

## WEEKEND TRAVEL

# Art Deco ocean liner of the Dandenongs

**SIMON PLANT finds that there is more to Burnham Beeches than its**

**Beeches than its Art Deco architecture**

**R**AYMOND Hall and Michael Wilson like to call Burnham Beeches "a place of sunshine and light".

But the co-owners of the historic Art Deco manor house in the Dandenongs should add greenery to their description.

Wherever you are on the 23 ha estate, established 56 years ago by Aspro "king" Alfred Nicholas, maples nod in the breeze, conifers rustle their feathery tops and copper beeches bend their branches over manicured lawns.

The luxuriously appointed rooms at Burnham Beeches have views of this all-enveloping forest but for the complete effect, spend a night in the opulent Nicholas Suite.

This remarkable four-room apartment, originally a bedroom for Alfred Nicholas, offers wide-angle views of mountain greenery on three sides. The plate-glass windows are so vast that you almost feel suspended among the branches like the estate's galahs and parrots.

When the wind drops, the image changes and it seems you are looking out at a vast still-life painting or the backdrop to a ballet.

Hall and Wilson cannot take credit for the spectacular garden. It was planted in the late '20s for Nicholas by landscape designer Percival Trevaskis. But the duo, with more than 30 years experience between them in the hospitality industry, have enhanced the drama of Burnham Beeches since taking it over last year.

Instead of being a "little touch of England in the Dandenongs", to quote its previous owner, John Guy, the 50-room hotel has adopted a lighter, brighter image which embo-

dies the fizz and fun of the inter-war era.

Zig-zag screens grace the dining room, sandblasted doors sparkle light into the corridors and Art Deco portraits adorn the walls.

The Nicholas Suite alone boasts a walnut cocktail cabinet, a '30s-style dining room setting and nymph-like figurines for the bedside tables. Even an antique mahogany piano is provided, just the thing for picking out a few Cole Porter tunes before dinner.

Hall admitted some of these furnishings would not have graced the house when Nicholas was alive, but combined they create an irresistible '30s ambience.

"People want to come here for a bit of drama," he says. "We decided the best way to do that was to take what was unique about Burnham Beeches and build on that."

Burnham Beeches may not be unique but the National Trust regards the three-storey mansion as one of the best

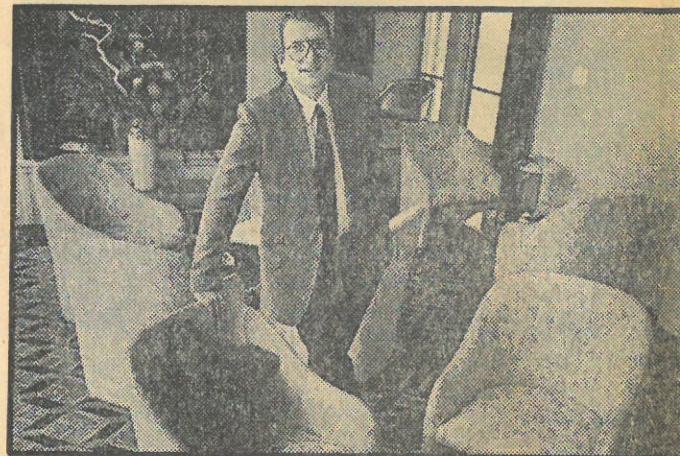
**'The 50-room hotel has adopted a lighter, brighter image'**

examples of Art Deco architecture in Australia. Architect Harry Norris was engaged to design the building during the Depression and gave it the streamlined look of an ocean liner.

One popular journal of the day marvelled at its interior too: "The house has all the comforts of a city dwelling and includes a private theatre with talkie equipment and electric pipe-organ in the music room."

These and other elements disappeared after Nicholas's death in 1937 and in the next two decades his dream home was turned into a wartime hospital and veterinary research institute.

Raymond Hall and Michael Wilson are restoring shape, line



Co-owner of Burnham Beeches, Michael Wilson.

and proportion to Burnham Beeches but, happily, they are doing this without chilling the atmosphere.

From the moment you sweep down the driveway, lined with azaleas and camellias, and step through the front door, the mood is warm and welcoming. Porters gather your luggage, waiters glide back and forth and the faint sound of jazz drifts on the air as you make your way up to your room.

