the difficult terrain. The area was thought to be difficult and expensive to build on, beyond the budget of most homeowners and so it was largely left alone. Under the name of 'Mon Repos' Leach's house introduced the stylised low-pitched roof to Western Australia.

The result was an innovative and successful building immediately recognized as a breakthrough by significant critics, a building the architect-academic John White (who worked with Marshall Clifton & Leach in the 1950s) termed 'the first truly modern building in Western Australia.' Robin Boyd in *Australia's Home* (1952) mentioned only one WA architect and one WA house, it was the Leach House. Long demolished, this house has in recent years taken on semi-mythic importance as the first truly modern house in WA, and as the forerunner of a regional or local response to housing.



Leach House at Saunders Street, Mosman Park (photos by Peter Wille 1932-1972, State Library of Victoria H91.244/3381, H91.244/3382)

During the last years of the 1940s Leach was responsible for a group of houses that deserve to be better known for their response to place, planning, form, and use of materials. Of this group the Livesey House was published in *The Architect*, and there were several others. The UWA School of Architecture has an example close at hand in the Cornish House, 63 William Road, Nedlands.

Duncan Richards notes that when interviewed in the 1980s, Western Australian architects Fred McCardell, Eric Moyle, John Oldham, and Ken Rosenthal all remembered Eric Leach with respect, as a 'forward looking designer' and cited the Leach House as influential. It must have been significant, as few houses can claim to have caused a paradigmatic shift in local home building patterns.



Gres Cohen, John Lidbury and skipper Eric Leach – all architects, and crew of *Aries*, winner of a Swan River invitation race for the Thera Shield (*The West Australian*, 23 March 1953, p.23).

In July 1954 Leach wrote an article for the *Sunday Times* entitled, ‘What Will House of the Future Look Like?’ In the article he saw future houses becoming more machine-made not because of client preference, but due to economic pressures. He suggested ‘the next 30 years should give us nothing very different from what we are becoming used to’.

In the short period (~1952-1957) that Leach practiced on his own account in WA, he was the architect for private houses, blocks of flats, the Supreme Court Gardens orchestral shell, the University Student Union building, the Church of England Theological College at Floreat/City Beach, a wool store at South Beach for Wenz & Co, and still found time to produce a scheme for the proposed Narrows Bridge over the Swan River.

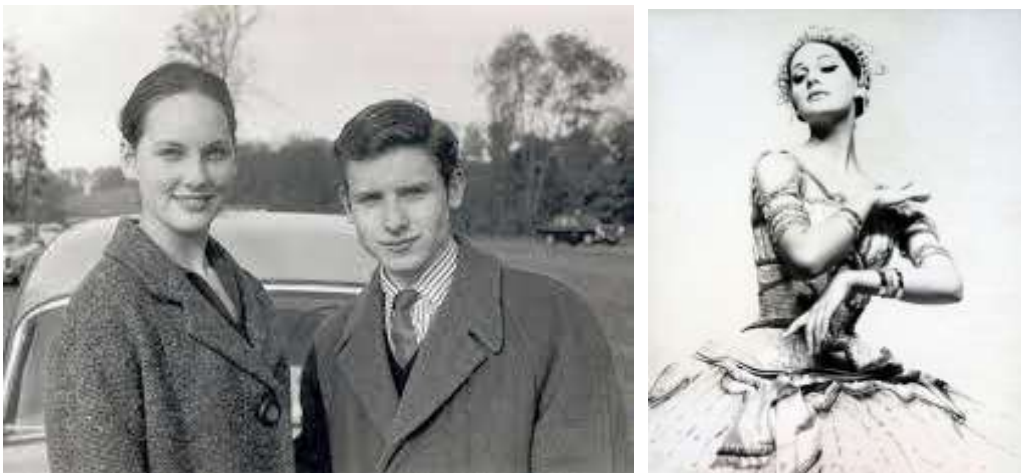


Lord Mayor of Perth Mr J. Murray examines a model of the Supreme Court Gardens Jubilee orchestral shell designed by Eric Leach (*The West Australian*, 4 August 1954 p.9). Concert at the shell in 1973 (SLWA 359869PD). Opened in 1956, removed after 1994 fire damage.

