

U3A AUSTRALIAN HISTORY.

FLORENCE MARY TAYLOR.

1879-1969.

Australia's First Female Architect.

At the ripe old age of 41, Florence Taylor was finally admitted to the NSW Institute of Architects in 1920. Not as a full member but as an Associate Member. She was a woman.

Thirteen years before this great event, she had graduated as an Architect at the University of Sydney. She was also a fully qualified Structural and Civil Engineer.

The male dominated Institute of Architects was a real ***Old Boys Club*** and they did not want women intruding on their patch. ***They*** determined who gained professional accreditation and who won Architectural Awards. ***They*** organized Dinners and Award Presentations. A man, with her qualifications, would have been welcomed with open arms.

No girls allowed in Australia in 1920.

For years, the only work that she was able to get was as a Designer not as an Architect. In fact, much of her work and plans were used by her employers as their own work, under their own names.

Florence was also a good publisher, a good editor and a good technical journalist. She was also the first woman to make a flight in a glider in Australia.

It was not easy for a woman to be an Architect in Australia in the 1900 period. Clients wanted their Architect to be a smartly dressed man with a small pointed beard and always wearing a bow-tie.

There was one woman who was prepared to do it the hard way and that was Florence Taylor.

Florence Mary Parsons was born on the 29 December 1879 at Bedminster, near Bristol in England. She was the eldest of four attractive daughters of John and Mary Parsons, John was a Civil Servant and in 1888 he and Mary decided to take the family to Australia and they arrived in Sydney where he found a job with the Parramatta Council.

Florence was enrolled at the Presbyterian Ladies College at Croydon where she excelled at Maths and Science, which was unusual for girls in those days. The PLC always encouraged its girls to look to careers other than typing and domestic duties.

In 1899, John Parsons died suddenly and Florence had to leave school and go to work to help support the family. Mary had inherited the family home but it was the end of the Great Depression of 1890 and times were tough.

Florence could have become a typist and given up her ideas of finishing her education but she managed to find a job, as a clerk, with an Engineering firm at Parramatta.

Highly intelligent and creative, Florence decided to become a Draughtsperson and she enrolled in evening classes at Sydney Technical College where she was the only woman studying Building Construction, Quantity Surveying and Architectural Drawing.

In addition to this workload, she also enrolled at the School of Engineering at the University of Sydney.

She set herself the task of finishing in the top ten at the Tech College and despite the long hours and hard work, she was successful.

She now found work with a Sydney Architect, Edmund Garton, where the work was anything but creative. She was given the task of writing technical specifications while the men were given the design tasks.

Florence would arrive at work at 7.30 am, finish her specifications and then ask if she could work on the designs. She was given more specifications.

When she had completed her Articles she went to work with another Architect, John Clamp, who recognized her skills and gave her the task of designing some very expensive homes on Sydney's North Shore.

The name of the Architect on these plans was always John Clamp.

Florence was a very determined young woman and after eight years of study she completed her degree at Sydney University. She was now a fully qualified Architect and also a Qualified Civil and Structural Engineer.

John Clamp nominated Florence as a member of the NSW Institute of Architects and he wrote an excellent reference in which he praised her design skills.

Her application was rejected by the all male committee.

John Clamp was furious and wrote a letter of protest.

Why did you reject her application? She can design an entire home while an ordinary Architect is sharpening his pencils.

Florence would never give up but it would be thirteen long years before her male colleagues at the Institute would finally admit her as the First Qualified Woman Architect in NSW. In that time, Florence had designed many homes on Sydney's North Shore and at Darling Point.

Her name could not appear on these plans and she could not receive her Architects fee. Meanwhile, Florence had met and fallen in love with, one of her Lecturers at Sydney University.

George Taylor was also an Engineer and a popular cartoonist at the *Bulletin Magazine*. He was also a member of the *Royal Art Society of NSW* and he had many Artistic and Literary friends. He was interested in the new *Wireless* and he was also a member of the *Aerial League of Australia* and he had a company which built gliders. He also liked to fly them.

Florence and George were married on the 3rd. April at St. Stephens Presbyterian Church in Sydney and it would be a very happy marriage as the young couple had many shared interests.

Urged on by her new husband, Florence learned to pilot a glider and despite her fear of heights, became the first woman to fly a glider in Australia in 1909. She flew from the sand-hills of Narrabeen Beach before a large crowd of onlookers.

Florence and George went into business together and they formed a Building Publishing Company. They would produce several major technical journals such as *The Australian Engineer* and *The Commonwealth Home Building* and *The Radio Journal of Australia*.

In these journals they would promote the interests of Architects, Engineers and Builders. They made the Australian Government aware of the need for more professionalism and training in these careers.