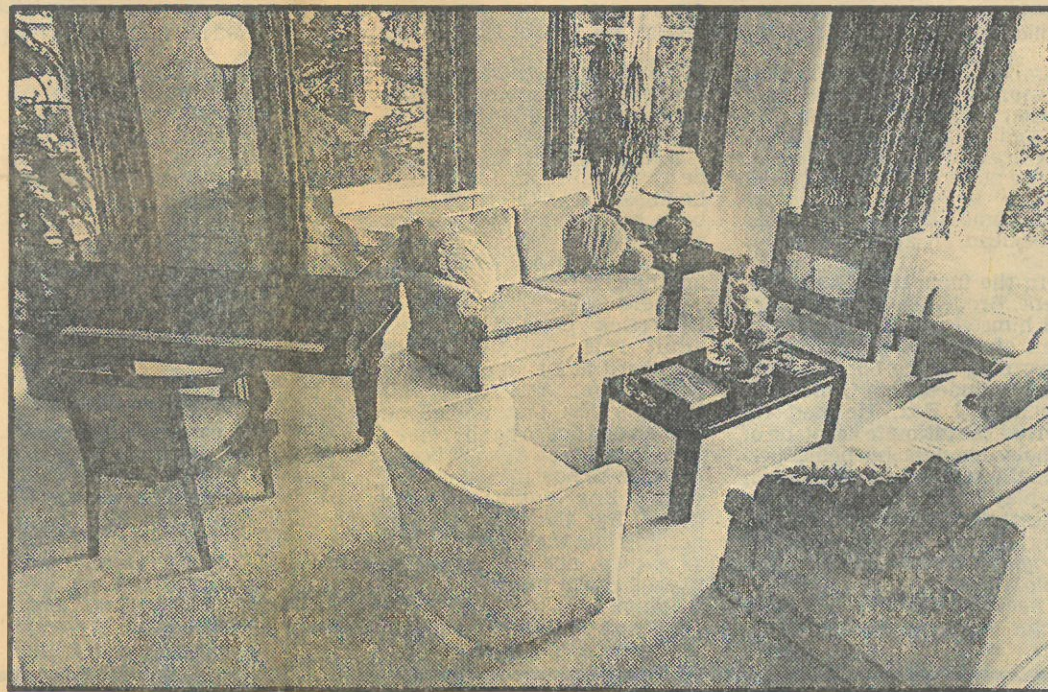
In the Nicholas Suite, everything is in abundance: bathrobes, bowls of fruit, thick white towels (warmed on heated racks) and a spa which gushes water like a Florentine fountain.

There are some curious omissions: the television set doesn't have a video recorder attached, there is no liquor in the cocktail cabinet and fresh flowers are in short supply. Those wanting a floral touch in their room can presumably get it from Flowers of Burnham Beeches, based at the hotel.

A late afternoon order for coffee takes 20 minutes to arrive but when it does, the plunger comes with chocolate truffles, wrapped in silver Cellophane and tied with ribbons.

No one waits for their drinks in the cocktail lounge. Attentive waiters wonder if you would like an olive or a twist of lemon with your martini, then serve it with style.

"Well-trained staff not only



Spend a night in the opulent four-room Nicholas Suite at Burnham Beeches for \$600.

offer excellent service," Wilson explains. "They understand and reflect the philosophies of the hotel."

The philosophy behind the dining room at Burnham Beeches is simple: offer the very best. Chef Stephen Goodlad, who joined the hotel early last year, is rising to the task and earning a reputation for serving imaginative dishes using superior local produce.

The night we dined, Goodlad's summertime entrées included warm salad of rabbit, home-smoked Tasmanian salmon and gateau of tuna and ocean trout tartar.

Main courses ranged from pot-cooked Victorian squab and blackened red snapper to loin of King Island lamb and roast Yarra Valley venison.

"The Yarra Valley region together with our own garden

can produce everything needed," Goodlad says. "And the best thing is, it's absolutely fresh."

This applies to breakfast, too, with fresh fruit, button mushrooms and paper-thin rashers of smoked bacon heading the menu. And while you sip your Earl Grey tea from Dudston china cups, there are parrots and lorikeets to keep you entertained.

They invade the balcony outside and hustle for position on the feed tray. Some guests stay on the balcony all morning, mesmerised by the twittering chorus, but there are plenty of alternatives for the more active: tennis on two red-clay courts, swimming in the indoor pool, golf at the nearby Emerald Country Club, bike riding in Sherbrooke Forest and, of course, an amble through the gardens.

**O**RIGINALLY the front of the house faced lawns that sloped down to "artificial waterfalls and a lake reflecting gay flowers and green trees". This area, sectioned off in the mid-'60s, is now known as the Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens and is open to the public at selected times.

If you plan to go further afield, Burnham Beeches makes up picnic hampers and itineraries for day trips.

The idea is being packaged during summer as "Beaches or Beeches?" and suggests that visitors enjoy the "luxurious alternative to salt, sand and humidity" for seven days and six nights.

Burnham Beeches, 600 metres above sea level, has also been integrated into High Country Living, a network of "gracious country houses and homesteads" between Melbourne and Sydney.

Hall hopes the scheme will

not only attract international visitors, who comprise 20 per cent of Burnham Beeches' clientele, but the local traveller too.

"This is a place that Melbourne can be very proud of," he says. Leaving the hotel, with sunlight streaming through the trees and the mountain air stirring a breeze in the branches, one could only agree.

High Country Living is an alternative to the Hume Highway route between Melbourne and Sydney. It forms a network of top quality stops between the cities, via Canberra, and gives the "discerning independent traveller" plenty of choice.

The network includes some of the leading hotels in Australia (the Regent in Sydney and Melbourne and the Hyatt in Canberra) and a range of luxury country-style accommodation.

Options include Milton Park Country House at Bowral, New South Wales, Mitchell's Country Life sheep station at Gundaroo, NSW, Riversleigh Country Hotel in Bairnsdale, Victoria and Berni's Mountain Inn at Thredbo, NSW.

■ Burnham Beeches, Sherbrooke Rd, Sherbrooke. Tariffs per night range from \$210 for a deluxe room through to \$600 for the Nicholas Suite. All rooms have en suite bathrooms and garden or forest views. Phone 755-1903 for details.

PICTURES: ELLEN SMITH

The historic Art Deco manor house was established 56 years ago by Aspro "king" Alfred Nicholas