

📍 Ngunnawal Country

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

East Lake





See map in centre spread

The stops on this walk are numbered for map location and information reference, however, you can start from any point and choose your own sequence. You can also take the tour in two parts, to the north and south of the railway line.

This itinerary adjoins the 'Kingston' tour and can link to the 'Dairy Flat' tour through the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve.

Dogs are not permitted within the nature reserve, except on-leash on the sealed path between Dairy Road and Eyre Street.

Most walking is on paved surfaces, with some loops on formed but unsealed tracks. Sound footwear is advisable.

East Lake

This tour offers stories that span 200 years of European settlement and 25,000 years of Aboriginal history, while also touching on 420 million years of geological time.

These stories take us from Aboriginal use of watercourses, floodplains and campsites, through East Lake's connection with the 'Duntroon' property, and its vital roles in early Canberra.

East Lake was meant to play a key part in Walter and Marion Mahony Griffins' plan for Canberra, although this was ultimately compromised by flooding. It housed communities of workers who were helping to build the emerging city and it boosted local rural production to feed a rapidly growing local population. East Lake hosted defence personnel during World War II, and responded to rapid urban growth from the 1950s and 1960s.

Most recently East Lake has been identified for sensitive urban renewal designed to protect the environment and important social and cultural heritage.

The choice of East Lake as the name for this urban renewal area echoes the name that the Griffins gave to a massive lake that was never built, and the first suburb name for Kingston (Eastlake as one word). Some community organisations still retain the Eastlake name, despite the change of name for Kingston, and abandonment of other references to lakes in names of major roads and planned railway stations.

1. Griffins' plan mural

The mural on the Kingsborough building facing Cunningham Street shows Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin with that part of their plan for Canberra relating to this site. The mural was completed in 2020 by artist Christopher Paul Toth. There is an explanatory sign around the corner on The Causeway.

The mural emphasises The Causeway as an axis in the geometry of the Griffins' plan, aligned with Mount Ainslie. The Causeway was to carry the City railway across the Molonglo River floodplain on a high embankment which would also retain a massive informal East Lake.

Financial constraints during World War I meant only a temporary line could be built to carry construction materials and workers. The railway began operating early in 1921 for a year and half before being severely damaged by major floods in 1922, and destroyed by an even larger flood in 1925.

The idea of a railway crossing the floodplain was abandoned in 1950, leading to removal of The Causeway Axis and East Lake from the city plan. The already-constructed part of The Causeway remained as a road of that name, but with its original intended purpose lost. The railway alignment is listed on the ACT Heritage Register.

During World War II there were sandbagged air raid slit trenches nearby, with the site on the opposite side of Cunningham Street at the top of The Causeway.

The Kingsborough development marks the site of the small Causeway Industrial Area which operated from the 1920s. During and after the Great Depression years of the 1930s some rough structures were used as shelter, and the area was criticised as 'a hopeless disorganised rabbit warren'. The last traces were removed in the mid-1960s. The public space at the centre of Kingsborough approximates the access road, and the names of its buildings reflect the site's industrial past.

2. Rail remnants

On the opposite side of Cunningham Street, two sets of railway tracks emerge from the railway yards. A level crossing here was in use until at least the 1970s.

The rails closer to Wentworth Avenue date from 1914, part of the rail connection between Queanbeyan and Canberra. Just to the north, two sidings branched westward to serve the Government Stores and Power House. A third branch curved eastward to take the temporary railway across the floodplain and river.

The second set of rails dates from 1967 to 1969, and served the new (1963) Government Printing Office on the corner of Cunningham Street and Wentworth Avenue.

The Forensic Medicine Centre (Canberra Morgue) stood from 1970 to 2011 near the corner of The Causeway and Eyre Street, on land freed up by removal of the City railway.

3. Causeway Settlement

The Causeway Settlement was built in 1925 as a temporary measure, and due to be submerged under East Lake behind The Causeway structure for which it was named.

It housed workers in some 130 small timber cottages in a grid pattern sloping towards the river. While the streets were not named (until 1969), the cottages had numbers.

The lowest cottages were flooded to the eaves in the 1925 flood, and evacuations were common whenever the river level rose. When the old timber cottages were removed in the mid-1970s, new brick veneer houses were built, but only in the more elevated half of the area.

