

THE AGE

MELBOURNE LIVING

edited by JOHN ALLIN and CLAUDE FORELL (Epicure)



Burnham Beeches

FOR MUCH of its 50 years Burnham Beeches, a little slice of England tucked away in the Dandenong ranges, has been shrouded in secrecy.

The Sassafras mansion, set in 23 hectares of lush gardens, has played a number of roles; it has been home for the Nicholas (Aspro) family, a hospital during the war years and — more recently — served as the company's research headquarters.

Except for the occasional open day it was not for the public. Only the people who worked there enjoyed the beauty and graciousness of the mansion and its surrounds.

Now Burnham Beeches is a luxury country house hotel and restaurant — the brainchild of Mr John Guy, a former Cunard steward, oildrums' laborer, sales representative and restaurateur who has spent \$3 million buying and re-modelling the property.

Mr Guy bought Burnham Beeches early last year. He has insisted on a high standard of internal decorating, and has given the house the splendor to match the gardens.

The complex opened for business two weeks ago; an official opening is planned in about three months.

His ambition, Mr Guy says, is to create a residential hotel of world-class standard, worthy of five stars in the European Relais et Chateaux rating system. He sees the culinary aspect as one of the most important, as the 100-seat restaurant is Burnham Beeches' major public attraction.

Certainly, Mr Guy's top chefs seem to have the experience to fulfil his ambition. The executive chef, Ian MacKenzie, has worked at the London Savoy and Glenelg in Scotland. The second chef, Michael Hoar, has worked at the Toronto Hilton and the London Dorchester.

Report: TOM NOBLE
Pictures: JOHN LAMB

There are four chefs and three apprentices. The third chef is Greg Brown, an Australian. He has worked at Frou Frou in the city and at the Cotswold Country House, and, as Mr Guy puts it, "already holds two 'Age' Good Food plaques".

Mr Guy sums up his aims for Burnham Beeches this way: "We're looking for that person who's seen what Melbourne itself has to offer, and is looking for something better."

He describes the house as "a solid concrete monolith of 200 squares". "It's been a builder's nightmare to convert because the walls are solid concrete," he said. "It took three weeks to demolish one wall in the kitchen, and the builders broke two jackhammers doing it."

Mr Guy says the property was in a good condition when he bought it, although it was somewhat jumbled because of the addition of partitions to create offices and laboratories.

"The building was gutted of its services, then we started from scratch, rewiring and replumbing it. The work was more adding things than pulling them out."

There were eight laboratories on the first floor. On the ground floor were three laboratories, several offices and a staff canteen. In the basement were several libraries and filing rooms, a chemical storage area and a theatre.

Following alterations there are now five suites on the first floor, a large dining area, kitchen and bar on the ground floor, and downstairs a staff dining and changing room, a patisserie, a bakery and a large wine cellar.

An area at the top of the build-

ing, formerly a storage room, has been opened up as a cocktail lounge for house guests. The roof, which has an observation tower, commands splendid views over Sherbrooke Forest.

The former theatre in the basement has been converted into a conference room. Mr Guy received specialist security advice in its design, and says it is unbuggable. A multi-lingual translator booth will soon be installed, and the room will be completed in July.

"We can guarantee to any company in Australia that meetings held in that room will be completely private," he says.

Mr Guy says the alterations include an elaborate concrete stairway with small wooden sections so carpets can be properly laid, and the installation of a \$30,000 telephone system, so guests in the five suites can dial internationally.