The competition for the design of the Sydney Opera House was announced in 1956, and competitors were required to register for the competition by paying a

fee of £10 Australian. Judging commenced in January 1957, with more than 223 entries received from 28 countries, and it was soon announced that the winner of the competition was Jørn Utzon, an unknown 38-year-old Dane. Jane Leach recalls: "My father (I think I remember him talking about it) entered the competition for the Sydney Opera House, and was fairly incensed that the winner didn't comply with the rules! He gave him credit, though, for the genius of the design ...".

Eric was elected a Fellow of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) in 1956, but left WA in March 1957 at 37 years of age, partly to further daughter Jane's ballet career in London. The move to England was successful on a number of fronts for the family. Jane completed training as a professional ballet dancer at the Royal Ballet School, won the Genée International Ballet Competition in 1964 as a 17 year old, was principal with the Royal Ballet Company (1964-69) and soloist with the Stuttgart Ballet (1969-72).



Jane Leach with English ballet dancer David Wall (1946-2013) at Oxford University in 1962 (RADA Facebook); and in her artistic name Jane Landon dancing as Raymonda (Anthony Crickmay, [Jane Niedermeier - Ballettschule Ballett-in-Solln in München](#))

Still teaching ballet in Germany well into the Twenty-first Century, Jane's website notes: *After graduating as the best of the year with Dame Ninette de Valois, the founder of the Royal Ballet, and winning the gold medal of the Adeline Genée Award of the Royal Academy of Dance, I joined the Royal Ballet Company at the age of 17. Here I soon danced, under my artistic name Jane Landon, the classic leading roles as Odette/Odile in "Swan Lake" and Aurora in "Sleeping Beauty". My career path later led me to Stuttgart, where John Cranko engaged me as a soloist for his Stuttgart Ballet until 1972. ...*



*After my marriage and the birth of my four sons, I first gave private lessons and then taught for a few years in the dance studio Senta Maria in Solln until I founded ballet in Solln in 1985. As a member and registered teacher of the Royal Academy of Dance I am entitled to prepare and register my students for the RAD exams.*

Gillian is now a dedicated garden designer, based in Harpenden, Hertfordshire. Her own website notes that Gilly always had a love for nature and as a child, visiting almost every stately home and country house in England with her architect father, and it was the gardens that captivated her. A Graphic Design graduate from the prestigious St Martin's School of Art in London, Gilly had a long career as a designer and art director in advertising, new product development and publishing before the large garden of her London flat re-awakened her love of nature and inspired it's re-style. A move to Harpenden and another horticultural challenge, sparked a decision to study garden design. After graduating in both Garden and Planting Design from Oaklands College, Hertfordshire, Gilly commenced her own business and is achieving her ambition to create beautiful outside spaces with a sense of place.

Eric Leach continued his own highly interesting career in England. Recommended for election by William Leighton, Athol Hobbs and Ken Duncan, in 1957 he became an Associate Member of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and initially worked as assistant architect to Sir Howard Robertson at Easton & Robertson of 53 Bedford Square London WC1. There he worked on a number of central area redevelopment schemes, the Shell Centre South Bank, a Bank of England branch at Bristol, Bank of England printing works Debden, and a printing plant at Pretoria for the South African Reserve Bank (through Bradbury Wilkinson & Co, an English engraver and printer of banknotes, postage stamps and share certificates). During this period the indefatigable Leach completed a three-year Town Planning Diploma under Professor Sir William Holford, achieving a distinction with his thesis.

Leach moved to Bryan and Norman Westwood and partners around 1961, and by 1962 he had been promoted to become an associate partner in the firm. He was project architect for shops, mostly Austin Reed, including Brompton Road, Fenchurch Street, and at Leeds – he noted 17 contracts in all. A number of

banks in the City of London; a showroom for Braemar at Sackville Street; a housing scheme for the Greater London Council at Copenhagen Place, and a mixed redevelopment of Grosvenor House, Berkeley Square with carparking, offices and seven floors of flats - all these projects display the comprehensive nature of his experience at this time.

When he wrote to the editor of *The Architect* in WA on 7 April 1970, Leach stated that he '*hadn't seen The Architect for ages, having been lost in London for thirteen years to the day. I am celebrating this unfortunate fact by setting up my own practice in London "pushing the boat out alone", right in the middle of the City about 100 yards from the Guildhall. ... Over here my two most interesting jobs – not yet built - are a large hotel in Kensington and a printing plant in the Far East of all places. ... We live in an ancient (1820) cottage among the trees near Richmond Park; any developer in his right mind would have demolished it long ago, but it has its charms, and as you know we are all a bit quaint over here, even those who are very Australian.*'



Eric Leach advertising at Richmond, Surrey (*The Architects' Journal*, 10 October 1973, p.133).

