

**Ken Duncan**

(*Sunday Times*, 21 March 1937, p.13; RAIA c.1950s)

**Kenneth Charles Duncan** (1898-1983) was born 13 April 1898 at Fremantle, son of James and Christina (nee Rodgers) Duncan. James Duncan was a carpenter and builder. In 1912 Kenneth, of the Midland Junction Central School, was placed 21st in the State elementary schools bursaries examination conducted by the Education Department. The £10 bursary received as a result would have been of great assistance to his parents, and Ken passed his Junior Public Examination at Perth Modern School in late 1913. As a lad he showed an aptitude for drawing, and a close friend who was an architect suggested he should take up architecture. Duncan was articled to architect Joseph Francis Allen (1869-1933) at Fremantle from 1914, also studying at Perth Technical College, before enlisting to serve in the First World War, in late 1917. At the time of his enlistment, Duncan's address was Meadow Street, Guildford.

Ken Duncan served overseas in France and Belgium with the Australian Imperial Forces, returning to Western Australia by transport ship in late 1919. After the war he worked for a time with the War Service Homes Division in WA, before commencing private practice in a partnership with Danish-born draftsman Christian Holger Jensen (c.1889-1950) in July 1921. Jensen had also served with the AIF in the 'Great War', noting that he was a carpenter at enlistment, and he also worked post-war in the War Service Homes office. Newspaper notices indicate that their business was modestly successful, producing suburban housing in the Perth metropolitan area. In December 1922 they called tenders for a residence at Goldsworthy Road, Claremont for M. Cooper [possibly Mervyn Cooper at 36 Goldsworthy Road]; and in June 1923 for a large residence in Market St Guildford for a Mrs Sharpe [possibly Mrs S.E. Sharpe at 19 Market Street].

Unfortunately Jensen had financial problems, and had made a number of unsecured personal borrowings, of which he appears to have kept Duncan unaware. At a personal bankruptcy hearing in January 1925, Jensen stated that the architect-partnership ended 1921 with a debit balance, their gross earnings in 1922 were £123, and in 1923 had improved to £253. But in one period of 18 months the partners 'did not receive a penny', and Jensen had been borrowing money without informing Duncan of his predicament. Fortunately, Duncan kept the books of the partnership, and was isolated from Jensen's financial malaise before dissolving the partnership in May 1924.

The *Architects Act of Western Australia 1921* received formal assent in 1922, and Ken Duncan duly registered (no.62) with the Architects Board of WA in July of that year. He married Helen Jean McCutcheon (1900-1987) in 1926.

Ken Duncan was President of the Royal Institute of Architects of Western Australia during 1939-1940, and was joined in partnership by Cyril James Stephen (1893-1974) in 1940. Following the outbreak of the Second World War, Ken Duncan enlisted in the Royal Australian Engineers. Duncan obtained an army engineering appointment in 1941 - other WA architects whose appointments were announced at the same time included Bill Tracey, Howard Bonner and Marshall Clifton. After Ken was discharged from the Australian Army in December 1946, Duncan & Stephen were joined in practice by John Duart Mercer (1923-1988) in 1948, with the firm known as Duncan Stephen & Mercer. Ken's son, John Kenneth Duncan (1928-2005), who also became an architect of renown in WA, came into the business in 1956. Ronald Bodycoat joined in 1979 and carried on the practice into the 1990s.

President of the RAlA (WA) 1954-56, Ken Duncan was elected as the first West Australian Federal President of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in 1959. With a tremendous record of community service, he was a supporter of the WA Fire Brigades' association from the time when, as a lad in 1915, he first joined the Volunteer Fire Brigade at Guildford. For ten years Duncan was secretary of the association, and eventually was made a life member. Duncan Stephen & Mercer eventually designed over 70 fire stations throughout Western Australia for the WA Fire Brigades Board, from as far north as Port Hedland, to Esperance in the south, and Kalgoorlie in the east.

Except for four years during the Second World War, Duncan was a member of the Architects Board of Western Australia for thirty-one years, 1938-69, and its chairman during 1962-67. A Life Fellow of the RAlA, Ken Duncan retired from practice in 1973 due to failing eyesight, and enjoyed a quiet retirement at South Perth. A long and valued contributor to architectural practice in Australia, Ken Duncan died 1 October 1983 at the Repatriation Hospital in Hollywood, aged 85 years. His life, community service and extensive portfolio of work would make a fine subject for further research at tertiary level.

References:

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 4 November 1922, p.12 (D & J: residence cnr Bulwer & Stirling Sts Perth for S.Wood).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 11 December 1922, p.1 (D & J: residence Goldsworthy Rd Claremont for M. Cooper).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 21 May 1923, p.4 (D & J: residence Sixth Ave Inglewood-Maylands for C. Pearse).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 23 June 1923, p.7 (D & J: large residence Market St Guildford for Mrs Sharpe).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 17 March 1924, p.10 (D & J: bungalow Labouchere Rd Como for Mrs Randell, with Allen & Nicholas Architects).

'Notice', *The West Australian*, 23 May 1924, p.1 (dissolution of partnership with C.H. Jensen).

'A Draftsman's Failure', *The West Australian*, 8 January 1925, p.10 (partnership details).

'Personality Parade', *Sunday Times*, 21 March 1937, p.13 (sec. volunteer fire brigade & work).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 25 October 1940, p.17 (D & S: two flats at Cottesloe).

'WA Men Promoted', *Daily News*, 21 July 1941, p.15 (RAE militia appointment).

'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 30 July 1948, p.28 (D S & M: residences cnr Matheson & Dee Rds Applecross, Lot 352 Canning Hwy Applecross, Lot 312 Marita Rd Nedlands).

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Auto-biographical details of J.K. Duncan compiled in 1969, courtesy Ronald Bodycoat 2013.

Freeland, J.M., *The Making of a Profession*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971, pp.267-8.

Bodycoat, Ronald, 'Profile of Duncan Stephen & Mercer', July 1994.

National Archives of Australia war service records for Kenneth Charles Duncan online at <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/search/index.aspx>, series no B2455 item barcode 3526412.

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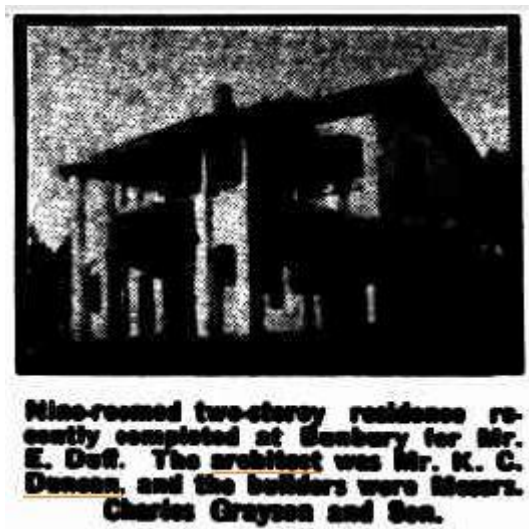
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It is likely that 19 Market Street, Guildford is a 1923 example of Duncan's work (Google 2013)



Residence for Edward Duff at Bunbury of 1930 (*The West Australian*, 20 September 1930, p.6).



Toodyay Fire Station of 1939 (Wikipedia).