



David Melsom in the late 1950s (Melsom family)

David James Melsom (1937-2020) was born 6 February 1937 at Miss Harvey's Private Hospital (later Wanslea Hostel), 30 Bulwer Street Perth. David's parents Atle Walter and Evelyn Norah (nee Darragh) Melsom had married at St Swithun's Church Lesmurdie in 1935. Born of naturalized Norwegian parents at Fremantle in 1907, Atle Melsom was appointed as Secretary of the Wiluna Public Hospital in 1940, and the young family moved to the Goldfields town soon after the birth of second child Judith Marjorie at Nurse Doyle's, 7 Mann Street Cottesloe.

Following the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-1945), Atle had been anxious to join the Australian services. Wiluna had done well in the 1930s, but the war had a severe effect on the mining industry, and many of the workforce were soon involved in military duties. By the time of Atle's enlistment in 1942, the Melsoms were living at 9 Melville Street in Cottesloe.



David Melsom's father Atle (1907-1977) in 1942 (NAA: A9301, 81238)

Atle had worked in a number of occupations in his youth, including as a skipper of a shark fishing boat off the WA Coast. This was a factor in the thirty-five-year-old's acceptance during July 1942 for training with Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) motor boat crew. Boat crew supported flying boat operations by maintaining their vessels and serving as a ship's company for their own launches. They were responsible for tasks such as navigation, seamanship, and boat handling, often serving as a "gale crew" to man aircraft during severe weather.

Whilst Evelyn was at Cottesloe with infants David and Judith, Atle served in Australia and New Guinea, fortunately without major injury before his demobilization in February 1946 - at this time David was just 9 years old. When David's grandfather Captain Magnus Melsom passed away in March 1949, Atle and Evelyn and the children were noted to be living at Swanbourne. David passed his Leaving Certificate in 1953 with a Distinction in Technical Drawing at Leederville Technical College.



C. Picton-Warlow (left), M. Stradwick (centre), and the skipper, D. Melsom, attend to the gear of the State champion cadet dinghy, *Minerva* (*The West Australian*, 21 December 1954, p.16)

David gained entrance into the relatively-new Associateship in Architecture course at Perth Technical College (PTC) in 1954, and joined the Architectural Students Association. Melsom commenced at PTC with a class that included future registered architects in WA: Brian Kidd (reg no. 318), Peter McComish (364), Geoff Mundy (360), John Pidgeon (327), Bill Phillips (320), Wallace Greenham (341), Margot Smalpage-Watson (359), Bruce Tomlinson (352), and Gordon White (376). The appointment of the design-focussed F. Senior Bolland as head of course in mid-1954 was of great benefit to Melsom.

Local periodical *The Architect* reported under 'Students' Notes' in June 1956 that '3rd year student David Melsom was serenading 1st year student Joanna Ferguson-Stewart'. Whilst *The Architect* records that David was also involved in hosting parties for fellow students, he was maintaining high academic standards, and in 1957 gained a Distinction in Design IV. Successfully completing the course, on 23 December 1958 he registered with the Architects Board of Western Australia (ABWA reg no 319). In February 1959 Melsom joined the WA Public Works Department Architectural Division as a Grade 3 Architect, soon becoming an Associate of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (ARAIA), and was still listed at 9 Melville Street Cottesloe in the 1959-60 RAI membership annual.

David was awarded the W.H. Robertson Memorial Grant in 1959, by that time specified to be used for travel and to gain experience in Australia. Previous winners of the travel grant Bob Lyon (1955), Lionel Bates (1956), Tony Brand (1957), and Doug Stuart (1958) had all chosen to go to Melbourne, basking in the excitement of the 1956 Olympics, and David followed that tradition. In February of 1960 David and Joanna Margaret Fergusson-Stewart were married, soon driving east across the Nullarbor Plain to work in Melbourne, where their first child Katrina was born. Returning to Western Australia, the couple had further children Jillian b.1961 and Michael b.1965.



Joanna and David Melsom were married 11 February 1960 (Melsom family)

Back at Perth, David soon joined the established architectural practice Summerhayes & Associates, eventually becoming a partner. A member of the first cohort to graduate from PTC (in 1950), Geoffrey Summerhayes (1928-2010) had joined a firm started in Perth by his grandfather Edwin Summerhayes in the 1890s, hence carried on by Geoff's father Reg Summerhayes from the 1920s until the 1950s, when Geoff began to assume control of the business.

Summerhayes & Associates' work in the 1960s was marked by the practice's exceptional commercial work, including the CBH office building at Delhi Street in West Perth; City Arcade in the Perth CBD; and the 3-5 Bennett Street Perth offices developed with a business consortium and housing the firm for some time. Another development of note was the apartment building at 2 Bindaring Parade Claremont. These projects were facilitated by the expansion of the business with Darryl Way (1937-2016), then Summerhayes Way and Associates, where Geoff and Darryl led a team of talented architects. Among them were David Melsom,

Beresford (Binky) Collins, Ralph Drexel, and Colin Moore. This group were responsible for the larger works of the late 1960s, and the business structure lasted virtually until the recession of the early 1970s when the office contracted.



CBH Building West Perth (Heritage Perth); 2 Bindaring Parade Claremont apartments of 1969 (School of Architecture UWA).