The Causeway Mess (Camp/Hostel) to the south of Cunningham Street housed about 60 workers in huts around a communal dining hall. The land was resumed for railway yards in 1968, removing both the Mess and the nearby St Therese Roman Catholic church, which had been constructed by volunteers in 1946–1947 using three former RAAF huts from Cootamundra.

4. Causeway Hall

Listed on the ACT Heritage Register, the hall is the only remaining structure from the original Causeway worker settlement. It was built on weekends in the summer of 1925–1926, with materials provided by the Federal Capital Commission, by local volunteers.

Until the Albert Hall opened in 1928, this was the largest hall in the Territory, and was said to be the largest hall in NSW south of Goulburn. It was a venue for concerts, dances, movie screenings, bazaars, indoor competitions and sport, and many other community gatherings.

In 1926 the hall was the scene of Canberra's first pantomime and first opera performances, as well as the first national radio broadcast from Canberra, featuring the Canberra Philharmonic Society.

In 2021 the hall became the ACT Hub, supporting several independent local theatre production companies.

5. Canberra Railway Museum

A pathway between houses at the end of Eurabbie Street connects to Geijera Place and the Railway Museum.

The Canberra Railway Museum was established in the 1980s in the former Commonwealth Railways marshalling yards. The visitors centre was transported here in 1982 from a construction site in Parkes.

One of the Museum's prized assets is locomotive 1210, built in 1878 in England. In 1914 this was the first revenue-earning train into Canberra, delivering coal to the Power House.

From 1962 the locomotive was displayed on a plinth at the railway station until it was housed at the Museum in 1984. After restoration, by 1988 it was the oldest operational main line steam locomotive in the world. In the 2010s it ceased operating and went on display, nearly a century after its historic arrival at the Power House.

Locomotive 1210 is listed on the ACT Heritage Register.

6. Big Gun Dairy Cottage (Cargills)

Access is from Blueberry Street

The Big Gun Dairy Cottage (Cargills) is one of four original dairy cottages built on the first blocks offered by the Federal Capital Commission to foster local commercial dairying production ahead of the move of Federal Parliament to Canberra in 1927.

The dairy cottages were built above the high water mark of the 1925 flood, with the rest of the dairy blocks (numbered 1 to 4) stretched across the alluvial soils of the Mill Flat floodplain.

Dairy Block no. 1 was first held by William Clutton (1926–1930), then Jack Sellar (1930–1933), and finally David Cargill and family, from 1933 until its resumption in 1963.

The dairy had close links with adjacent Causeway settlement residents who were both customers and workers. It had an air raid shelter during World War II near the bull pen.

Clutton's block became known as Big Gun Dairy, being the closest to a conspicuous Canberra landmark, the Amiens Gun at Wentworth Avenue and the railway station.

The Amiens Gun, a railway gun, had been captured by Australian troops in the last year of World War I. From 1927 the 'Big Gun' became a major attraction in Canberra, until it was removed in 1943 for wartime technical research. Only the barrel has survived, and is now on display at the Australian War Memorial.

The cottage from the Big Gun Dairy is a tangible link to the story of the Gun which once dominated the station.

It is also the only remaining original residence in The Causeway, and one of only two remaining cottages (the other Goldenholm) from the original four dairies that led to Mill Flat becoming Dairy Flat.

East Lake



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7. Causeway oval and wetland

The area east of The Causeway below Eyre Street was used by settlement residents for horse and greyhound exercising, and for grazing cows on an informal 'Causeway Common'. It was also used by a circus set up at the railway sidings to exercise some of the tamer animals.

From 1970 part of the area served as an oval, with a concrete cricket pitch, sheltered by the line of poplars.

Over some years this area was built up with landfill to reduce the risk of flooding. It was later added to the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve to protect riparian areas on Jerrabomberra Reach.

The wetland between the creek and the East Lake urban renewal area was completed in 2019. It filters water from the creek prior to entering Lake Burley Griffin, and complements other wetland habitats in the reserve.

8. Jerrabomberra Reach

From the end of the path is a view across Jerrabomberra Reach and the Molonglo floodplain to 'Duntroon', a reminder of the Campbell estate which covered the area from the 1820s. A path leads into a forested area within the nature reserve (part of the Woodland Loop track).

