

A House for Harry

An architect looks at the former residence of Harry Escombe

THE Bayside Beach, Durban, was a long cry from a classical education at St. Paul's, London, and the clerical cubicles of the London Stock Exchange, but appropriate for the man who, more than any other, believed that Durban's potential development would pivot on its harbour and the eradication of the sand that 'barred' its use. Harry Escombe, liberal, amateur astronomer, chess-player, vigorous surf-bather, eminent lawyer, antagonist and then protagonist of self-government for Natal and later Prime Minister would have selected the site for his future home on that beach with great care.¹

Escombe approached Philip Dudgeon, architect, some time during the winter of 1881 and commissioned the young Irishman to design his house there so that he might be close to the object of his life's work.² Dudgeon had only been practising in Durban for four years at that time,³ and considering his age, had established quite a reputation for his abilities. This was firstly through his work on Addington Hospital⁴ and then as professional adviser to the Durban Town Council for the new town hall competition.⁵ He won this competition the following year (1882), and it is possible that due to these circumstances Escombe found the man who would realise his intentions.

We know that Dudgeon ran into some difficulties with the Town Clerk shortly after the building had commenced in October 1881. Evidently operations had begun without the prior submissions of drawings for the 'mayor's approval'. This was rather strange for an architect designing a house for so prominent a legal client.⁶ Dudgeon's ire at the 'considerable inconvenience caused to him by the Town Surveyor's office keeping his plans for four days' shows, however, how different such matters were then.⁷

The house itself was superb; standing back from the Bay behind several wild figs (which even at that time must have been a considerable size), it consisted of a main double-storeyed portion containing the principal apartments and a secondary one on the northern side. The main entrance to *Bayview* was approached from Beach Grove and led through the lush planting directly onto a generous veranda. This completely surrounded the front part of the building. (Fig. 1, 2). The main entrance was strategically placed to allow easy access to the gentlemen's cloak room and service areas of the house on the one hand, and to a large tiled stair-hall on the other. This space with its two flanking stained-glass windows and palms led into the study and drawing room.⁸ The latter were connected with folding doors to form one large space which opened out across the veranda to the lawn. From these rooms one could enjoy the splendid views of the garden and Bay.

By contrast, the bedrooms above would have been light and airy, with their different views of the treetops and the Bluff beyond. During the heat of summer, however, closed shutters would have assisted in preventing any sense of discomfort. The upper floor windows were very interesting for another reason.

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(Fig. 3). Although they had slightly flattened arches which were emphasised with applied mouldings, they were obviously the forerunners of those Dudgeon used in the Standard Bank, Pietermaritzburg. Tenders were called for this building in January, 1882, and this must mean that both designs were on the drawing boards at the same time.⁹

There are other similarities, too, some peculiar to Philip Dudgeon's work.¹⁰ The intersection of the string courses with the arched windows on the upper floor, the utilitarian and unifying repetition of one or two sizes of well-proportioned windows, the formal cleanness of the composition, and the overriding classicism of the whole are traits which bear the familiar touch of this enigmatic Natal architect.¹¹ Perhaps other sources, too, may one day be discovered for 'Fergus Hathorn's' bank.¹²

But the importance of this house does not belong to any particular feature (for it is by no means 'featuristic') but rather can be seen in its forthright simplicity, the sensibility of its form and arrangement as a solution for life in the sub-tropical 'antipodes', and not least of all in that unique interrelationship between house and garden. I know of no comparable building of this date which succeeds so well by restraint (for example, the veranda struts), and which for richness and variety relies not on pretentious display, but on the exotic splendours of its immediate environment which act as a foil to the building and occupants alike. (Fig. 3, 4).

It seems hardly likely that such a garden could have developed accidentally. Through the use of the *genius loci* and indigenous plant material, a clever informality of deceptive ease was achieved. Thus trees, shrubs and ground cover of contrasting shapes and sizes, in sun and shade, contributed towards creating wonderful outdoor spaces for the leisures of life. (Fig. 3). One is so forcefully reminded of the great democratic romanticism evident in the gardens of Jens Jensen and other early twentieth century landscape artists.¹³ Here was not the recreation of the prairie or woodland though, but the ethos of that glorious 'bushscape' which overawed the earliest settlers and gave Natal its garden reputation.

