

# WJ GRASSICK:

## AN UNQUALIFIED SUCCESS

Before the passing of the *Architects Registration Act 1922*, anybody in Victoria could refer to themselves as an architect. When registration became compulsory in 1923, countless people engaged in various aspects of the construction industry clambered for official recognition as architects. Amongst this hopeful throng was one W J Grassick, a 37-year old Irishman whose application stated boldly that, "for the past ten years, I have designed for architects, engineers and proprietors in Victoria, building construction of factories, warehouses, offices and power houses representing an average of about £250,000 worth of work per annum". While his nomination was supported by Alec Eggleston and Harry Tompkins – two leading architects of the day – Grassick's application was rejected by the board, which noted ruefully that "you do not possess the necessary qualifications". This curt dismissal, however, belied the broad experience that Grassick had built up over the previous decade, and gave no hint of the even grander projects that would follow.

Born in Dublin in 1884, William Jenkinson Grassick was the son of a shipping engineer from Scotland who had settled in Ireland two years before. The younger Grassick began his own career as an apprentice mechanical engineer in



Sussan Building, West Melbourne  
(Formerly Symington Corset Factory),  
photo: David Thompson

Dublin's Seville Engineering Works, later transferring to the drawing office of the Dublin Ports & Docks Board (Engineering Section). There, he worked on a range of engineering projects, including docks, bridges, lighthouses, jetties and tramways, under the direction of the board's Chief Engineer, Sir John Purser Griffith (1848-1948), a redoubtable character who has been described as "the grand old man of Irish engineering". In a testimonial dated September 1907, Griffith wrote that "Mr Grassick has recently assisted me in the design for the proposed new bridge over the River Suir at Waterford, and has shown great industry, zeal and skill as well as technical knowledge in connection with the work". This ambitious structure, which was to replace a timber counterpart dating back to 1793, was designed with steel-framed bascule spans (a type of drawbridge) at a total cost of £114,500. Unfortunately, the scheme was abandoned when the local authorities moved that a reinforced concrete bridge would be more appropriate. New plans

were drawn up in 1908, and the bridge opened five years later.

However by that time Will Grassick had already settled into his new life in Australia. His former employer had concluded the glowing testimonial by stating that "I greatly regret that he thinks it necessary to leave this country, and that I shall lose his assistance." As it happened, Griffith's star engineer had "thought it necessary" to migrate simply due to health reasons. The Grassick family had a history of tuberculosis, which was to claim the lives of two of Will's seven siblings. The eldest son, James (1882-1963) had already migrated to Australia in 1906, where he settled in Queensland and became a successful orchardist. No doubt spurred by his positive reports, Will migrated to Victoria a year later and was joined by the remainder of the family in 1911.

For Will Grassick, 1913 was a momentous year. It not only saw the birth of his son Phillip, but also the deaths, in quick succession, of his new wife and both of his parents, who succumbed to tuberculosis. It was also the year that he commenced practice as an engineer, based at National Mutual Chambers in Collins Street. An early job was as structural consultant to architect Alec Eggleston



Securway Storage, former BALM factory,  
Port Melbourne, photo: Robin Grow



William Grassick, date unknown

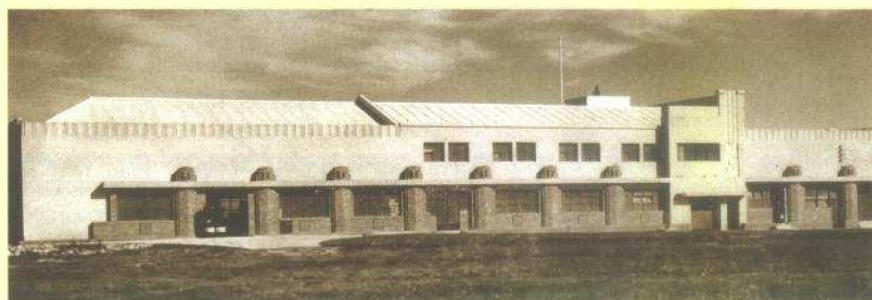
(1883-1955) on a large rear extension to Collins House – a project on which the then recently-arrived Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) had also been engaged as an associate. Grassick had designed the addition in structural steel when, in a twist that oddly echoed the saga of the Waterford Bridge, it was decided – reportedly on Griffin’s recommendation – to redesign the building in reinforced concrete. Consequently, Grassick was replaced on the project by Sir John Monash. Notwithstanding this setback, Grassick made some valuable contacts through the project. Walter Burley Griffin offered Grassick’s sister Emily – then studying landscape design at Burnley College – a position in his own office. Grassick himself, who moved his office in Collins House in 1915, maintained contact with fellow tenant Alec Eggleston, and, in 1922, took on Eggleston’s nephew, a young architect named J Douglas Overend (1898-1951) as a member of his own staff. The following year, Eggleston acted as one of the three signatories to Grassick’s (unsuccessful) application for registration as an architect.