This was once alluvial flats, transformed by landfill in the 1980s to create excavated wetlands and shelter belts, and a visitor centre site on high ground. Some of the fill for the new landscape came from removal of the top of Capital Hill during construction of the new Parliament House.

After a long community campaign for a nature reserve, the first section was gazetted in 1990, shortly after the beginning of ACT self-government. The car park remnants here were for a visitor centre which was never built.

A short walk over the crest will bring you to the Tadorna bird hide for a view over Jerrabomberra Pool. From there the track connects to the Kellys Swamp Loop and Biyaligee boardwalk, and via the cycleway to Dairy Road.

9. Eyre Street limestone

The ACT Weights and Measures building opened here in 1981, its name Newcastle House reflecting a plan to extend Newcastle Street in Fyshwick beyond Dairy Flat Road and across Jerrabomberra Creek. When the road was not built, the building's name became an anomaly.

Designed by celebrated architect Gene Willsford, the building later housed a museum of scales, weights and petrol bowsers which was open to the public.

On the corner is an outcrop of limestone, with fossils of creatures that lived on the bed of a warm shallow ocean about 420 million years ago when Canberra was located very close to the Equator. Outcrops like this prompted the name Limestone Plains to be given to this district in the 1820s. This is one of only two outcrops that remain visible following urban development, the other being at Acton.

The Fulica bird hide is less than 400 metres inside the reserve from the end of Eyre Street and provides a different angle on Jerrabomberra Pool and the city beyond.

10. Causeway landfill

There are no formed and labelled tracks in this area.

Jerrabomberra Creek had a wide floodplain, and in the 1960s efforts were made to confine the creek while providing land for development.

An extensive area was reclaimed with fill along more than a kilometre of the creek's course. Most of this came from the Causeway Tip at the end of Cunningham Street, which operated from 1964 to 1976. By 1970 the tip was receiving up to 25 car bodies per week, some dumped at the edge of the creek.

Causeway residents were not always happy living next to the tip, due to frequent illegal dumping and almost constant fires.

After the tip closed the reclamation area received clean fill for some years, followed by topsoil, grass and tree planting.

11. Jerrabomberra (Mill) Creek

There are no formed and labelled tracks linking the end of Eyre Street with this point. It is most easily accessed by car to Mildura Street, and then on foot.

Jerrabomberra Creek is known to have been an important pathway for Aboriginal people to and from the south and the Monaro. There are records of visiting Aboriginal groups waiting below Mount Jerrabomberra to be welcomed and guided in to join gatherings and ceremonies on the Molonglo floodplain.

To European settlers it was known as Mill Creek, traversing Mill Flat, both being named for the 'Duntroon' windmill which occupied a low rise to the east (Mill Hill) from the 1840s.

The creek crossing for the road between Queanbeyan and Uriarra was particularly troublesome at times. Horses were said to have sunk in 'dangerous quicksand' when they strayed from the narrow track.

As transport developed and traffic grew, this became the site of many vehicle accidents and several drownings, until the stone causeway was replaced with a steel girder bridge in 1893.

The railway from Queanbeyan crossed the creek further to the north. Floods destroyed several generations of road and rail bridges over this creek.

There is now no trace of the road crossing. The railway crossings can (at times) be accessed from a gated track next to the AGL hydrogen station (itself an Australian first) in Mildura Street.

Access may change – please obey all signs. Exercise care on unformed tracks and at any time near water.

12. Mildura Street precinct

The Fyshwick Markets have occupied this site since 1967, when an area was made available for hawkers of fruit and vegetables. Nicknamed 'Tent City', it was disorganised, and vendors were required to move their sites around. Four years later a building was erected that enabled vendors to establish a 'home base' from which to sell their produce.

The markets grew over time and in 2018 expanded into products beyond food, in the Niche Markets.

Some of the area on the flats of Mildura Street was built up with landfill because of its low-lying nature and the risk of flooding.

An area of tree planting was established in the 19th century on the 'Duntroon' property – a fairly unusual practice at that time. The surrounding enclosed land was known as the Plantation Paddock.

