

Camden

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Camden is one of Australia's most historic country towns situated on the floodplain of the Nepean River, on the traditional land of the Dharawal people in an area known at the Cowpastures. The town is bordered in the east and north by the Nepean River, in the south by Burratorang road and Camden Bypass and in the west by Matahill Creek. The town area has a population of 3,063 (2001) and until the 1950s was the hub of a district which took in the rural villages to the west of Camden including Yerranderie, Burratorang Valley, The Oaks and Oakdale and those to the north of Elderslie and Narellan. Today Camden is being engulfed by Sydney's urbanisation on the rural-urban fringe of the metropolitan area.

The landform has given the Camden town area a distinctive landscape which has moulded the community's identity and sense of place. The central town area is enclosed on three sides by a sweeping bend in the Nepean River, which regularly floods the surrounding farmland and lower parts of the town. The floodplain creates a sense of openness around the town and symbolises the traditional values associated with country town life, which is still celebrated each at the Camden Show. A ridge rises 25 metres from the flood plain to the south and is topped by St John's Anglican church, which was built shortly after the town was founded in 1840. St John's church has dominated the village from the hill and is the basis of town's iconic imagery and rural mythology; like an English country village where the church is the symbolic heart of the village.

From the earliest days of European settlement class and social networks ordered daily life in the village and at the top of the social hierarchy were the local gentry. The interests of the landed gentry were to dominate the area from John Macarthur's original grant of 5,000 acres (2023 hectares) in 1805. These large landholders established a rural hegemony in the area based on five big estates using convict labour: *Camden Park*, *Brownlow Hill*, *Kirkham*, *Elderslie* and *Macquarie Grove*; dominated by the Macarthur family of *Camden Park*, and exercised their view of an 'ideal world'. Many immigrant families came to the area under Governor Bourke's 1835 plan and settled on the gentry's estates as tenant farmers. Some of these tenant farmers eventually established businesses in the new privately developed village of Camden and became an urban based *petite bourgeoisie*. The first land sales in the village were held in

1841, and this stifled the growth of the existing European settlements in the area at Cawdor (1822), Narellan (1827), Cobbitty (1828) and Elderslie (1828). The population of Camden grew from 242 in 1846 to 458 in 1856; although the village was still dominated by the estates of the gentry, for example, *Camden Park* had a population of 900 in 1850.

The gentry practiced their philanthropy in the new village to maintain its moral tone. The Macarthur family, who dominated Camden until the 1950s, granted land to each of the major denominations in the village for churches. The moral position of St John's, supported by the generosity of the Macarthur family, reinforced the influence of Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow from the 1880s and that of her daughter Sibella until her death in 1943. The social authority of these women was absolute. Nothing escaped their scrutiny or influence and St Johns was central to their view of the world in Camden. Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow encouraged the maintenance of the proprietaries of life, moral order and good works, as well as memorialising her family by donating a clock and bells to St Johns Church in 1897. She also memorialised the memory of her late husband by providing a public park (1882), which was named after her husband (Onslow Park), and is now the Camden showground.

Elizabeth and Sibella Macarthur Onslow presided over the village and, after Elizabeth had reorganised the administration of *Camden Park* in the 1890s, ensured the prosperity of the estate and the village in the 'dairy revolution'. A series of technical and institutional innovations transformed the dairy industry and combined with access to the Sydney market by rail assured the material progress that the town enjoyed during the next 50 years. Modernity in the town was reflected by the construction of a new bank (1878), 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 origin of local government in Camden dates back to 1843, when Camden, along with Campbelltown, Narellan and Picton, were one of 28 district councils in New South Wales that were formed to raise revenue locally for constructing roads, bridges and other

infrastructure. The local district council was racked by competing rivalries, localism and the opposition of the landed gentry, all of which contributed to its eventual failure. The current council dates back to 1883, when a public meeting was held to form the Municipality of Camden. In 1887, 46 local signatories (townsmen) petitioned the New South Wales Government, and the municipality was proclaimed in 1889. The Municipality of Camden covered 7000 acres (2800 hectares) and included Camden and the village of Elderslie. The first council election was held in April of that year, nine townsmen were elected as aldermen, and the first meeting was held at the School of Arts. Camden Municipal Council eventually became the Council of Camden in 1993. Today Camden is the administrative centre of the Camden Local Government Area (LGA) which has a population of over 51,000 (2006) and an area of 201 km² and includes Cobbitty, Narellan, Bringelly, Catherine Fields and Mt Annan. The LGA is part of the state government's Sydney South West Growth Centre, which is planned for 500,000 new residents.

