Back then …

Camden, a Macarthur family venture

By Ian Willis

The establishment of Camden in 1840, was a private venture of James and William Macarthur, sons of colonial patriarch John Macarthur, at the Nepean River crossing on the northern edge of the family's pastoral property of Camden Park. The town's site was enclosed on three sides by a sweeping bend in the Nepean River and has regularly flooded the surrounding farmland and lower parts of the town.

The site of Camden was within the 5000 acres granted to John Macarthur by the 2nd Earl Camden [3.2], the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, in 1805, while Macarthur was in England on charges for duelling. Macarthur was a fractious quarrelsome self-promoter who arrived in NSW with his wife Elizabeth and family in 1790 as paymaster of the New South Wales Marine Corps, The Corps (sometimes called The Rum Corps) was formed in England in 1789 as a permanent regiment of the British Army to relieve the New South Wales Marine Corps, which had accompanied the First Fleet to Australia in 1788 to fortify the colony of NSW.

His membership threatened the security of his landholdings and inevitably led to conflict and violence. Many immigrant families came to the area to establish gentry estates as tenant farmers, some establishing businesses in Camden. The town became the district's transport hub at the centre of the road network, primarily set by the pattern of land grants from the 1820s. The earliest villages in the district pre-dated Camden and then looked to Camden for cultural and economic leadership as the district's major centre. The arrival of the Camden railway in 1882 meant that silver ore west of the district (1871) was shipped through the Camden railhead to the Main Southern Railway from Sydney.

The fine English Gothic-style church was funded mainly by the Macarthur family and has been the basis of the town's iconic imagery. There were a number of large gentry estates built on convict labour in the surrounding farmland, the largest being the Macarthur family's Camden Park of over 28,000 acres.

Many immigrant families came to the area under Governor Bourke's 1835 plan and settled on the gentry estates as tenants farmers, some establishing businesses in Camden. The first land sales in the village occurred in 1841, which stifled the growth of the existing European settlements in the area. The population of Camden grew from 242 in 1846 to 458 in 1856, although the gentry's estates still dominated the village. Camden Park, for example, had a population of 900 in 1850.

The English-style gentry practised philanthropy in Camden to maintain its moral tone. Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow, John Macarthur’s granddaughter, encouraged the maintenance of the proprieties of life, moral order and good works, as well as memorialising her family by donating a clock and bells to St John's Anglican Church in its hilltop location at the top of John Street Camden. This image is by Charles Kerry in the 1890s (Camden Images).

The town meant that it towered over the town centre and had a clear line of sight to the Macarthur family’s Georgian mansion at Camden Park 2.6 miles to the southwest.

The fine English Gothic-style church was funded mainly by the Macarthur family and has been the basis of the town's iconic imagery. There were a number of large gentry estates built on convict labour in the surrounding farmland, the largest being the Macarthur family's Camden Park of over 28,000 acres.

Many immigrant families came to the area under Governor Bourke's 1835 plan and settled on the gentry estates as tenant farmers, some establishing businesses in Camden. The first land sales in the village occurred in 1841, which stifled the growth of the existing European settlements in the area. The population of Camden grew from 242 in 1846 to 458 in 1856, although the gentry's estates still dominated the village. Camden Park, for example, had a population of 900 in 1850.

The English-style gentry practised philanthropy in Camden to maintain its moral tone. Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow, John Macarthur’s granddaughter, encouraged the maintenance of the proprieties of life, moral order and good works, as well as memorialising her family by donating a clock and bells to St John's Anglican Church in its hilltop location at the top of John Street Camden. This image is by Charles Kerry in the 1890s (Camden Images).

The town became the district's transport hub at the centre of the road network, primarily set by the pattern of land grants from the 1820s. The earliest villages in the district pre-dated Camden and then looked to Camden for cultural and economic leadership as the district's major centre. The arrival of the Camden railway in 1882 meant that silver ore west of the district (1871) was shipped through the Camden railhead to the Main Southern Railway from Sydney.

Combined with rail access to markets, the town's prosperity was assured by a series of technical and institutional innovations that transformed the dairy industry in the 1890s. In the 1920s, the Macarthur family set up the Camden Vale Milk Company and built a milk processing plant at the eastern end of the main street adjacent to the rail line. Whole milk was railed to Sydney and bottled under its label until the mid-1920s. Milk was delivered daily to the factory by horse and cart until the 1940s from local dairy farms.

Camden's progress saw the construction of a new bank (1878), the commencement of weekly stock sales (1883), the formation of the Camden Agricultural, Horticultural and Industrial Society and the first Camden Show (1886), a new post and telegraph office (1898), the foundation of two weekly newspapers (Camden Times, 1879, Camden News, 1880), a new cottage hospital (1898), the formation of a fire brigade (1900), the opening of a telephone exchange (1910), the installation of reticulated gas (1912), electricity (1929), town water (1899) and the replacement of gas street lighting with electric lights (1932), and a sewerage scheme (1939). By 1933 the population of the town had grown to 2394.

The town's site, as part of the Macarthur grants, was located on some of the finest farming country in the colony in the government Cowpastures reserve on the colonial frontier. The grants were part of the dispossession of traditional lands of the Dharawal people by the British settler colonial project and inevitably led to conflict and violence. Macarthur claimed that the town's establishment threatened the security of his landholdings at Camden Park and opposed it during his lifetime. On his death in 1834, his sons had a different worldview and moved to establish an English-style estate village dominated by a church.

The early townsite at Camden Vale was named after her husband (Onslow Park), Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow, John Macarthur’s granddaughter, encouraged the maintenance of the proprieties of life, moral order and good works, as well as memorialising her family by donating a clock and bells to St John's Anglican Church in its hilltop location at the top of John Street Camden.

The Camden Branch Line Locomotive Crossing the Nepean River Bridge 1900 Postcard (Camden Images)

The first attempt at local government in 1843 was unsuccessful. A meeting of local notables formed the municipality of Camden at a public meeting in 1883. Still, it was not until 1889 that the municipality was proclaimed, covering 7,000 acres and including Camden and the neighbouring village of Elderslie. Nine townsons were elected aldermen at the first election that year, and the first meeting was held at the School of Arts. In 1993 the Camden Municipal Council eventually became the Council of Camden.

To read more visit Camden History Notes.

It’s better banking with a local

Camden | Picton | Tahmoor
themaccu.com.au | 1300 622 278

Macarthur Credit Union Ltd ABN 83 087 650 244 AFSL/Australian Credit Licence No 239933

The Camden Historical Society
meets for lively discussions and guest speakers on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30pm at the Camden Museum on John Street Camden. Interested persons and new members are most welcome. For further information call John on 4655 3400.