However, it was another of the signatories that would have a more decisive impact on Grassick’s career. This was another Collins House tenant: Scottish-born engineer and businessman Alexander (later Sir Alexander) Stewart (1874-1956), who, in 1906, had entered into partnership with another Scotsman, William Fyvie (1859-1942), and after acquiring key German patents, became pioneers of the industrial gas industry in Australia. In the mid 1920s, the firm of Fyvie & Stewart began a fruitful professional association with Will Grassick, and the two offices undertook a number of major industrial projects in association for such clients as the Larkin Aircraft Company (see *Argus*, 26 April 1927), Australian Knitting Mills, Yarra Falls Ltd and I R Morley Pty Ltd. The buildings from this period were fairly typical of the era: multi-storeyed factories in red brick, enlivened with stringcourses and rendered trim, with large steel-framed windows. This phase of Grassick’s career is probably best represented by the sprawling factory for the Ford Motor Company at Geelong – to this day, a striking landmark on the Princes Highway (*Argus*, 2 July 1925). It was also during this fruitful period that Grassick married for the second time, to Winsome Davies, daughter of Heidelberg School painter David Davies (1864-1939), and had two daughters.

After Fyvie & Stewart dissolved their partnership in 1932, Will Grassick



Early photo of the Ford plant in Geelong



Early photo of the BALM factory in Port Melbourne (now Securway)

resumed his independent practice and began to move even further towards the role of an architectural designer. This period, of course, coincided with the development of the Moderne style, which Grassick embraced with alacrity. An early manifestation was the huge wool store in North Melbourne that he designed for the Commonwealth Wool & Produce Company in 1934. This was a sprawling saw tooth-roofed complex spread over a two acre site, with an elongated frontage to Sutton Street that incorporated continuous bays of steel-framed windows (*Age*, 10 April 1934). This otherwise stark facade was relieved only by over scaled rendered lettering that spelt out the company’s name, and a row of faceted panels, with a projecting canted sun hood, which marked the main entry porch. A year or two later, Will Grassick designed a factory at Port Melbourne for the British Australian Lead Manufacturers (BALM), which displayed an increasingly confident use of the Moderne idiom. Here, a similarly conventional hip-roofed rectilinear factory complex was enlivened along its Williamstown Road frontage by canted brick piers that projected through a continuous concrete sun hood, and a fluted parapet, while a squat rendered tower featured an off-centre flagpole rising from a telescopic plinth.

Will Grassick went on to design several other factories in the later 1930s that can be considered as particularly assured examples of the Moderne style. The new premises of corset manufacturers

W H Symington Pty Ltd, described by one newspaper report as “a very good example of the type of factory buildings now being erected in industrial areas” (*Argus*, 10 December 1936), were built on an odd-shaped corner site in West Melbourne. Its principal facade, which curved around both street frontages, had window bays delineated by fluted piers in the manner of the American architect Paul Cret, and a parapet with incised grooves. An off-centre entry porch was again marked by a tower-like element, this time with vertical strip windows set into a tiled surround, and the ubiquitous flagpole rising from a drum-like turret on the roof. Contemporary accounts indicate that the interior fit out was equally progressive, with modern air-conditioning, heating and mechanical services and “a novel feature is a mannequin theatre with proscenium stage and special lighting” (*Age*, 11 May 1937).

The peak of Grassick’s pre-war career as an architectural designer was probably represented by the striking (but, sadly, recently demolished) factory for the Hilton Hosiery Company in Brunswick. Described by the *Herald* (14 April 1937) as an “interesting example of modern industrial architecture”, this was another vast saw tooth-roofed complex, but with an eye-catching single-storey office block at the corner of Albion and Duggan Streets. The intersection was marked by a recessed curving wall extending between two stark block-like elements, relieved only by incised grooves above



2009 image of Ford factory in Geelong, photo: Robin Graw

the window bays. A curved flight of steps led up to double doors, with the company name above in projecting metal lettering. Again, much was made of the emphasis on staff welfare and working conditions: air-conditioning, natural lighting with anti-glare glazing, and well-appointed dining rooms and shower facilities.