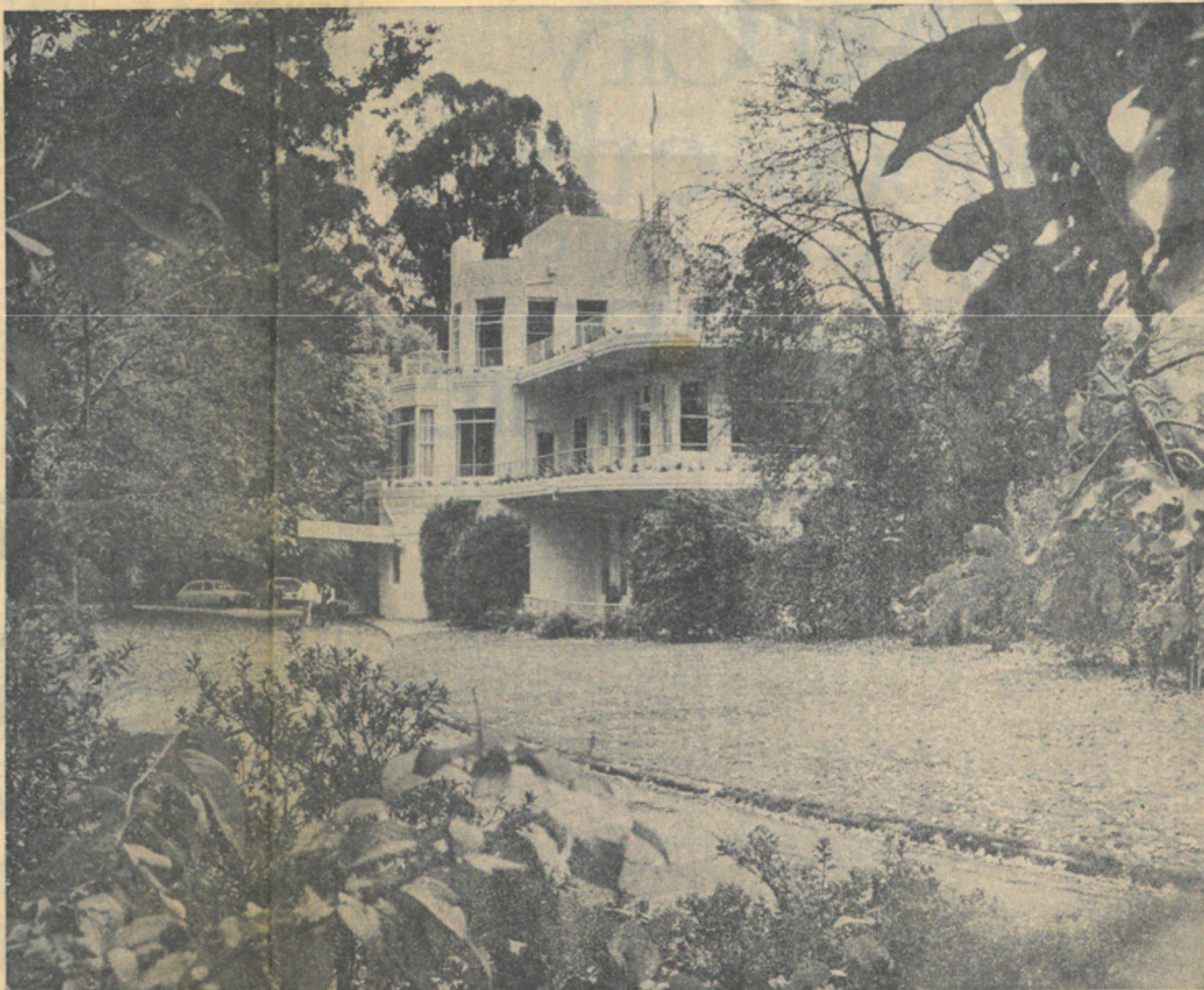
"Short cuts were not an option in this project," Mr Guy says.

In the three weeks before Burnham Beeches opened, Mr Guy found friends and acquaintances to test the food from his kitchen, bakery and patisserie.

About 600 meals, featuring about 18 main courses, were produced at a cost of between \$10,000 and \$12,000. The idea, Mr Guy says, was to test how the kitchen and waiters operated in the new restaurant, and to settle on a starting menu of about six main courses.

"The only other place I know that tested their kitchens in this way was the Regency, and they did it for two weeks."

Facilities for house guests at Burnham Beeches will be quite extensive. When renovations are complete there will be a tennis court, squash court, new swimming pool, two games rooms, sauna, bicycle riding track, two



TOP LEFT: John Guy in the diningroom — "a major public attraction".

ABOVE: The mansion — set for a new life.

FAR RIGHT: George Nicholas, the man behind the multi-million-dollar company.

RIGHT: Alfred Nicholas, bought the land in the 1920s.

horses for riding and three kilometres of bushwalking area.

