

# Elderslie

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Elderslie is a suburb of Camden, the traditional land of the Dharawal people. It lies on the southern end of the Camden Municipality, 62 km southwest of Sydney, on the rural-urban fringe. It is bordered by the Nepean River to the west, Narellan Creek to the north, Camden By-Pass to the south, and Studley Park Golf Course to the east. The population at the 2001 census was 2,638.

Under Governor Macquarie's stewardship, the area now known as Elderslie was the site of a number of smallholder land grants along the Nepean River, made between 1812 and 1815. There was also one large grant given to John Oxley, a member of the colonial gentry, in 1816. He called it 'Elerslie', although by 1828 he had changed it to 'Elderslie'. Oxley's grant was one of the five large estates in the Camden area that used convict labour.

Elderslie can lay claim to the first building in the Camden area. This was a small hut erected at the Nepean River crossing, after the 1803 visit of Governor King, for the government man who looked after the cattle in the Cowpastures. It is reported that the hut was still in existence in 1822.

The village of Elderslie was planned along the Great Northern Road (now Camden Valley Way) with a subdivision and sites for a church, parsonage and market place. A post office was opened in 1839 - and closed in 1841, when it was moved to Camden. A number of village blocks were sold by auction in 1841, but three months after the Elderslie land sales the village was effectively overwhelmed by land sales across the river in Camden.

The first church in Elderslie was St Mark's Anglican Church, built in 1902 of plain timber construction. The church is framed by a huge 150 year old camphor laurel tree, and has only ceased functioning in recent years.

*Hilsyde* is one of the more significant homes in the Elderslie area, and was built in 1888 by Walter Furner, a local builder. A number of important cottages were owned by the Bruchhauser family, who were viticulturalists and orchardists in the Elderslie area, as were the Fuchs, Thurns, and most recently the Carmagnolas.

Viticulture has been re-established at Camden Estate Vineyards on the deep alluvial soils of the Nepean floodplain. There were plantings of mixed varieties in 1975 by Norman Hanckel, and in the 1990s these had been converted completely to Chardonnay, which best suits the soil and climate of the area. Grapes for wine had previously been grown in this location by Martin Thurn, one of the six German vinedressers brought out by the Macarthurs of *Camden Park* in 1852. Table grapes were grown throughout the Elderslie area and sold in the Sydney markets. Vegetables were grown on the floodplain adjacent to Narellan Creek by Sun Chong

Key, who was one of a number of Chinese market gardeners in the Camden area in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from farming, the floodplain and surrounding areas have been subject to extensive sand-mining for the Sydney building industry.

Elderslie was the first stop after Camden on the tramway that ran between Camden and Campbelltown, which began operations in 1882. The locomotive (affectionately known as *Pansy*) had 24 services each week-day, which were a mixture of passenger and goods services. Observant travellers to the area can still make out the earth works of the tramway on the northern side of Camden Valley Way along the floodplain. The tramway operated until 1963, when a number of branch lines in the Sydney area were shut. The tramway, which ran beside the Hume Highway between Elderslie and Camden, was often closed due to flooding.

Swimming became one of Elderslie earliest organized sporting activities, after the Nepean River was dammed in 1908 with the construction of the Camden Weir. Water backed up behind the weir for four kilometres through the Elderslie area, and provided relatively deep water suitable for swimming. The ‘Camden Aquatic Sports’ carnival was organized in 1909 and attracted over 1000 spectators, and this was the location of the Camden Swimming Club in the 1920s. There were two popular swimming holes at Kings Bush Reserve and Little Sandy, where the Australian Army built a footbridge during World War II (and there is still one in that location today). By the 1950s, increasing pollution of the river put pressure on authorities for a town swimming pool, which was eventually opened in Camden in 1964.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the growth of coal mining contributed to local population growth and demand for residential land releases on farmland adjacent to the floodplain. This created a need for education facilities and led to establishment of Mawarra Primary School (1972) and Elderslie High School (1976). Elderslie was also identified as part of the growth area for Greater Sydney, initially as part of the *Macarthur Growth Centre Plan* (1973), then the *Metropolitan Strategy* (1988) and most recently in the *Cities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* plan (1995). Some of these land releases caused concerns over air quality issues and deteriorating water quality in the Hawkesbury-Nepean River, and consequently they were deferred until 2005. In the most recent Elderslie land releases, developers have commodified the rural mythology and imagery of ‘the country town’ and associated rural vistas, with names like ‘Camden Acres’, ‘The Ridges’ and ‘Vantage Point’. These values have attracted ‘outsiders’ to the area in the hope of finding places where ‘the country still looks like the country’. Part of this imagery is found in Elderslie’s older residential streets, which are a picture in November when the Jacarandas provide a colorful show of purple and mauve.

One of Elderslie’s most notable resident was possibly the Australian poet and actor, Hugh McCrae (1876-1958). He lived in River Road in the 1930s and occasionally after that. He was a member of the Sydney Bohemian set, and a friend of Norman Lindsay and members of the Camden elite: for example, local surgeon Dr RM Crookston and his wife, Zoe. McCrae wrote about the local area in works like ‘October in Camden’, and ‘Camden Magpie’. He was awarded an OBE (1953) for services to Australian Literature. {link to ADB}

## References

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

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

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