

# Power House or White Elephant?

*Bishopscourt Melbourne – Official Residence and Family Home*, by Elizabeth Rushen (Mosaic Press 2013 \$49.95)

reviewed by David Woods

**W**HEN BISHOPSCOURT was our family home for 20 years the question as to whether the house was a priceless national icon or a bastion of privilege did not unduly concern me. The family got on with their lives and I as a student and young teacher nonchalantly enjoyed the spacious house and grounds and the permanence and security of the home that was ours for so long. We were not greatly interested in its history, but frankly nor was anyone else. The word 'heritage' was hardly known in the '50s and '60s and many fine old buildings were being brutally demolished with little public concern. Only in later years have I come to reflect on the rather unusual circumstances of our family life and begun to realise the extraordinary position that Bishopscourt holds in the life of the Anglican Church, the city of Melbourne and the State of Victoria. Dr Elizabeth Rushen has produced a comprehensive exposition of the subject in her landmark study of Bishopscourt and its social history, and it is now possible for us all to understand some of the complexities of the role of Bishopscourt and the experience of living in it.

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on the shoulders of the bishop's wife.

This is a study of the work of the bishops' and archbishops' wives who have lived at Bishopscourt and willingly and unassumingly handled the many sided demands of their position. As Dr Rushen states, 'For each of these women, one of the greatest challenges has been balancing their public duties and their private lives, creating a family home in a residence which is essentially a public building'. When the Governor or the Lord Mayor 'gives' a reception or a dinner they or their wives are unlikely to have planned the menu, done the shopping and cooking and served the food themselves. The archbishop has long since ceased to have anything like that kind of staff support, although living in Bishopscourt creates the expectation that that kind of hos-

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a wide range of those in need in society, for women and children, for orphans and the unemployed, for newly arrived immigrant women, and most notably for impoverished pregnant women for whom she co-founded what became the Royal Women's Hospital, of which she remained its President until her departure. She set the bar high for future bishops' wives and created an expectation in the community that the bishop's wife would play a leading philanthropic role in society, regardless of her inclinations, her previous experience or the demands of her family which would frequently conflict with public duties. The book could well be subtitled 'Official Residence *versus* Family Home'.

In their own style, each family determined how the house was used and reflected the social and church customs of the time. The majority of episcopates lasted 10 – 15 years, so each regime was an era in itself

finding themselves married to the Archbishop of Melbourne. The diocese has been wonderfully served by a group of outstanding women who have given unstintingly of their time and talents to the church they have served and the society in which they lived.

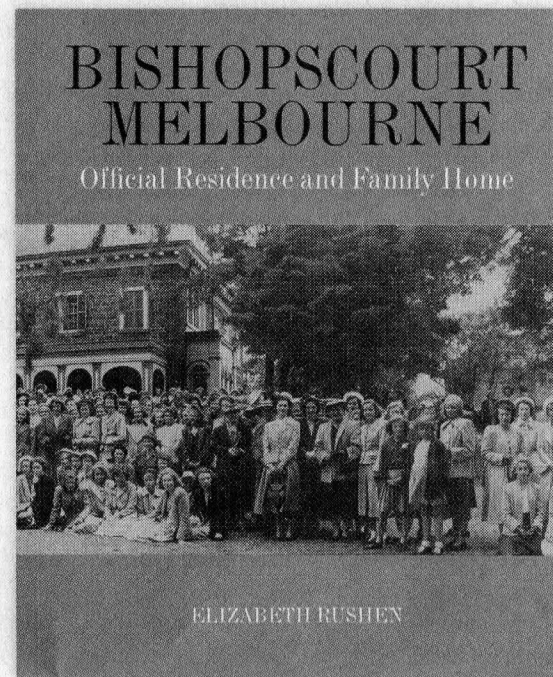
As each era approached its conclusion the issue of the future of Bishopscourt reared its head in the diocesan offices and deliberations of finance committees. The cost

former glory. They showed conclusively that not just the house but the house and garden *together* are a unique and irreplaceable 19th century estate in the city of Melbourne of major historical, religious, social and aesthetic importance, and that the site should be preserved as a whole for the benefit of future generations.

