

The following question was submitted by an *About the House* reader.

Question

When was The Lodge built and who was the first Prime Minister to live in it?



The completed Prime Minister's Lodge, 1927. Photo: W J Mildenhall. NLA 26520. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Australia.

Answer

The Prime Minister's Lodge was built between 1926 and 1927, during the flurry of construction activity that preceded the Federal Parliament's move from Melbourne to Canberra. It was designed by Melbourne architects Oakley and Parkes and constructed by Sydney builder J. G. Taylor. The initial proposal was for three similar residences, which would house the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate. Ultimately, only one house was built. It was to be occupied temporarily by the Prime Minister until a grander, permanent residence could be erected.

The entire construction of The Lodge cost 28,319 pounds. This sum included landscaping, installation of a tennis court and croquet lawn and interior fit-out. A Melbourne interior decorator, Ruth Lane-Poole, was commissioned to complete the Prime Minister's residence with the latest in quality design and furnishings.

The first Prime Minister to occupy the lodge was Stanley Melbourne Bruce, who held office from February 1923 until October 1929.

The son of a wealthy Melbourne merchant, Bruce was educated at Melbourne Grammar and Cambridge University. He was admitted to the English Bar in 1906 and also presided over the

London board of his father's company, Paterson, Laing and Bruce. In 1914, Bruce enlisted in the British army. He saw active service at Gallipoli during a military career distinguished by honours that included the Military Cross and the Croix de Guerre. He reached the rank of Captain before being invalided out of the service by a bullet wound that shattered his knee.

In 1917, Bruce returned to Australia to manage the family business. Shortly afterwards, he was persuaded to enter Federal politics as Nationalist candidate for the Victorian seat of Flinders, which he won and held for the next four general elections.

Bruce became Prime Minister on 9 February 1923 following the resignation of Prime Minister William Hughes. He governed in a coalition for over six years with Country Party leader Earle Page as his Deputy.

The Canberra Times of 31 March 1927 reported the first visit paid by Bruce to the embryonic national capital. It states that during his overnight trip, Bruce inspected the Parliament House and his new residence. Unfortunately, it does not record the Prime Minister's impressions of his future home, which would have been a far cry from the sophistication of London or Melbourne. Prime Minister and Mrs Bruce moved into The Lodge on 4 May 1927, only five days before the grand opening of Parliament in Canberra.

n Time

On 23 August 1929, the Bruce-Page Government was defeated on the floor of the House over its Maritime Industrial Bill. In the subsequent general election, Bruce lost the seat of Flinders, becoming the only Australian Prime Minister of the twentieth century to lose his seat whilst in office. He regained Flinders in 1931 and joined the United Australia Party (UAP) Ministry of Joseph Lyons.

In 1933, Bruce retired from Parliament to become Australian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. England became his permanent home. He continued to be an important figure in public life, representing Australia at the League of Nations on six occasions, serving as President of the League Council in 1936. From 1952 to 1961, he was the first Vice Chancellor of the Australian National University and in 1947 he was dubbed Viscount Bruce of Melbourne – the only Australian ever to be honoured with such a title.

Bruce's privileged upbringing and aristocratic demeanour may have alienated him from the voting public, but certainly did not diminish his standing in the eyes of his political colleagues. He was held in great respect by his parliamentary peers, as demonstrated by attempts to entice him back to political office in Australia. In 1938, he was invited by Prime Minister Lyons to return as leader of the UAP – effectively an offer to resume the Prime Ministership. A similar offer was made by Earle Page

following Lyons' death in 1939. Bruce accepted on both occasions, but set conditions that proved unacceptable to the Government.

Following his death in 1967, Bruce's remains were returned to Australia. Surprisingly for a man who had spent most of his life in Melbourne and London, it was a condition of Bruce's will that his ashes should be scattered over Canberra. Perhaps despite his distinguished international career, the years Bruce spent in The Lodge were his proudest personal achievement.

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Stanley Melbourne Bruce and Mrs Bruce at the Prime Minister's Lodge, Canberra, February 1928.
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