



**Strathcona**  
GIRLS GRAMMAR



# Tay Creggan

## Strathcona's Year 9 Campus



## The History of Tay Creggan

Since June 2009, Tay Creggan has been listed in the Victorian Heritage Register recognising its 'architectural significance as one of the finest examples in Victoria of the Victorian Queen Anne Revival style and as one of the most picturesque houses built in Victoria in the late nineteenth century.'

Today, Tay Creggan is Strathcona's dedicated Year 9 Campus; providing a rich, challenging and unique experience for teenage girls when they are exerting greater independence and exploring personal identity.

Construction of the Tay Creggan house commenced in 1893 by Mr Robert Guyon Purchas who was the owner, architect and builder. Tay Creggan is Scottish for 'house built on a rock'. His concept was influenced by an Italian Chateau that had impressed him during his travels on the continent in the 1870s.

However, Purchas lost his fortune in the 1890s depression and was forced to sell the unfinished home. The newly married Michael and Flora Spencer became the owners in 1897, and had Purchas design a number of changes to the house for them.

In the original plan, a gallery for the orchestra was to be built above the fireplace in the ballroom and this had been partly installed.

The large wooden beam, still visible along the low ceiling at the south of this room (later used by Strathcona as the weaving room), was the support for this orchestral gallery. The new owners decided that the ballroom should be a billiard room instead, and so the gallery was closed off and six foundation pillars were erected under the floor. These pillars and the steel wedges may be seen from the passageway of the cellar.



The fireplace in the billiard room came from Scotland and is made of Scottish oak. In the front hall the Spencer Family Crest appears above the fireplace.

Mr Spencer died in 1900 at Tay Creggan at the age of 31 and is buried at Boroondara Cemetery. In 1901, Mrs Spencer married Mr A H McKean and whilst they were away on a lengthy honeymoon, further alterations to the home took place.

The original stairs were immediately inside the front door on the west side of the hall and rose steeply in one flight to the landing on the first floor. These stairs were removed, thus creating the gracious hallway of today, and the new stairs, with a stained glass window above them, were installed at the southern end of the hall. In great contrast to the original stairs, there was now a substantial landing half way up and each step was much shallower than initially conceived.



The home itself was built most substantially: the lower part of the ground floor walls are 18 inches (45.7cm) thick (this presented enormous difficulties when subsequently sewerage and electricity were installed) and all rafters and floor joists are of oregon.

The floor joists, all of which are 10 x 3 inches (25.4 x 7.6cm) with 12 inch (30.4cm) centres, support New Zealand kauri floor boards 1.5 inches (3.8cm) thick and secured from underneath with brass screws.

In the early days, there were ten servants at Tay Creggan, including a coachman and four gardeners. The cook and three maids lived 'at the top of the back stairs'. At the bottom of these stairs was the sewing room (with tiled floor, now the Conference Room), a storeroom and the butler's pantry.

The main drive swept down and passed the house as it does now,





but on its western side a bank appeared which gradually increased in height as the drive led into the stable yard.

The top of the bank was level with the back of the house and formed a back lawn with a fountain in the centre. The present classrooms (originally dormitories) were built on this bank, part of which was removed by the school to form the locker room.

The stable yard had a bricked surface, was large enough for a coach and a team of three horses to turn in and was surrounded by coach house and stables. The coach house contained space for a hansom cab, wagonette and a dog cart and there was a harness room attached. There were four double and two single stalls in the stable, a feed room, fowl house, loft and sleeping quarters for the coachman. There were always at least four horses, many fowls and a Jersey cow.

The garden has always been a feature with its winding paths and shady trees. The croquet lawn and grass tennis court were tended meticulously, especially the latter, as many interstate games were played there. A pergola, covered with prodigiously-yielding vines and adding glorious colour to the garden, ran down the side of the tennis court to the river. This pergola divided the main garden from 1.5 acres (0.6 ha) of vegetable garden. Many seedlings and much advice about growing vegetables came from the Chinese market gardeners whose farms were on the river banks on either side of the property. The milking shed was on the south side of the stables and a path through the cow yard led to a jetty on the river.

Tay Creggan was sold to Mr William Mortill and Mrs Mortill, a Russian dancer, in 1925, a period during which the home became a hub of social life for the wealthy of Melbourne with the



Mortills leading a life full of music, art and fashion. The Mortill's entertained famous dancer Anna Pavlova as well as the Ballets Russes during their second tour of Australia in 1936.

The grounds have welcomed many important visitors. On a Friday afternoon in early November 1939, 750 people gathered outside to welcome the Ladies of the Grail, following the Catholic Church's purchase of Tay Creggan. The crowd included 11 Bishops and Dame Enid Lyons, still mourning the death of her husband – the previous Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, who had died just seven months earlier.

Tay Creggan became the property of 'The Grail' of the Melbourne diocese of the Catholic Church in 1938. They operated Tay Creggan as a hostel for up to 50 young women. They added the Tudor hall, dormitories and some of the present amenities. In 1963, one of the residents was Anne Summers, famous author, journalist, editor and political activist.

She recalls her time spent living here, whilst working full-time and studying fashion design at night, in her book *The Lost Mother*. Summers left because she found it too strict.

Strathcona purchased Tay Creggan in November, 1969. Since occupation by the Year 9 students of the School, substantial renovation and extension works have been carried out including the re-roofing of the entire house, the new jetty which was officially opened in February 1997 and, in 1998, the total renovation and extension of the educational facilities at a cost of \$1.3 million. The atrium and commercial kitchen were completed in 2000. Subsequent refurbishment was carried out in 2011 to create a 'Learning Lounge' to cater for an increasing emphasis on research and collaborative work. In 2005, scenes from the Hollywood movie *Charlotte's Web* were filmed in the front rooms of Tay Creggan. At over 130 years of age, Tay Creggan is still adapting to new demands brought about by social change and yet it retains its dignity and sense of history.

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Strathcona's history *A School on a Hill* - Strathcona 1924-2004, was written by J.Margaret Fendley, a past student, teacher and parent and we thank her for her assistance in providing the above information.





# Tay Creggan Today



Tay Creggan is Melbourne's first independent girls Year 9 campus established in 1969. Unlike other Year 9 programs, our students have the unique opportunity to study at a separate campus, return to their families at night and importantly remain part of the whole school community for school events and celebrations.

Woven together with Australian National Year 9 Curriculum, the TC Envision Program teaches important entrepreneurial and life ready skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, design capability, intellect, collaboration, communication and resilience. An active sport and outdoor program contributes to health and wellbeing. Our caring and passionate staff are experts in the emotional, social, physical and cognitive stages of development of young teenage girls.

Melbourne is known for its strong enterprise and business culture. TC Envision has partnered with the *Future Anything*, complementing the entrepreneurial aspect of the program by embedding the latest thinking in entrepreneurial pedagogy to build our students confidence and capability in the development of their own business. The program supports students to ideate, prototype and pitch innovative ideas that make their world a better place.

By the conclusion of Year 9, our students have developed in maturity, formed lifelong friendships and connections, are well prepared for learning in the senior years and have developed their own businesses. They will hold awarded credentials as tangible evidence of real life learning in a range of areas such as teamwork, sustainability, Duke of Edinburgh, financial management and digital technologies.



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