

The Curtain Falls

During the 1940s, Edmund's brother and two sisters died; however, he remained in good health and was determined to remain at *Norwood*. After having several unsuitable housekeepers, his younger brother Sydney arranged for his daughter, Grace Johnson, with her husband Walter (son of Ben Johnson) and their family of three mature teenagers (including the writer), to move to *Norwood* in 1947. This was a significant undertaking for Grace: she had suffered severe bronchitis most of her life. She was a quiet, retiring person dedicated to her family and was not greatly involved in business affairs.

With some trepidation, the Johnsons arrived; the house had no electric lights and the kitchen had not been modified since the house was built. *Norwood* was lit by gas with the efficient Welsbach mantles only in the rooms used regularly. For several weeks, the family found their way around in the evening with lanterns, torches and candles, while electric cables were being run around the building. Eventually, a very comprehensive, but not total, array of light and power was provided with minimum effect on the fabric of the building.

The Johnson's home on Ruckers Hill, Northcote, had been sold. It was a time when the government retained wartime price control at prewar (depression) prices and the entire proceeds from the sale of the Northcote house, with its large garden, tennis court and modernised bathroom and kitchen, were consumed in the cost of the electrification of *Norwood*. An electric stove and stainless steel kitchen sink unit were installed, some worn linoleum and carpets replaced and, with an electric hot water system and a refrigerator, contemporary standards of comfort which Walter was keen to maintain, were achieved. As electric cables were run through the gas pipes in many places, the gas had to be disconnected before the electric power could be connected. The Brighton Gas Company took this to be a significant occasion and senior staff members attended the disconnection.

Walter renewed his relationship with Claude Ferguson, the Brighton town clerk. Claude, a boyhood friend, had been Walter's best man at his wedding but they had lost touch when Claude moved to Brighton in 1937 and had then joined the Air Force during the war.

Norwood was needing more and more maintenance, which Edmund, as a typical aged person, was not prepared to fund, so it was arranged that the house would be left to his niece, Grace, and the Johnsons would maintain it. Maintenance of the garden was difficult and much of the 19th century garden was turned to lawn. Pressure through the old, rusty pipes was low, so Walter arranged for a new water line from Kinane Street. When a tile on the turret was dislodged in a storm, it had to be replaced by a steeplejack.

The intrusion of the young family into Edmund's home was remarkably harmonious. Edmund enjoyed the company of young people and discussing business with Walter. He



**Grace & Walter
Johnson, 1957**

Gas to electricity





also enjoyed the modern comforts they brought: the radio, electric light and good cooking. He would have breakfast in bed and arise for lunch, then, once or twice a week, walk to the Middle Brighton station and travel to the city, where he would transact business with the help of young Ernie Gibson in the office of E. A. Gibson & Co., estate agents, and occasionally he would provide finance to Gibson's clients. After dinner, Edmund would retire for a few hours, then reappear looking for a game of euchre when the rest of the house was thinking of bed. Grace took responsibility for the care of Edmund's wishes as well as keeping the family in a 1950s mode of living.

The interior of the house was relatively easy to maintain. Grace employed some of the early Dutch migrants to clean once a month. They called themselves the 'New Dutch Cleaners', a take-off of the popular 'Old Dutch Cleanser' product. They would arrive with ladders, buckets and energy; a thorough cleaning of the rooms not normally used by the family would last for many months. Additional staff were difficult to find, as unemployment was down to one or two percent, although there was some casual help available.

To some members of the family the place was an embarrassment, while others enjoyed wandering around discovering the unexpected detail. There was not one window in the whole house which did not have some coloured glass. There were eighteen exterior doors, ten of them opening out at ground level; some rooms had not been entered for many years and were never known to some members of the family.

The family spent much of their time in the comfortable servants' quarters, especially the pleasant servants' dining room, but made some use of the potential of the house, with many pleasant summer afternoons being spent on the front terrace. A number of parties were held; there were two balls held for birthday celebrations and a ball was held by the Whernside Junior Auxiliary of the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

The house had been illustrated in a number of local and overseas architectural journals and in 1954 Grace Johnson was approached by the respected photographer Eric Lang for permission to photograph *Norwood* for a large exhibition in London of Australian buildings, planned to coincide with the forthcoming 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. Lang gave the family one excellent photo, which is shown (modified) on page 3. Contacted many years later, when he was in retirement on the south coast of NSW, Lang was unfortunately unable to provide any more photographs; unable to persuade any organisation to store them, he had destroyed his large collection, recording Melbourne's building heritage over many years.



In 1953, after a short illness, Edmund passed away – he died in his bed, which had been moved to his lovely library. The Johnson family continued to live at *Norwood* but, as the