



W.J.W. Forbes

(Battye, J.S., *Cyclopedia of Western Australia*, Vol.1, 1912, p.625; RAlA c.1933)

Walter James Waldie Forbes (1869-1939) was born 15 March 1869 at Kinsale, County Cork, Ireland. His Scottish father, also Walter, served in the British army, and his mother, Mary Waldie, was English. The family travelled to India where Quartermaster-Sergeant Forbes died at Rawalpindi (Pakistan) in 1872. Mary took their three infants to live with relatives in New Zealand, where she remarried in 1875, hence moving to Brisbane where her second husband also died young, of tuberculosis. Young Walter eventually finished schooling at St James' Grammar, Melbourne. At the age of fifteen he entered the office of Melbourne architect Walter Scott Law, with whom he remained for eight and a half years – till c.1893. At that time he moved to Sydney for a three year period, working for Edward Raht, Austrian-born architect of the fabulous American Romanesque style 'Equitable Buildings' in Sydney and Melbourne. The Sydney offices for the Equitable Life Assurance Society of America still stand in George Street, near Martin Place. Unfortunately the splendid Melbourne building, on the north-west corner of Collins and Elizabeth Streets, was demolished in 1960.

With architectural work having virtually 'dried-up' on the economically depressed east coast, Waldie Forbes, as he became known, moved to Perth in 1897. Joining first with architects Wilkinson & Smith, then as chief draughtsman with E.H. Dean Smith from 1900, and in mid-1904 being made the junior partner with J.J. Talbot Hobbs (1864-1938) and Dean Smith at Hobbs Smith & Forbes; Forbes became a highly respected member of the architectural profession in Western Australia. Forbes married Kate Strickland in 1903, and they had five children: Howard (Bill) Forbes in 1904; Hettie in 1906; Madeleine in 1907; Nancy in 1910; and Dorothy in 1911. Bill Forbes was also to become a prominent architect in WA. In 1911 Waldie moved his family from West Perth to the spacious blocks at Peppermint Grove on Freshwater Bay.

As Dean Smith had died in 1906, and Talbot Hobbs departed from Australia for war service in the period 1914-1919, Waldie Forbes effectively ran the Hobbs Smith & Forbes office in this five year period. From 1906 until 1924, Hobbs Smith & Forbes had been based at the Weld Chambers, 44 St George's Terrace. In the 1920s, both Hobbs Smith & Forbes' office and the focus of their major office projects in Perth shifted west along 'The Terrace'. By 1925 the firm had moved into spacious premises on the second floor of the newly built WA Trustees Building, and the practice continued another prolific period of work. Consciously composed as an ensemble, the WA Trustees Building (1925) at 135 St George's Terrace, the Royal Insurance Building (1929) at 133 St George's Terrace, and Newspaper House (1932) at 125-131 St George's Terrace, all still remaining, form a fine precinct of inter-war buildings with distinctive character and style. All were designed under the leadership of Talbot Hobbs and Waldie Forbes, and reflect their combined stylistic output.

With this sequence of three buildings along St George's Terrace, all recently 'restored', Hobbs and Forbes demonstrated an increasing and innovative facility in the use of steel frames, metal framed windows, electric lifts, and reinforced concrete floors, which were all relatively new technologies. They also showed dexterity and innovation in the manner with which they gradually applied facades of freer styles and increased modernity. The stylistic progression and design interaction between the commercial buildings of the group, their extension of the St George's Terrace Gold-Boom streetscape to the west of William Street, transposed into the design idiom of the period between the World Wars, was place-making of a high order. The homogenous series of buildings at 125-135 St George's Terrace added to Hobbs' fine Prince's Building of 1896 (later Elder House), which so neatly turned the William Street corner, and Forbes was instrumental in pre-empting the group with the finest commercial example of its type in WA, St George's House, built for Millar's Karri and Jarrah Co. in 1912. The building had a monumental quality, now only to be seen in Perth with the GPO and former Commonwealth Bank buildings in Forrest Place. Ironically, St George's House and the Prince's Building were bowled over in 1972 during Perth's rabid demolition period, allowing erection of a new Elder House designed by the descendant firm Hobbs Winning Leighton.

With Hobbs and Forbes approaching retirement and both having architect sons, they soon gave thought to succession plans for the business. The Hobbs Smith & Forbes name continued until 1933, when it was modified to Hobbs Forbes & Partners. This was due to the diminishing practical involvement of Talbot Hobbs and Waldie Forbes, and the growing responsibilities of the younger architects in the office, including Athol Hobbs and Bill Forbes.

Always active in professional affairs, Forbes crowned this work when elected as President of the Royal Institute of Architects of Western Australia (RIAWA) for the term 1933-1934. An ardent golfer throughout his life, Waldie Forbes died at his 152 Forrest Street, Peppermint Grove residence on 3 April 1939, aged seventy years. Just two days after Forbes had passed on, Alfred Wright also died. Talbot Hobbs had passed away in April 1938, just less than a year earlier. Other previous presidents of the local institute in J.F. Allen, G.T. Poole and E.G. Cohen had also died in the 1930s, with M.F. Cavanagh to follow in 1941. There was a true 'changing of the guard' within the architectural profession of WA, soon to be interrupted by the demands of the Second World War.

Following the deaths of Hobbs and Forbes, two influential new Western Australian firms eventually developed - Hobbs Winning Leighton, and Forbes & Fitzhardinge. Following the Second World War, Bill Forbes merged the business with that of John Fitzhardinge. Forbes & Fitzhardinge produced a large share of WA's finer buildings up until the 1990s, then evolving into Forbes & Fitzhardinge Woodland, with the Forbes name finally disappearing when the company name changed to Cox Howlett & Bailey Woodland.

References:

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Heritage Committee meeting approval date: 18 April 2013 Last updated: 18 April 2013

Citation details:

Taylor, Dr John J., 'Walter James Waldie Forbes (1869-1939)', *Western Australian Architect Biographies*, <http://www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=13453>, accessed DATE.



St George's House at left, Newspaper House central and Royal Insurance Building at right (SLWA 095208PD)



Newspaper House, Royal Insurance Building, and WA Trustees Building at 125-135 St George's Terrace (John Taylor 2006).