Harry Escombe might well be forgiven his Ruskinian fondness for the 'attribution of sentient emotions to inanimate objects' if this environment were his influence. 'The rock recognises the superior powers of the dredger bucket, the bar itself will waste away, deprived of that nourishment by which alone its vitality is secured'.¹⁴ But these words of Harry Escombe could, in the context of his involvement with the Bay, be viewed as the final irony of romanticism. For it was from this demesne that he devised the political machinery which opened up the port and set off a chain of far-reaching processes in the development of the city which would ultimately demand the unfortunate disappearance of his own house and the wonderful environment he had created.¹⁵

Notes and References:

1. No. 15 Beach Grove, Durban, adjacent to the Law Courts on the esplanade. This site was originally occupied by a house belonging to Peter Lennox. Hartley, W. *Reminiscences*; C. Bird Papers, Natal Archives. *Obituary, Harry Escombe; Natal Mercury*, 28.12.1899.
2. Hobson, E. G. *The effect of Durban Harbour on Natal's politics, 1874-1898*. B.A. Hons. Thesis, Univ. of Natal, 1961.
3. P. M. Dudgeon was born in Dublin in 1852 and arrived in Durban from East London in 1877. *Times of Natal*, 20.1.1877.

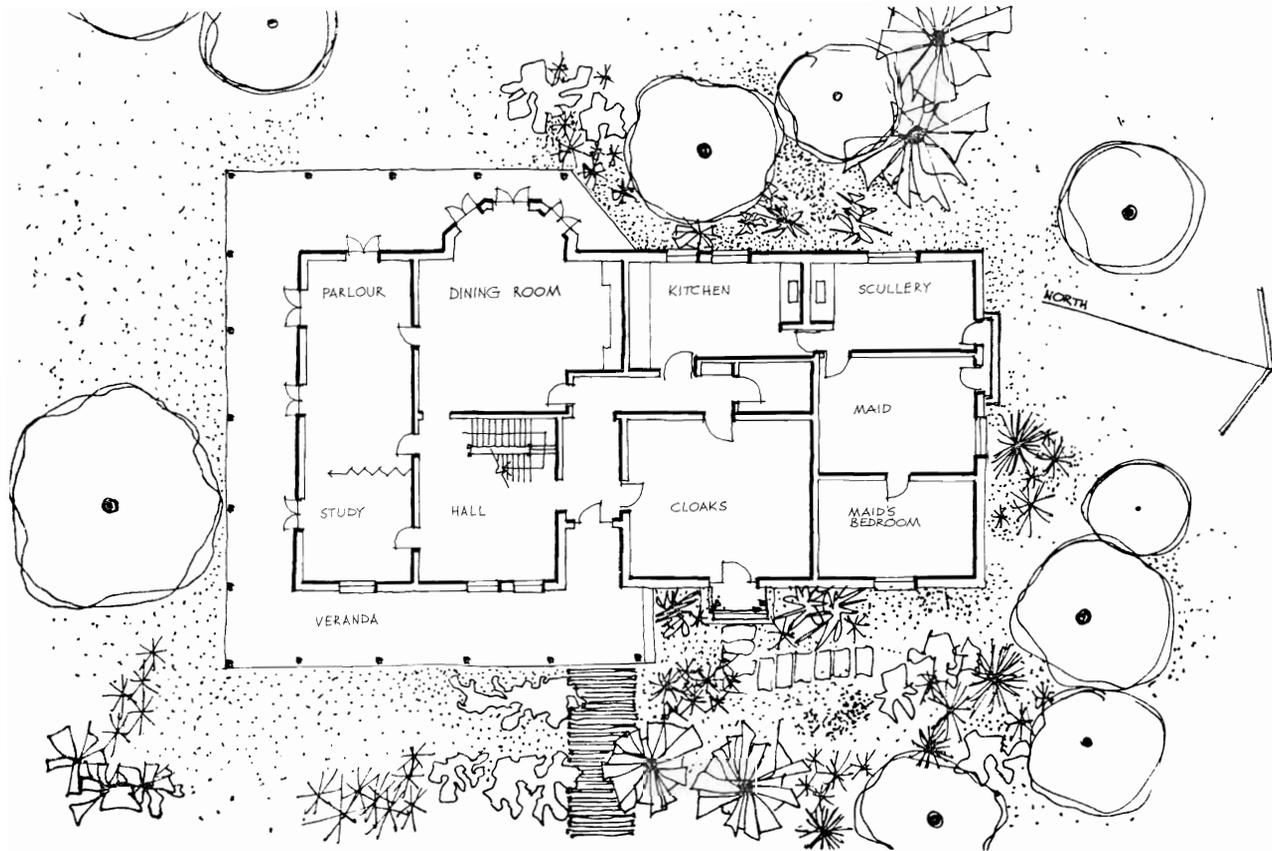


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of ground floor plan, Bayview.