The morphology of central Camden is still representative of the period of the town's foundation in the 1840s. The original grid pattern of streets is intact and contains a mixed land use of commercial, educational, religious, residential and industrial uses, which still persists. The route of the Hume Highway was along the main street (Argyle Street), which carried the through traffic, and had hundreds of daily coal truck movements, until the highway was re-routed to the Camden Bypass with completion of the Macarthur Bridge across the Nepean River (1976). Commercial activity in central Camden was typified by low and middle order retail activities of local shopkeepers, who were characterised by personalised service and home deliveries in, and out of, town. Many shopfronts are still intact and some are typical of the Victorian and art-deco style, while the general height and setback of buildings in the main street has changed little in 70 years. Social networks were re-enforced in this part of town by personal contacts on a daily basis, along with Sale Day and the Camden Show when farmers came to town. The many laneways, which characterised the main street, have been in-filled with development and progress has seen the car replace the horse-and-cart. The development of a café culture continues the social contact networks, which was one of the principal characteristics of the 'country town'.

The ridge on the southern side of the commercial precinct is topped by Menangle Road, which used to make its way out of town to *Camden Park* house past the gatehouse (now located on the Camden Bypass). Apart from St John's church (1840), the Menangle Road precinct has the Rectory (1859) and a number of charming Federation and Californian

bungalows, which were the homes of the Camden elite. The precinct is also the location of Macarthur Park (1905) which was dedicated to the townsfolk by Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow (1905) and contains the town's First World War memorial (donated by the Macarthur family). Macarthur Park is a fine example of an urban Victorian Park and has a number of significant trees.

The main N-S axis of central Camden consists of the historic precinct of John Street, which runs downhill to the floodplain from the commanding position of St Johns church at the top of the ridge. Lower John Street is the location of the Italianate style of Macaria (c1842), St Paul's Catholic Church and the government buildings associated with the Camden police barracks (1878) and court house (1857) and Camden Primary School. This area also contains the oldest surviving Georgian cottage in the town area, Bransby's Cottage (1842) in Mitchell Street. There is also the Camden Museum, which is part of the recently redeveloped Camden Library and Museum Complex. These buildings are an excellent example of adaptive re-use of heritage buildings and at the same time illustrate the stages of the town's progress and development. The northern side of the complex was originally the Camden Temperance Hall (1867) and served as Camden Fire Station (1916-1993) until it was moved to Elderslie. The southern side of the complex was the School of Arts (1866), which served as the Camden Town Hall, while the rear of the building was occupied by Camden Municipal Council, until it built a new office complex behind *Macaria* on the opposite side of John Street. The library, which now occupies the front part of the complex, was located in *Macaria* from 1967 until 1982, when it moved into the current building.

Camden has always been the transport hub of the district from the 1820s when the road network had largely been set the pattern of land grants. The earliest villages in the district predate Camden and then looked to Camden for cultural and economic leadership as the district's major centre. The arrival of the Camden tramway in 1882 meant that silver ore from Yerranderie (1871) and later coal were shipped through the Camden railhead to Campbelltown, although even by the late 1930s more coal was moved by road than rail. The locomotive, affectionately known as 'Pansy', travelled on the branch-line from Campbelltown, and in the 1940s had 24 weekday services, which were a mixture of goods and passenger services. Camden railway station and goods yard, which are now a car yard, were located on the floodplain on the north-eastern corner of the village adjacent to the milk factory. 'Locals' report that you could hear the train whistle 'all over town' and marked the arrival of Sydney's newspapers and other goods. The old station master's house is now a

restaurant, while opposite the railway station were the local sale yards, which are still operating and owned by the Inglis family. In 1920 the Macarthur family set up the Camden Vale Milk Company and built a milk processing plant in the town at the eastern end of the main street (and the building is still standing) adjacent to the rail line. Whole milk was railed to Darling Harbour and bottled under its own label until 1926. Between 1920 and 1922 Camden Vale Milk, which became a co-operative in 1921, had 162 milk suppliers and 289 cream suppliers. Milk was delivered to the factory on a daily basis by horse and cart, even up to the 1940s.

