

LAKE Burley Griffin



Lake Burley Griffin is an integral part of Canberra's design and is a vital element in the plan for the nation's capital. The lake consists of the waters of the Molonglo River between Scrivener Dam and the Dairy Road Bridge.

Competition for the site for the future national capital was intense. In 1908 the Yass-Canberra area was chosen by Parliament owing to its 'bracing' climate, good water supply and natural beauty. Charles Scrivener, the New South Wales Government Surveyor, was instructed to explore all possible sites in the Yass-Canberra district. Scrivener's task was to investigate possible water catchment for the area and to prepare a contour survey for a site appropriate to the Seat of Government.

The Canberra valley, set in an 'amphitheatre of hills' and in a relatively sheltered position, was chosen as the best site. Scrivener also suggested four possible points along the Molonglo River where weirs could be constructed to create ornamental waters.

Named after Walter Burley Griffin, winner of the design competition for the national capital in 1912, the lake is a key element in Griffin's plan for the city. The heart of Griffin's plan was a central artificial lake and a 'Parliamentary Triangle', in which the most important national buildings were to be placed. The plan was structured on two major lines. One, the Water Axis, runs southeast from Black Mountain along the line of the formal central lake. The other, the Land Axis, starts at Mount Ainslie, intersects the Water Axis at a right angle, crosses to Capital Hill, and out to Mount Bimberi in the distant Brindabella mountains.

Griffin's original plan was modified to become a lake controlled by a dam at the site originally suggested by Scrivener. This is now called 'Scrivener Dam'. The two bridges on Griffin's 'direct lines of communication' visually divide the lake into three water basins as originally proposed (East, West and Central Basins).

The bridges are each twin carriageways. Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, consisting of five spans totalling 310 metres in length, was opened in November 1963. Kings Avenue Bridge has seven spans, is 270 metres long and was opened in March 1962.

In 1959, the Commonwealth Government agreed to the construction of Lake Burley Griffin and committed funds for the project. The design and construction of the lake and Scrivener Dam were undertaken in two stages. The first stage commenced in 1960 and involved the construction of the dam, lake floor, two bridges, jetties and edges to over 843 hectares of lake foreshore. The impounding of the lake waters commenced in 1963 with the closing of the valves at Scrivener Dam. Prime Minister Robert Menzies officially commemorated stage one, the filling of the lake, on 17 October 1964. The second stage involved detailed landscape development of the foreshores and is an ongoing process.

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Scrivener Dam is 235 metres long with flow controlled by hydraulically operated 'fish belly' flap gates, rare in Australia. The dam is an important flood control structure in the upper catchment of the Murrumbidgee River, and the scheme has created valuable wetland habitats upstream of the lake.

Different sections of Lake Burley Griffin have different uses appropriate to their special physical characteristics, their foreshores and their water quality. The formal nature of Central Basin provides an appropriate setting for the nationally important buildings of the parliamentary area.

As an important freshwater ecosystem, the lake and its margins are a significant wildlife refuge and bird habitat. The Jerrabomberra Wetlands, at the eastern end of Lake Burley Griffin, provide a valuable habitat for many species of waterbirds.

Westlake and West Basin are the main areas for sailing, sailboarding and swimming. There are many areas around the lake where public recreation has priority, such as Commonwealth, Kings and Grevillea Parks, Lennox Gardens and Commonwealth Place to name a few.

Lake Burley Griffin is a shallow lake occupying the flood plain of the Molonglo River, with a maximum depth of 17.6 metres near Scrivener Dam and a mean depth of four metres, with the shallowest part at 1.9 metres at East Basin. Scrivener Dam maintains the lake level. Lake Burley Griffin is approximately nine kilometres long and has a width varying from 300 to 1 200 metres. It is located at an elevation of 555.93 metres above sea level, approximately 300 kilometres south-west of Sydney.

The water area covers 664 hectares and the distance around the shoreline is 40.5 kilometres. There are three large islands and three small unnamed islands within the lake. Aspen Island (the site of the National Carillon) is located in Central Basin. Springbank Island and Spinnaker Island are located in the West Basin.

Lake Burley Griffin is managed and maintained by the National Capital Authority on behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia.