Archbishop Philip and Mrs Joy Freier have committed themselves wholeheartedly to continuing the

tradition of hospitality at Bishopscourt, have welcomed many individuals and groups of all kinds to the house, have held 'open house' and 'open garden' weekends and have reaffirmed the value of the property to the whole community. Anyone who has visited on those occasions must be struck by the beauty of the garden and the peaceful ambience of the whole estate and would be horrified by its disappearance. Joy Freier especially has inspired the creation of this book, assembled the necessary committee who have enlisted the backing of the East Melbourne Historical Society, raised the funds and commis-

sioned Dr Rushen to write a social history of Bishopscourt. The depth and extent of the author's research are exceptional, her style is fluent



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She unfolds a panorama of personal and public triumphs and tribulations stretching over 160 years. Three bishops and ten archbishops and their wives and families have lived at Bishops court continuously since 1853. The house has seen times of boom and times of depression, times of growth and times of stagnation, times of confidence and times of anxiety, times of peace and times of war and times of joy and times of sadness. Two distinguished laymen also rented Bishops court, a governor squatted in it, three wives died there and three archbishops died in office. The building has needed endless upkeep and repair, has had one major and one minor extension, has been divided, renovated and repeatedly redecored. Meanwhile the burden of managing the household, looking after the bishop and organising the large scale hospitality expected of him has fallen fairly and squarely

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pitality will be provided. The panel of bells which used to ring in the kitchen no longer summon a bevy of willing servants. I well remember my father coming in from work and hastily getting out the sherry and looking for some biscuits that were not too stale as a group of eminent visitors arrived for a visit, while my mother slipped out to the kitchen to keep an eye on the cooking and the younger children, in between making conversation with yet another bunch of complete strangers.

Bishop Charles Perry, the first, at 41 the youngest and with 27 years in office the longest serving bishop or archbishop of Melbourne, had a vision for the church and the diocese (the whole of Victoria in his day) in which a suitable bishop's residence had a natural place. Eschewing the English term 'Palace' for the more egalitarian 'Bishops court' he made it both his home and his administrative centre. In Frances he had the ideal wife for a bishop. She had an equal intellect and as much energy and eagerly embraced the opportunities for public life and philanthropy. She was concerned for the welfare of

inclinations, her previous experience or the demands of her family which would frequently conflict with public duties. The book could well be subtitled 'Official Residence versus Family Home'.

In their own style, each family determined how the house was used and reflected the social and church customs of the time. The majority of episcopates lasted 10 - 15 years, so each regime was an era in itself and each succeeding family had a different outlook and different objectives from the last. Garden parties for invited guests with hats and gloves gradually gave way to an 'open house' or 'open garden' style of hospitality for any of the general public who wished to attend. The number of organisations attended or more often led by the archbishop's wife, the number of significant guests entertained and often staying in the house, the number of journeys near and far the wives made with their husbands, the number of talks and speeches they gave and meetings they chaired, to mention a few of the diversions open to them, makes exhausting reading. Most significantly, all the bishops' and archbishops' wives have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into the plethora of activities and responsibilities that come with the always unexpected experience of

# BISHOPSCOURT MELBOURNE

Official Residence and Family Home



ELIZABETH RUSHEN

of maintaining the building was alarming and many arguments were aired from decade to decade about the feasibility of selling it or the possibility of subdividing it. Reasonable financial concerns were backed by equally reasonable ideological concerns that such a residence was relic of a bygone age and was no longer an appropriate lifestyle for a church leader. Such opinions were supported by keenly held views that the house was a monstrosity of no architectural significance and wasn't worth keeping anyway. With each move to sell, subdivide or otherwise jeopardise its continued existence, another layer of protection was added by the National Trust, Heritage Victoria, the Register of the National Estate, Melbourne City Council or the East Melbourne Group. Finally, as the new millennium dawned, the Australian Garden History Society led by Helen Page took in hand the garden, which had suffered from decades of neglect, and began comprehensively to restore it to its

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sioned Dr Rushen to write a social history of Bishops court. The depth and extent of the author's research are exceptional, her style is fluent and eminently readable and the balance between the broad canvas and the small detail is excellent. The book is very well laid out and is a pleasure to read. The many illustrations immeasurably enhance the text and the end notes give huge scope to anyone wishing to pursue the subject further. Her appreciation of the many sided lives of the bishops' wives is sympathetic and understanding. The disparate stories of twelve very different women over 160 years all inadvertently faced with the same situation make fascinating, revealing and often deeply moving reading. This book is an outstanding and timely contribution to the religious and social history of Melbourne, Victoria and Australia.

David Woods lived at Bishops court 1957-77 when his father, Sir Frank Woods KBE, was Archbishop of Melbourne.