



**Francis Bird**

(courtesy Wendy Hackett)

**B**ird, Francis (1845-1937), was born at Hyde Park in London on 14 November 1845. Previously articled to architects in England, Bird embarked on the clipper *Bridgetown* in July 1869, bound for Western Australia (WA). Independently wealthy, by December of 1870 Bird had formed a business partnership, Mason Bird & Co, with timber merchant Benjamin Mason. Mason had need of capital to develop his timber concessions in the Darling Range east of Perth, and Bird invested a small fortune in the venture. They were pioneers of the timber industry in WA, cutting forest near Kalamunda. Bird is believed to have developed one of the first private tram lines in WA, where horses pulling trucks along wooden rails moved jarrah logs over fourteen kilometres from the hills to the Canning River at Cannington. Ultimately, the business partnership was unsuccessful, and Bird gave notice of its dissolution in June 1873.

In 1871, Bird was Chairman of the Canning Roads Board, with Mason as a member. Frank Bird married Augusta Maude Earnshaw at Busselton in February 1871. A first child was stillborn in December 1871, but they eventually had fifteen children, of which twelve survived childbirth, and eight achieved adulthood. In the early 1870s, Bird designed the family home *Woodloes*, a fine Victorian Georgian bungalow at 'Mason's Landing' in Cannington. He developed the property with gardens, orchards and a surrounding park. Perhaps the earliest architect-designed house remaining in WA, *Woodloes* was purchased by the Town (now City) of Canning in the 1970s, and is kept as a museum.

Lacking financial success in Western Australia during the 1870s, and with the expenses of raising his growing family, Frank was not 'making ends meet'. The Bird family were forced by financial circumstances to leave *Woodloes* in 1882, moving to Victoria Park, and then to Perth. Advertising himself in 1882 as an architect and surveyor with an office in St George's Terrace, Perth, Bird noted he had been an 'articled pupil of John Elliot, Portland Street, Southampton, and of Ewan Christian, 10A Whitehall Place, London - Architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners'. He developed a small clientele, and in July of 1882, Bird called tenders for new premises at Geraldton on behalf of prominent businessmen George and Edward Shenton.

Despite having resumed his professional activity in order to generate income, Francis Bird was listed as bankrupt in the Government Gazette of 20 March 1883. He must have retained some favour in society circles at Perth, as Bird secured the government office of temporary Superintendent of Public Works in 1883-1884. During this period he was also undertaking private commissions, and was responsible for the design of the St John the Baptist Church at Dongara. The foundation stone was laid in 1884 and the consecration was performed by Bishop Parry (father of architect Herbert Parry, grandfather of architect Mervyn Parry) in June of 1885. Another ecclesiastical project around this period that is attributed to Bird is a church at Kenwick Pioneer Cemetery (1884, not-extant); and then later, St John's Anglican Church, Northam (1890).

On 9 February 1887, a meeting of architects was held in Perth 'at which every member of the profession in private practice was present', and where it was 'unanimously resolved to form an Association for protecting the rights of private practitioners'. Continued debate and discussion focussed on the topic of public works employees undertaking private work was found in local newspapers for weeks following. The West Australian Architects Association formed a deputation to the Governor in November 1888, again complaining about government employees performing architectural work independent of their official duties, and one must wonder at the invidious position of Bird, himself apparently having previously undertaken private projects whilst in official employ. The Association's pioneer members included Francis Bird, James Wright, Harry Trigg, Thomas Whitney, George Light and John G. Taylor. It was the precursor to the West Australian Institute of Architects, mooted in 1892 and eventually formed in 1896.

Between 1885 and 1886 the Bird family had lived in Charles Manning's vast *Manning's Folly* at Fremantle. Although his family in England declined to provide him with further fortune to replace that expended in the 1870s, Frank was apparently rehabilitated from his bankrupt state by 1887 when he commenced a house on a very large landholding on the heights overlooking Freshwater Bay at Claremont. This was one of a number of prominent residences he designed in this period. In 1888, Frank was substantially blinded by wind-blown cinders whilst burning off his land at Freshwater Bay. This was an ironic tragedy, as at the time he was also acting as an insurance agent advertising 'Fires Risks accepted at Current Rates.' On doctor's orders, the family moved to a cooler environment at Albany, and the Claremont house was sold in June 1889. In December of that year Frank's mother died and he came into an inheritance. He was able to purchase *Strawberry Hill* farm at Albany. He gradually restored the home of 1836 and gardens at *Strawberry Hill*, and much later it would become one of the National Trust of Australia (WA)'s proudest acquisitions.

Bird's sight returned sufficiently for him to take on the responsibilities of the local Inspector of Works in Albany for chief government architect George Temple Poole. Bird was Inspector of Works for the construction of the Albany Primary School during 1894-1895, and supervised construction at the former Post Office in 1895-1896. He had been made a Fellow of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in 1890, and a Justice of the Peace in 1895. Supposedly retired in 1910, Frank was still listed as a practitioner in Albany's 1917 postal directory. The extensive family were able to celebrate their parents' diamond wedding anniversary in 1931, before Bird passed away in Albany at the age of 91 in 1937. His memorials include the Francis Bird Reserve at Cannington.

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Woodloes, Cannington (HCWA Pic129 – F.A. Sharr)



*St John the Baptist Church, Dongara (John Taylor); St John's Church, Northam (HCWA)*