



MICHAEL ELLIOT VINEY FLEMING: R.I.P.

On Monday 13th April a very dear friend, Michael Fleming, passed away. We had worked together for more than 30 years, first when he became Chairman of the Westcliff Residents Association, then when he served on the Board of Management and as a Trustee of the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust and then on the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation as an invaluable researcher and archivist. Michael recorded the details found on thousands of building plans as he selected drawings for archiving at Museum Africa. His method was simple. He started at stand No 1 and went on till the last file for that township. He covered more than 35 townships this way, discovering some of the most beautiful drawings of which we were all completely unaware. As secretary to the Joint Plans Committee for 20 years he played an important part in accurately recording proceedings. I always enjoyed his comments made *sotto voce* which certainly did not appear in the minutes. As a comrade he was steadfast and gave me the courage to face the attorneys and sometimes even advocates in battles to keep the heritage intact. We had occasionally momentous victories which we cherished and could remember when things were going badly in a hearing.

He was at all times a perfect gentleman. Helen Counihan Greene remembered him this way

I recall him as being a rock steady and solid member of the JPC, with a calm cool head and a wicked, dry sense of humour, and a wonderful, light touch with people. Always a ready smile and a twinkle in his eye. The obvious rapport he had with you as a friend, and indeed the obvious enjoyment he took in most people, was a pleasure to behold and be part of. I am so sad to hear he was in such pain, and I suppose a small relief that he is out of it.

From the days of our very first tours in Parktown Michael was always there to help. He was much too shy and private a person to lead tours but he was a stalwart when it came to fighting to save the ridges by inserting these into town planning schemes. This was the one great victory of the Northern Areas Group and he was still using it when he successfully quashed an application for a cellphone tower on the Westcliff ridge.

Born at home in 18 Woolston Road Westcliff, the house designed by his father and the one where Michael lived until he retired, he attended St John's Preparatory School until of age to be a boarder to Michael House as a boarder. Then on to Wits University where he studied architecture in the name year as Julian Cooke. The two young architects went into practice with both their fathers – Fleming and Cooke. That was the practice which was responsible for the buildings on SA Institute for Medical Research and also for St George's Church, Parktown. They were also the architects for the Witwatersrand Agricultural Show.

The partnership had begun with Baker and Fleming in 1911. He was the third Fleming after his father Leonard and grandfather FLH Fleming. , One example of Michael's architectural work I would like to cite is providing wheelchair access to St George's church. While outrageous and particularly offensive proposals were made for a ramp and roofing to the steps, Michael chose the simplest and least disruptive, route, the one which took the heritage of the church into account.(His parents are interred in the crypt) There was a path on the east side of the church. By removing one window in the Lady Chapel and replacing it with a door he created direct access for the disabled into the sanctuary. For me that illustrates how self-effacing he was, how humble and lacking in greed.

I shall miss him dreadfully and want to place on record the enormous debt all Joburg conservationists owe him in ensuring accurate information on architects, dates of construction and names of owners and the wonderful heritage of the architectural drawing collection at Museum Africa which now numbers well over 1 500 drawing. To the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation he gave the treasure of the Fleming collection which is housed at Northwards. His grandfather's detailed drawings of the Salisbury (now Harare) Cathedral are perhaps the most impressive.

His dear wife Liz, their children and grandchildren will be mourning him deeply. I know that I and all members of the JHF share their grief.

Flo Bird