The plantation became a picnic destination for schools in the area (about 100 people attending one in 1905), and occasionally for families living at the nearby Causeway Camp. This may have been the place termed the 'Cuddling Paddock' by courting couples from the Causeway. The trees were removed around 1960 to allow development at the site. The site is close to the railway line and today's Canberra Institute of Technology campus.

The higher end of Mildura Street, between Hume Circle and the railway station, is the site of the Eastlake Camp or Eastlake Mess which operated from 1922 to 1928 to house workers.

During World War II the camp was used to billet the RAAF School of Technical Training, with trainee aircraft fitters attending the Canberra Technical College in Kingston.

After the War the camp opened as Eastlake Hostel to house about 550 single workers, and was then enlarged to house British migrant workers. It closed in 1952 and its buildings were relocated elsewhere, allowing development of new roads and blocks in the Mildura Street precinct.

13. Hume Place/Eastlake Circle/ Brodie's Corner

Hume Place is what remains from Eastlake Circle in the Griffins' plan, the meeting point of Interlake (Wentworth) Avenue, Eastlake Avenue and Eastlake Esplanade (both now Canberra Avenue) and Eastview (Sturt) Avenue.

This was Canberra's southern gateway by road, with Brodie's Garage opened here in 1927. Its architects, LH Rudd and DE Limburg, included a lantern tower to 'serve as a road lighthouse to incoming motorists'. The garage site was in what is now Hely Street.

During the 1930s Brodie's Corner was a popular half-way turn-around point for cycle road races between Queanbeyan and Canberra.

Eastlake Circle was the southern end of the Causeway Axis and was planned to contain an underground Eastlake Station. The line would arrive at the station in a sweeping curve from the east. Although the railway was never built, the arc remains as Kootara Crescent in Narrabundah.

The line would then emerge from the station in a cutting at the top of The Causeway, to cross the Molonglo floodplain and head into the City.

14. Dairy Producers Depot

The Depot is listed on the ACT Heritage Register.

Fronting Wentworth Avenue, it was built in 1938 to centralise milk processing and distribution. It was supplied by dairies at Mill Flat, Fyshwick, Acton and Kambah, and had its own rail siding.

Designed by noted architect Ken Oliphant, it is valued as an industrial building in the Inter-War Functionalist style.

A new building was erected next to the old depot in 1952, after the local cooperative merged with the Dairy Farmers Cooperative of Sydney. In 1960 the Bega Co-operative Society built a new plant next door to process and sell 'Bega Milk'. From the 1970s, all milk processed here was labelled as 'ACT Milk', and later as 'Canberra Milk'.

15. Railway Station

The first Canberra railway station was built in 1914 on the line from Queanbeyan to the Power House.

In the following year the Canberra Co-op Store opened at the western end of the railway platform, the only general store in Canberra at the time. A separate building was constructed nearby, but the Co-op was eclipsed by new stores with the opening of the Eastlake (Kingston) shopping centre in 1925.

A new and larger railway station building was completed in 1927, in time for the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York to open the first Federal Parliament since Federation to sit in Canberra.

A major one-day-only attraction in 1926 was the 'Great White Train', a touring exhibition for the Australian Made Preference League. Some 2,600 people came to see it on a siding facing Interlake (Wentworth) Avenue. Five years earlier, that figure had been the entire population of Canberra.

Among later (longer-lasting) attractions next to Wentworth Avenue were the 'Big Gun', parked in a special siding from 1927 to 1943, and the historic Locomotive 1210, displayed from 1962 to 1984 on a plinth that is still visible.

The station and yards were extensively rebuilt in the 1960s. The present station replaced both the old station buildings in 1966.

The closure of the line from Queanbeyan to Bombala in the 1980s led to a significant reduction in rail services to Canberra, and prompted consideration of complete closure of the line.

Causeway Hall nearing completion 1927 [National Archives of Australia NAA: A3560,793] Front cover: 1967 Canberra's first railway engine, near Canberra Rail Station [National Archives Australia NAA: A1500, K18002]

Visit East Lake to discover stories of some of Canberra's earliest roads, railways, industrial areas, worker settlements and dairy farms, and enjoy some wetlands and wildlife along the way.

East Lake

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