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PROPERTY 3

# An exclusive retreat in the Dandenongs

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**I**FREQUENTLY tramped miles through deep snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines." (Henry D. Thoreau, 1817-62, Walden).

Now there will be plenty of old acquaintances to share in the gardens of Burnham Beeches, the historic 1930s Sherbrooke country home of the Nicholas family, and former five-star hotel to the rich and glamorous.

The grand Art Deco residence, a landmark in the Dandenong Ranges, is about to regain its former glory with a rebirth as the Burnham Beeches retirement living and aged care complex, and already there have been 71 registrations of interest

for the proposed first 55 suites.

City Residential developers Andrew Venn and Dale Harrison have formed a new company, Burnham Beeches Retirement Living Pty Ltd, which has bought the property for \$4 million. Listed with the National Trust and with Heritage Victoria, and in a spectacular mountain setting on 23 hectares of lawns, among towering eucalypts and European trees, the renowned country estate has been vacant for most of the past decade. Much washing, stripping and sandblasting is taking place where once only falling leaves could be heard.

Still looking impressively stylish, yet rather like a deserted Hollywood film set, Burnham Beeches will this time gain a new lease of life, if, as is expected, the go-ahead for retirement living is granted. The process

of obtaining town planning approval is under way.

Mr Venn said that at a meeting a fortnight ago with the Shire of Yarra Ranges council and local residents, the majority were keen to see the zoning of the area change from tourism to residential. The reason is that the council foresees less wear and tear on the roads, and the public would be pleased to see Burnham Beeches restored as a high-quality retirement complex. The zoning change could take place by mid-year, with the release of the estate towards the end of this year.

Previous potential developers Lustig and Moar estimated that to revamp and run the house as an upmarket hotel, as had been done before, would be too expensive with rising costs; their opinion was also that the area was under-developed,

not offering enough activities for tourism purposes.

Locals consulted express approval for the retirement living alternative for Burnham Beeches, including the on-site gardener Tim Shannon, who has cared for the famous garden since 1987. He can name every tree and flower, and give a potted history of the old country home at the same time.

Back in the 1920s Alfred Nicholas began buying up Sherbrooke land to build his "gentleman's residence in the hills". His brother George was the chemist who developed the compound to make Aspro, and Alfred Nicholas did the marketing.

They gained a government licence to supply troops during the First World War, and their fortune was made.

No expense was spared in making

Burnham Beeches a showcase of its time.

Architect Harry Norris designed the substantial house, boldly built with streamlined curves of reinforced concrete, in the latest Art Deco "ocean liner" style.

To establish the garden, landscaped by Cornishman Percival Trevaskis, special seedlings were shipped from England, of green and copper beeches, a European linden and a rare North American thuja conifer. The last two are magnificent specimens now, and classified as significant.

In 1941, Alfred Nicholas had died in 1937, the house was used as a children's hospital, and from 1955 as the Nicholas Research Institute.

The luxurious, widely acclaimed five-star Burnham Beeches Country House and Restaurant came into

being in 1980 under John Guy, who sold it to Aman Resorts, a Hong Kong Company, in 1988. In 1997 developers Lustig and Moar planned to reopen it as a hotel, but when that didn't eventuate, the property was closed.

Mr Shannon is delighted with the proposal, because it should ensure a long life for Burnham Beeches and its beautiful gardens.

So far, Mr Venn's company plans to develop stage one, which will entail restoring and renovating the original four-storey main house (the Norris Wing) as the communal centre, with its large elegant lounge, open fireplaces, huge picture windows and balcony overlooking the garden; two dining rooms, one a private one for residents and their guests, a library, pool, even a ballroom below. The former hotel

accommodation wing will have 55 rooms with ensuite bathrooms.

Mr Venn says that the Art Deco Society of Australia is sourcing appropriate light fittings, and the interior design consultants will be Rina Cohen and designer-decorator Gregory Ladner, who gained his fashion experience with Le Louvre in Collins Street.

Further developments on the property are intended to cater for all levels of aged care.

The old stable will be converted to an al fresco cafe for the public. Stage one of the refurbishment could cost up to \$8 million, including the purchase price. The possible projected value of the completed five-stage project to house more than 200 people is estimated at \$20-30 million. From little acorns, big things grow.