During the Second World War, when Collins House was requisitioned by the government, Will Grassick relocated his practice into his home in Kooyong Road, Toorak. According to family folklore, he offered his old rooms to General Macarthur himself, who later took Grassick's favourite desk with him when he moved out. The engineer dug in his heels, and his desk was eventually returned. It was also around this time that Grassick brought in a new member of staff in the form of architect Leslie Grant (1904-1978), who had spent much of the previous decade as Chief Draftsman in Walter Burley Griffin's office.

Describing his practice as "equivalent to that of industrial architects and engineers", Grassick went on to design a number of complexes that were larger, if more utilitarian in style, than his pre-war projects. In 1950, he applied to the Ministry for Post-war Reconstruction for sponsorship in order to travel to Europe and the USA to study the latest developments in construction, and also to advertise for an assistant. His application also stated that he "wished to make contacts in the United States with firms who specialise in factory fabrication of moderate size homes, with a view to the formation of a company to manufacture this type of home under factory conditions, but with the preservation of variety in architectural expression". Although Grassick obtained funding for his travel, his visit to the USA was cut short to just one week, and he later reported that he had failed to make

the contacts he had hoped. It is not known if his ambitious prefabricated housing scheme – one of many, incidentally, then being contemplated in Australia – ever came to fruition.

One positive outcome of Grassick's study trip, however, was the employment of an assistant. While in Europe, he secured the services of a Czech engineer, who returned to Australia and became his partner. At that time, his office staff included senior draftsman Les Grant, five or six other draftsmen, an office girl, and Grassick's long-time secretary, Gertrude. Around 1954, she became the third Mrs W J Grassick. Perhaps not coincidentally, his practice wound down thereafter, and he finally retired at the end of the decade. In a letter to his brother dated July 1960, he stated simply that "I gave up my office completely some three months ago and, as I look back on the years – especially the past four or five – I realise that it was high time I gave it away". He and Gertrude remained living in Kooyong Road until Grassick's death on 11 January 1964, aged 80.

Will Grassick's daughter Cecilia remembered him as a complicated and somewhat aloof man with an extraordinary mind – fascinated by nuclear science, Asian philosophy and comparative religion, a brilliant mathematician and a keen reader of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. "We used to split the atom every night around the dining table", she recalls, adding that he also tried to convince her and her sister to follow him into the family engineering profession. While his qualifications may well have been insufficient for him to register as an architect back in 1923, Grassick's surviving buildings, and the published illustrations of those no longer extant, remain as testament to one of Melbourne's leading exponents of modern inter-war factory architecture.

### List of Known Projects

(those marked \* in association with Fyvie & Stewart)

- 1923 Additions to Power Station for Melbourne Electric Supply Company, Geelong
- 1925 Factory for the Ford Motor Company of Australia, Geelong\*
- 1926 Additions to factory for Australian Knitting Mills, 19-29 Stewart Street, Richmond\*
- 1927 Wool store extension for Yarra Falls Limited, 452-484 Johnston Street, Abbotsford\*
- 1927 Offices and workshops for Larkin Aircraft Company, Footscray Road, Coode Island\*
- 1927 Spinning mill for Messrs I R Morley Pty Ltd, 903 Daveton Street, North, Ballarat\*
- 1928 Factory for Nobel Chemical Finishes Ltd, 38-48 Station Road, Deer Park
- 1929 Alterations to Cliveden Mansions, 192 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne
- 1930 Power House for the Australian Oil & Metal Company Pty Ltd, Broken Hill, NSW\*
- 1934 Stores for Commonwealth Wool & Produce Co, 64-80 Sutton Street, North Melbourne
- 1936 Factory for British Australian Lead Manufacturers, 339-341 Williamstown Road, Fishermen's Bend
- 1936 Factory for R & W H Symington Pty Ltd, 22 Rosslyn Street, West Melbourne
- 1937 Hosiery mill for Hilton Hosiery Company Ltd, 291 Albion Street West, Brunswick
- 1939 Office & laboratory building for Australian Aluminium Company, Urwin Street, Rosehill, NSW
- 1941 Additions to Melbourne Wire Works (Greer & Ashburner), 85 Cremorne Street, Richmond
- 1948 Factory for Austral Standard Cables Pty Ltd, 82-84 Hampstead Road, Maidstone
- 1949 Factory for Bradford Cotton Mills Ltd, 239-249 High Street, Kangaroo Flat (Bendigo)
- 1949 Grain mill for Robert Harper & Company, 133 Rouse Street, Port Melbourne

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