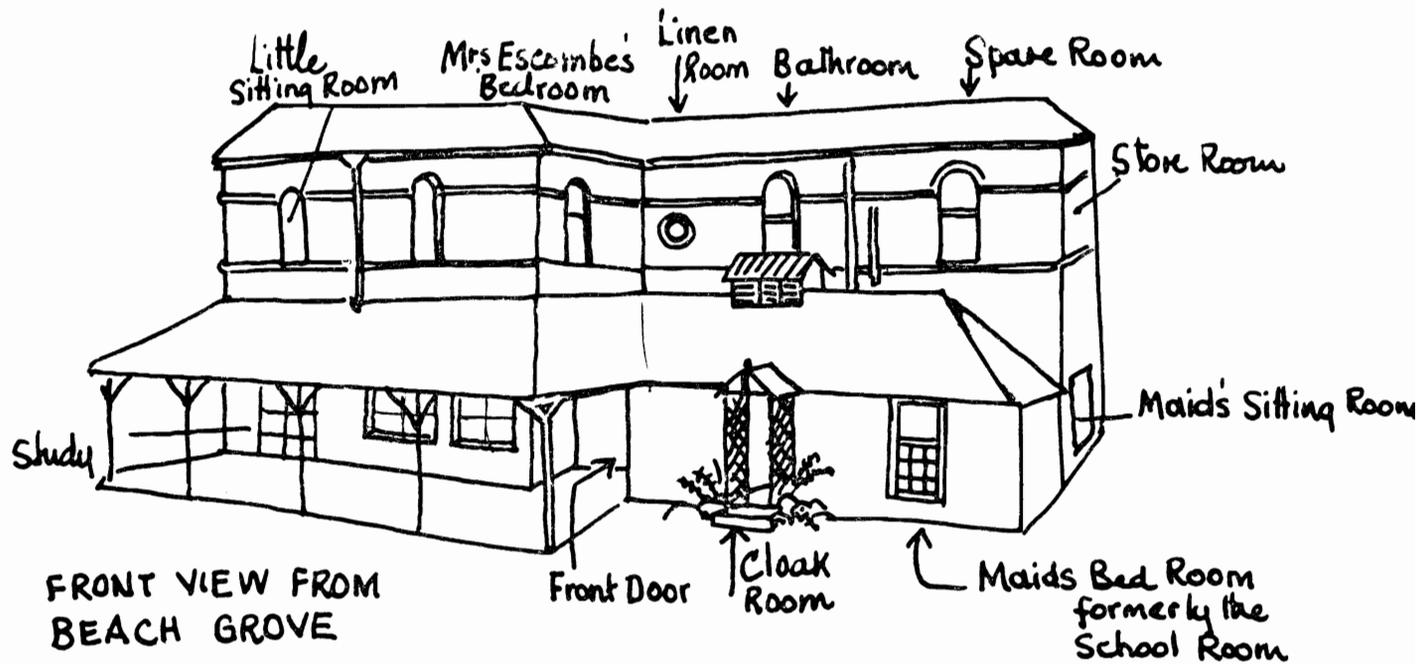


Fig. 2. View from Beach Grove, Drawing by Mrs. Wolfson



Fig. 3. View northwards towards the entrance



Fig. 4. The bay windows on the west.

4. Some sources cite Robert Sellars Upton as the architect of Addington Hospital (1877) but the *Natal Mercury* of 29.10.1879, attributes this building to Dudgeon. Some kind of association between the two men cannot be ruled out.
5. Correspondence between P. M. Dudgeon and the Town Clerk, Durban. Letters of 30.8.1881 and 3.10.1881. Town Clerk's archives, Durban.
6. Letter, Town Clerk to Dudgeon, 29.10.1881.
7. Letter, Dudgeon to Town Clerk, 19.12.1881. A by-law was gazetted in 1878 compelling prospective builders to lodge drawings with the Borough Surveyor's Department prior to building. These would have been original drawings.
8. The layout of the internal walls and the arrangement of the spaces is based entirely on information supplied by Mrs. K. Wolfson and Mrs. J. A. Smith.
9. *Times of Natal*, 9.1.1882.
10. A photograph in the Local History Museum, Durban, showing the house on the embankment would appear to indicate that the chimney had several semi-circular discs—a device which Dudgeon used on the Standard Bank and a house in Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg.
11. Nothing is known of Dudgeon's earlier life and training after his father died in 1853. He returned to Britain in 1887 and died at Bath in 1891.
12. Hathorn was the manager of the Standard Bank at the time the new premises were erected and as he was supposed to have been 'something of an architect' himself (Victoria Club, 1893) this might explain Dudgeon's free hand.
13. Eaton, L. K. *Landscape artist in America; the life and work of Jens Jensen*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1964.
14. *Op. cit.*, Hobson, E. G. p. 14.
15. The house was demolished in 1958.

Acknowledgements

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