When in 1970 Leach established his own practice 'Eric Leach Associates', it was first based at Queen Street in the City of London, hence moving to 3 The Green, Richmond, Surrey in 1971, and to Park Farm Cottage in Ham Common, Richmond in 1972. In 1975 he was preparing a manuscript for a book on Mediterranean Villages, possibly based on his planning work with Spanish architects Mercadal-Mercadal at Puerto D'addaia in Menorca. Leach noted that there were 87 jobs listed in the job book of the practice 1970-1983, including a £600 000 town house and office project at Richmond (conversion of the Grade II listed Holbrooke House – winner of a Richmond Society award in 1977).

Leach took the design of printing plants for Bradbury Wilkinson & Co on to be a specialty of his practice, with works at New Malden in 1970-1971, and designing several security plants in foreign countries, one which was built at Whangarei in New Zealand during 1980-1981, and in semi-retirement designing a typical printing plant for De la Rue (Giori) at Lausanne, Switzerland during 1984-1985. With a lack of work, Leach retired from practice in 1983, and moved to Fleetings End, Golant, Fowey in Cornwall. His resignation from RIBA was accepted in January 1984. Back in Western Australia, Eric's father Mathew had died aged 78 years at Doubleview in 1970, and his mother Jessie died aged 94 years at Wembley Downs in 1984.

Eric Leach died at 85 years of age in Cornwall on 14 February 2005 of mesothelioma, ironically (and heartbreakingly) caused by his sanding down the asbestos fibre cement roof at 7 Saunders Street. He was survived by daughters Jane and Gillian, and grandsons John, Thomas, David, Joseph and Oskar. Vicky died in 2008. His sister Jessie Whitby died at Claremont in April 2020 - aged 102 years. Over the years many of Eric's WA buildings have been demolished; thus knowledge of his work and great influence has been diminished with the passing of time. Further detailed study of the erudite Eric Leach's contributions to Western Australian and English architecture would be an enormously valuable contribution to our understanding of his highly significant place in the profession.

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- 'Births- Leach', *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 11 August 1917, p.4 (birth of Jessie at Nurse Dunlop's).
- 'Births- Leach', *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 30 May 1919, p.4 (birth of Eric at at 6 Lewis Street).
- 'The Late Mr F. Leach', *The West Australian*, 1 June 1935, p.17 (death Grandfather Frederick).
- 'Architectural Student's Success', *Daily News*, 7 May 1936, p.4 (design for tennis court pavilion).
- 'T Square Ball', *The West Australian*, 14 May 1938, p.10 (tenth annual ball Embassy Ballroom).
- 'Bronze Medal', *The Architect*, December 1941, p.14 (also lists Eric's previous experience).
- 'Personal', *The West Australian*, 12 December 1941, p.6 (winner of RIAWA bronze medal).
- 'Leach-Badmington', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 1945, p.18 (engagement to Victoria).
- 'Notice', *The West Australian*, 7 September 1946, p.12 (partnership Marshall Clifton & Leach).
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'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 6 March 1954, p.40 (block of 21 flats for R.J. and C. Norris on Lot S7 Terrace Drive Perth).

'Architect's Plan for Open-Air Auditorium', *The West Australian*, 8 May 1954, p.9 (to seat 1,100 people at Cottesloe Civic Centre).

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'What will the home of the future look like?', *Sunday Times*, 11 July 1954, p.35 (Leach author).

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'Foreshore Flats Rise', *The West Australian*, 21 August 1954, p.13 (Norris, Terrace Dve Perth).

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Eric Leach's sailing on the 'Haze' is noted in a letters of 2000 to and from John Lidbury. The boat is still at RFBYC, see [https://issuu.com/rfbyc/docs/200929\\_septtidings\\_online/s/11060519](https://issuu.com/rfbyc/docs/200929_septtidings_online/s/11060519). 'Haze' is remembered fondly Eric's daughters, who noted he would 'spend days every year varnishing the boat and cleaning the hull', and that it was 'our fathers pride and joy of a yacht when we lived at Mosman Park.'

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