At present sheep and cattle graze in paddocks on the property, adding a country atmosphere.

The original swimming pool will be removed to make way for another 30 suites and the two games rooms. The four houses on the property will be occupied by staff.

A large vegetable garden will supply the kitchens. There are also two greenhouses and an indoor mushroom farm.

A pair of lyrebirds regularly come up to the house. They have become very tame, Mr Guy says, and he hopes they will become a major attraction for guests.

Mr Guy says the privacy at Burnham Beeches is something he hopes will attract important overseas visitors, as well as businessmen for lunches and conferences.

"Where you can have privacy at the Hilton or Wentworth (Regent), you're a prisoner of that privacy. Once you walk into the corridor you're in a public place," he said.

About 36 people will be em-



ployed at Burnham Beeches. The restaurant manager and head receptionist came from the English version of Burnham Beeches — a gracious mansion in the stockbrokers' belt between High Wycombe and London — and two of the three gardeners were formally employed at the Melbourne Royal Botanic Gardens.

Mr Guy, 45, who is married with two children, was trained in catering in Weymouth, England. He served on the Cunard Line for five years, mostly on the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth, as a steward and deck steward.

In 1961 he migrated to Australia, but found a job in the catering industry hard to find. After four months unemployed, he worked as a builders' laborer, before becoming a sales representative.

He worked for a number of firms until 1971, when he bought his first restaurant, the Barbeque Inn at Elwood. A year later he bought a second restaurant, the Kitch-Inn.

Mr Guy said both were very successful, helped by the surge in in-

terest in BYO restaurants at the time. In 1975 he bought his third restaurant, the Harborside Inn, which he sold last year.

From 1973-79, Mr Guy was the president of the Restaurant and Caterers Association. He has also been a member of the national executive of the Restaurants' Association, and is still an executive member of the Hospitality Industry Association of Victoria.

Burnham Beeches is presently running under a BYO licence. An application is pending for a tourist facility licence which allows the serving of liquor.

The four-bedroom Nicholas suite costs \$250 a night, including breakfast. The other four suites are priced at \$120 or \$130 a night.

The restaurant is open seven days a week. Lunch (about \$15-\$20) is served between noon and 2 pm. Dinner, at about \$30 a head, is served between 7 pm and midnight. Afternoon teas are available each day between 3 pm and 5 pm.

For further information ring Burnham Beeches on 755 1903.

A touch of England in the Dandenongs

THE LAND for Burnham Beeches, named after a country house near Slough, England, was bought by Mr Alfred Nicholas in the late 1920s. He set about converting the land into an English-style rock garden estate.

Golden camellias from China, butterfly delphiniums, bonfire and blue salvia, nodding daffodils, and rare orchids from England and Europe were imported, along with a variety of rare shrubs and flowers.

It is said that Mr Nicholas organised a ship from England to bring out specially chosen beech trees. Dogwood trees were imported from Canada, and rhododendrons were planted so they would flower in sequence.

Mr Nicholas was the brother of the St Kilda chemist, Mr George Nicholas, who developed Aspro into a multi-million-dollar international company. Mr George Nicholas died in 1960.

The house was built in 1933, soon after the gardens were completed, and Mr Nicholas, his family and about eight servants moved in.

The 20-room mansion had four bedrooms. The master bedroom had adjacent sun, dressing and

bathrooms. An indoor swimming pool could be reached by a tunnel from the house. There was also a tennis court and one of Australia's first squash courts.

Mr Nicholas died in 1937, and it is thought that soon afterwards his family moved out. During World War II the house was used as a children's hospital, and after the war as a rest and recuperation hotel.

It was handed back to the family, and in 1955 the Nicholas company took it over and converted the house into a veterinary research building.

In 1978 the Nicholas company made Burnham Beeches its research headquarters, and veterinary research was dropped for pharmaceutical and analytical development and research.

At this time, the four houses on the property were modernised, roads resurfaced, power changed, MMBW water connected, and the sporting facilities upgraded for the benefit of staff.

The Nicholas company merged a few years later with Kiwi International, and the headquarters moved to Clayton South. Burnham Beeches was auctioned in late 1981 and bought by Mr Guy.