With a large staff working across many complex projects, attribution of the office's design work in the 1960s to singular persons would be unrealistic, however recognition of their work included a 1969 RAIA citation for the CBH building; 1970 RAIA citation for the Bennett Street offices; and a 1973 Clay Brick Award for the Chelsea Village at suburban Nedlands. When first opened the development consisted of a tavern and restaurant, food outlets, and a series of retail shops. On the upper level there were a number of professional suites and offices. The Melsom family recall that David had a strong early role in the design of the Chelsea Village, although 'Binky' Collins received attribution in the Clay Brick Award citation, which may have occurred due to the fact David had moved-on from the Summerhayes office by the time of the project's full documentation.

In a book detailing the work of her father Geoffrey Summerhayes, Andrea Treadgold notes that David was recognised as a very strong part of Summerhayes design team in the 1960s; and other staff members such as John McKenzie noted that David had a mercurial ability when motivated – 'when he was on, he was on!' David served on the Town Planning Committee of the RAIA (WA) in the mid-1960s, and designed the family residence at 102 Palmerston Street Mosman Park where he lived with Joanna and the growing family. This house was to be purchased by Rosie and Jon Ainslie – in later years, David designed a home for Rosie Ainslie at 112 Victoria Street Mosman Park.



Exterior view and living room 102 Palmerston Street in 1967 (SLWA 340865PD, Fritz Kos)

The WA State Records Office has note of additions to Karragullen Primary School designed by David in 1971-72; and a real estate website has note of a residence that he designed at Gooseberry Hill in 1971, indicating his move to sole practice at the start of the 1970s.



57 Landor Road Gooseberry Hill of 1971 – aerial view and plans (realestate.com.au, Oct 2025)

Family recall that David designed the Mangrove Hotel at Broome, constructed in 1973 by Joe Haas. The hotel's steel framework was obtained from 'Talgarno', an abandoned township south of Broome (designed in the late 1950s by Commonwealth Works Department architect Jack Ballenger 1913-2005) which had been chosen by Britain to provide a test site for the Blue Streak Rocket program. Also from family recall, David designed the Lazy Crab Motel near Dawesville, along with the shopping centre adjacent, for Ken Stanton; and the Cobblers Tavern at 629 Old Coast Road Falcon (opened in 1975, rebuilt in 2013). Local government files could reveal more details of the design of these places.

ABWA registration lists note David at 1 Passmore Street North Fremantle in 1975-76, and at 150 Solomon Street Beaconsfield in 1977. David and Jo divorced in the early 1970s, and he re-married to Alison Scott in 1977, subsequently having children James b.1977 and Ainslie b.1979.



David and Alison Melsom (Melsom family)

Alison notes that David designed renovations to their residence at Solomon Street, including creating an attic room in the roof space which was totally lined with pine. They were there for around 30 years, c.1977-2007. Three houses [Palmerston Street, Victoria Street, and Solomon Street] *'all displayed his signature design of timber ceilings, brick floors and full-length jarrah framed doors'*. David also designed a house at Solomon Street for David McGowan, and a residence overlooking the Swan River at Bicton for lawyer Tony Unmack. Although David and Alison subsequently divorced, they remained friends.



Residence at 150 Solomon Street Beaconsfield (Google 2025)

Concurrent with his sole practice work in the 1970-80s, largely gained 'by word of mouth', David's father Atle died in 1977 at Dawesville aged 70 years, and his mother Evelyn passed away in 2004 at Wilson aged 93 years. The Heritage Council of WA notes alterations/additions to 13 Russell Street Fremantle by David in 1989, but by this time he was taking on very little work due to ill-health. Further research may reveal more of the projects that he was involved with.

After the home in Beaconsfield was sold in the early 2000s, David relocated to Northcliffe where son Mike was developing the Merum Estate Wines vineyard nearby at Crowea, and David designed the vineyard building. Throughout his life, David endured bipolar disorder, a mental health condition characterized by significant mood swings between extreme highs (mania) and lows (depression). David resided at Northcliffe until he needed more support, and then lived out his life at 'Wearne' in South Cottesloe.



Merum Estate at 89 Charlie Road Crowea (realestate.com.au; Nathan Reynolds stonemason).

David Melsom died 31 May 2020 at Sir Charles Gardiner Hospital, survived by first wife Jo and their children Katrina, Jill, Mike; second wife Alison and their children James, Ainslie; and twelve grandchildren. Perhaps reflecting his Norwegian maritime bloodlines passed on from grandfather Captain Magnus Melsom, David was remembered as a three-time State champion in cadet dinghies and as a Dragon yachtsman at Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club, where his uncle Finn Melsom had been Commodore in 1950. Of other family, David's uncle Captain Alf Melsom had been extensively involved with whaling off the WA coast in the mid Twentieth Century – eventually becoming a Fisheries Inspector; and his uncle Captain Carl Melsom was a long-term and world-wide mariner.

David Melsom was one of the more talented designers of the 120-plus Western Australian architects who graduated from PTC between 1950 and 1967, when the course was transferred to the Western Australian Institute of Technology. The

close association of PTC graduates of the 1950s and 1960s gave this group a strong sense of familiarity and cohesion, and many travelled interstate and overseas together to absorb further international developments in modern architecture. They developed distinctive local domestic and commercial styles, now gaining further study and recognition.

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- Heritage Committee review: 20 November 2025 Last updated: 20 November 2025

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