The Route

The start point in the National Capital Exhibition Centre/Visitor Information Centre provides an introduction to Canberra’s design. There are historic objects including surveying equipment used by Charles Scrivener, who produced the first detailed survey of the area in 1901, used to brief entrants in the Canberra design competition. He also proposed that the Molonglo River could be dammed to create a lake.

Outside the entrance to the Centre is an engineer’s Australia plaque commemorating the heritage significance of Lake Burley Griffin and recognising the role of engineers in creating the lake.

New Parliament House

The old and new Parliament Houses each warrant lengthy visits. Background information about Old Parliament House is included in this brochure. A brief external tour is recommended as part of this tour, but there is much to see inside and you may wish to return and explore either building. From the front of both buildings the view northwards across the lake to Mount Ainslie is one of the key axis of Griffin’s design. The temporary old Parliament House, which opened in 1927, became overcrowded and in 1938 the decision was taken to replace it. The principal architect for the new building was Romaldo Giurgola. Construction started in 1980 and it was opened by the Queen during the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations on 9 May (the same date as the opening of the original Federal Parliament in Melbourne in 1901, and the Provisional House in 1927).

The construction was a vast and complex undertaking. Capital Hill and two smaller hills were removed, the building constructed, and then earth was returned to partially cover the structure. The design brief required the use of conventional, tried technology and materials consistent with the capabilities of local industry, so reinforced concrete was the main structural material selected. The building’s 200 year design life required special attention to structural elements, including extensive use of stainless steel. Structural design was by Irwin Johnson and Partners, construction management by a joint venture between Constructions Constructions and John Holland, along with a vast number of consultants and contractors.

A major feature is the huge stainless-steel flag pole that towers 81 metres above the building.

Outfall sewer historic marker

The Main Outfall Sewer was commenced in 1914 and has operated since 1928. As part of Canberra’s wastewater treatment network, completion of the sewer allowed the Federal Parliament to transfer from Melbourne. It originally conveyed sewage from central Canberra by gravity at a constant rate of 0.57 m per km (4 ft per mile) to a treatment plant at Weston Creek. The tunnel is still part of a much expanded system, and is now connecting to the Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre. It was designed by engineers Thomas Hill and Harry Connelly with construction supervised by Connelly, using direct employees.

The sewer is an oval concrete lined tunnel which was excavated by miners who lived in temporary camps. One construction camp was close to the historic market and another was at what is now the Royal Canberra Golf Club.

The interpretive panel allows you to visualise the route deep below ground. It provides information about the route and features including the brick ventilators and a section that forms a weir on the Yarralumla Creek.

Site of Westlake camp and Stirling Ridge outfall sewer vent

A short walk straight ahead up the hill from the western end of Foster Crescent takes you from the marker at the former Westlake camp up Stirling Ridge to the sewer vent.

Westlake camp was built by contractor John Howe in 1922 to house his workers who were building Hotel No. 1, now the Hyatt Hotel and there were other, now vanished, camps nearby. One of these was Sewer Camp No. 3. A small marker locates the Sewer Camp and Community Hall. Sewer Vent No. 3 is one of three shafts constructed in brick from the Canberra Brickworks to ventilate the sewer tunnels and reduce the build-up of gas in the system. They are 6m high, with a cast iron ventilator on top. The other original vents are part of the Royal Canberra Golf Club and at Weston Creek adjacent to the Turf Club.

Canberra Brickworks

The Commonwealth Government established a brickworks in 1913 to supply bricks for buildings in the new capital. A temporary plant was soon replaced by a Staffordshire kiln, crushing and processing shale raw material, each with a grinding mill, a press and pug mixer. The shale raw material was obtained primarily by levelling a trail to the east of the works. The depression caused erosion to be reduced in 1929 and halted between 1931 and 1935. There was further closure during World War II but brick making resumed and continued until 1976. The site has since been used for a range of purposes, but kilns and machinery should be retained as part of an urban renewal project.

The brickworks area has been a popular location for amateur photographers, with narrow page relays linking the works to major building sites around Canberra until 1927 and traces of the track bed can be seen close to the works.

Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre

By the 1970s the original sewage treatment plant at Weston Creek was overloaded. A site was selected near the junction of the Molonglo and Murrumbidgee Rivers. A very high quality treatment was required so that the water discharged into the Murrumbidgee would not be polluting. When completed in 1978, this plant was the largest of its kind to be built. It processes 225 million litres of wastewater every week, treats it using biological and chemical methods, and discharges as clean water into the Molonglo River. The input to the plant, which is 99% water, goes through physical, chemical, and biological treatment and can be seen close to the works.

Belconnen Naval Transmitter Station

This transmitter station was designed in Australia and constructed in 1919. As the world’s first radio transmitter in the Southern Hemisphere, it communicated direct with the United States. The station was operated by the Admiralty and Navy Radio Station, with radio engineers and radio operators from the Royal Australian Navy. The station is now a museum and public access. A 30 metre telecommunications tower on Black Mountain is a listed heritage site.

The tower houses the transmitters and aerials for radio and TV transmission. The tower has an overall height of 195 metres and was designed and supervised by architects and engineers. It serves many functions: military communications, language training, speaking drills, and shooting drills. The tower is still in use and houses the world’s largest linear power amplifier, which is used for military communications.

The tower is 12 metre in diameter at the base, tapering to 3.8 metre at the top. The tower is covered in stainless steel and contains a number of large equipment spaces, including a control room, a power plant, and a maintenance facility. The tower is illuminated at night, making it a prominent landmark in the Canberra region.