As an outpost of the British Empire, the community supported the notion that the 'Best of British' was the rule of daily life. Hence it is little wonder that there was strong support for British militarism in the Boer War, the First World War and the defence of Australia in the Second World War, with men and women from many local families seeing action. There was strong home front support in all actions, with the foundation of local branches of national patriotic funds and civil defence organisations. The Second World War was brought close to home with a number of defence establishments (Camden Airfield at Kirkham, Narellan Military Camp at Oran Park and the Eastern Command Training School at Studley Park) in and around the town. This enthusiasm for militarism was not replicated in later conflicts (Korean War, Vietnam War) when the influence of the British Empire had largely disappeared in Camden as it had done in the rest of the country.

Community organisations and active citizenship have been part of the political processes in Camden from the foundation of the town in the 1840s. It could be argued that they provided the basis for successful implementation of local government. In the late 1800s they were male dominated, usually led by the landed gentry and held informal political power through patronage, for example, James Macarthur sponsored the Camden School of Arts (1865) and Agricultural, Horticultural & Industrial Society (now the Camden Show Society), while various lodges and the temperance movement were sponsored by the Non-conformists. A number of conservative women's organisations were established after Federation, which were led by a small clique of well-off local women. Their social position supported their husband's political activities and the influence of the Macarthur family stood high in of these organisations, for example the Camden Red Cross and Country Women's Association. In the post-war era, the growth of the town, increasing levels of education, and economic prosperity provided by coal broke down many of the old hierarchies and challenged the existing political power structures. New community organisations, like Rotary, and later the Chamber of

Commerce, fostered business networks in the town away from those whose political power rested on landed wealth. Ownership of the town's pioneering past was taken up by the Camden Historical Society, and later, the Camden Resident's Action Group saw the threat of urbanisation to the town's cultural identity. These organisations became some of the new power brokers in the town. The LGA has over 250 voluntary organisations, which help to create the social glue, or social capital, that encourages community participation.

The town clearly benefited from its proximity to Sydney as a market and higher order specialist services, such as retailing. The townsfolk had a love/hate relationship with Sydney based on rural ideology (the town/country divide) and city-based decisions that affected the town. Townspeople resented interference in local affairs from 'outsiders', who were numerous, as in most country towns, in the form of the local policeman, teacher, public servant and doctors, despite the many benefits they brought to the town. Sydney-based decisions, like the flooding of the Burragorang Valley in the 1950s due to the construction of Warragamba Dam and the closure of the tramway in 1963, reinforced these sentiments.

Sydney-based decisions continued to shape the morphology of the town, from the 1960s, when the town was targeted by the state government as a growth area, under the *Macarthur Growth Centre Plan* (1973). Increasing levels of urbanisation have continued and threatened the loss of rural landscapes around the town. This has aroused a desire for a type of 'rural arcadia' by some in the community based on the iconic imagery of the picturesque country town, with the church on the hill, surrounded by rural vistas.

Camden has become part of Sydney's exurbanisation on the rural-urban fringe, where suburbanites move out of the city and are looking for places where 'the country looks like the country'. These 'outsiders' romanticise the benefits of the country town, while staying disengaged from it and commodifying this lifestyle in aesthetic terms. In response 'locals' have retreated to a nostalgic version of reality by creating a 'country town idyll', which is celebrated at the Camden Show, and adopted by local government, businesses and community organisations, and used variously as a political weapon, a marketing tool and a tourist promotion. For many years one of the staunchest defenders of Camden's rurality was an 'outsider', Dr Elizabeth Kernohan, veterinary surgeon, Camden mayor and member for Camden in the New South Wales parliament, who died in 2004.

References

Alan Atkinson's, *Camden, Farm and Village Life in Early New South Wales*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988.

A useful summary of secondary sources on Camden can be found at <http://www.camdenhistory.org.au> and follow the links to Camden Bibliography.