As Editor and as a feature writer, Florence Taylor campaigned for urban planning , better construction methods and more use of local materials. She and George organized a petition which was signed by Architects and

Engineers, in support for the acceptance of *Walter Burley Griffin's* revolutionary design for the new *Australian Capital at Canberra*.

In 1913, The Taylors founded *The Town Planning Association of NSW* and this would be the beginning of a new profession in Australia.

Florence and George Taylor's marriage was a very happy one and they spent many exciting and productive years together. George was an epileptic and Florence would learn how to live with this terrible problem. She often had to force open his teeth so that he could breathe when he had one of his fits. They believed that epilepsy was congenital so they decided that they would not have children.

After 21 years of their marriage, George had a bad fit and he died in 1928. Florence was devastated.

She decided that she would never remarry and she threw herself into running their business. She submerged her grief into a surge of creativity and she set about starting several Town Planning schemes and Civil Engineering projects.

She knew that, one day, Sydney would need a new Airport and she designed one at Newport on the Northern Beaches. She designed a new wide road from the centre of Sydney to the Eastern Suburbs. She wrote that, one day, Sydney would expand into the West and she drew up plans for new towns in The New Western Suburbs. They included light-rail, broad roads, parks and open space.

Many of Florence Taylor's colleagues felt threatened and some suggested that there was no place for women in their profession and that she should concentrate on domestic ideas such as new designs for kitchens.

Another thing that worried them was that despite her technical skill, she always remained very feminine. She dressed in the latest fashions and she certainly stood out in the male dominated society that she mixed with. A well known Architect, John Berger wrote;

Men look. Women appear. Men are socialized to be active, women to be passive. What will happen if women begin to look as well as appear? How will women manage the complexities of appearing when undertaking an active role in public life?

Florence answered this nonsense by writing;

Every woman should be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with men without losing the important characteristics of her sex.

Florence always wore French Perfume, long white gloves with her hair piled up under very large hats with feathers. She dressed that way when the Flappers bobbed their hair and raised their skirts above their knees.

She certainly knew how to stand out in a crowd of men.

The leading Fashion Writer of the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote;

Mrs. Taylor is the very essence of femininity, Despite her achievements in male strongholds she is essentially feminine. She has a weakness for oversized hats with feathers.

These statements tended to give the impression that Florence was more about fashion than the many technical skills that she had. Her articles advocating better Town Planning, wider roads and a new Airport were not always reported.

Fortunately for Florence, she lived long enough to see a marked change in men's attitudes towards women in business and the professions.

Florence was always open to new ideas and she found many when she

travelled to the USA and there she fascinated those she met there with her knowledge, her design skills and her bright personality. She loved the labour-saving devices and gadgets in the USA and she loved the idea that these new items would help women in finding more time to educate themselves.

The Architects in the USA liked her publications and would use many of her ideas on Town Planning. They accepted Florence and her ideas and she wrote that it did not matter to them that she was a woman.

As a very attractive woman they all loved Florence and they admired her skills.

Back in Australia Florence sponsored and gave support to several design awards. *The Australian Institute of Metals* would now award each year;

The Florence Taylor Medal.

In 1939 Florence was honoured by the King with an OBE and some years later, in her eighties, she received a CBE.

Her work and dedication was recognized in her lifetime by her profession and she was honoured with;

An Honorary Member of the Australian Institute of Builders.

An Honorary member of the Engineering Society of NSW.

A Life Member of the Master Builders Association.

A Life Member of the Town Planning Association of NSW

A Member of the Society of Women Writers

A Member of the Arts Club of NSW

A Member of the Royal Aero Club of NSW.

Florence Taylor was also a Member of the British Royal Society of Arts. Very few Australians have ever received this Honour.

In 1952 Florence Taylor was presented with *The Award of Honour* by the Master Builders Association. Florence Taylor would always speak out about how women should be taken seriously and she outraged the male dominated society of her day with her ideas.

Despite her achievements she could not escape the fact that the media in Australia would express more interest in her appearance than her work. In 1959 the Daily Telegraph wrote;

It would be hard to find anyone more feminine than Mrs. Taylor and to find any woman with less feminine interests. I interviewed Mrs. Taylor on her 80th. Birthday and was struck by her beautiful perfume, her frivolous hat and her fashionable dress. However she only wished to talk about tunnels, bridges, buildings and car parks.

What an opportunity the reporter missed. What a chance to interview a remarkable woman with her ideas of Town Planning , the future expansion of Sydney and the need for a second airport.

I hope that our media, today, will be better than this.

In 1961 Florence Taylors health began to deteriorate and she was cared for by her sister, Anna Parsons. until she died on the 13 February 1969.

A beautiful, very talented Australian lady.

(John Imrie, 28/9/2021)