

Seven Hills

Jack Brook

Seven Hills, popularly known as ‘Sevo’, is a suburb of the City of Blacktown.

When white men first arrived, the district was covered in open forest. A clan of the Dharug tribe, probably part of the Toogagal or Toongabbie clan, were the original inhabitants of the land. The Weymaly (Warmuli) or Prospect clan was the other local Aboriginal group.

On 22 April 1788 – within four months of the settlement at Port Jackson – Governor Phillip and party reached Prospect Hill, from where they would have seen what was to become the suburb of Seven Hills.

The first land grant in Seven Hills, then in the district of Toongabbee, was 60 acres (24 hectares) granted to John Redmond, an ex-Marine, by Lieutenant-Governor Grose on 1 April 1793. Within a few years other portions of the forested land were granted to ex-convicts, emancipists, retired soldiers and a handful of free settlers.

Tracks crisscrossed the land between neighbours’ properties and many of these early tracks became roads. By 1800 the name Seven Hills had become recognised for the district, particularly the land on each side of the recently built Hawkesbury Road (Old Windsor Road). The following was printed in the *Sydney Gazette* on 3 July 1803:

His Excellency [Governor King] during his last visit to the out settlements, has given directions for making a more convenient road to Hawkesbury from Parramatta, by which the mischief occasioned to horses and carriages from crossing the Seven Hills will be totally removed.

The actual seven hills are situated along the Old Windsor Road between Westmead and where today’s road intersects Northwest Boulevard, Bella Vista.

In 1819 much of the land on the eastern side of Seven Hills Road South, part of what was known as the Prospect Common, was granted away by Governor Macquarie. There was not yet a clear defined area for Seven Hills but the name had spread southwards to include the 1819 land grants. When in 1860 the railway line was built to the south of Old Windsor Road, the name transferred to the new railway station and cemented the name of the growing village.

Early agriculture and orchards

John Macarthur owned a farm at Seven Hills from 1801 until May 1821, when the land was returned to the Crown as part of a deal to give Macarthur more land at Camden.¹ He bought it from a fellow officer of the NSW Corps, Major Joseph Foveaux, along with over 1000 sheep grazing on 2020 acres (817 hectares). With Macarthur spending time in England on more than

one occasion, his wife Elizabeth managed both the farm and the breeding of sheep at Seven Hills and other properties they owned. However, she had a special affection for the farm at Seven Hills which she fondly called 'My Seven Hills Farm'.² It can justifiably claim to be one of the first major Australian sheep breeding farms. The outstanding results later achieved at Camden with fine merino sheep only followed Elizabeth's sterling efforts at Seven Hills.

Seven Hills in the 1830s was a firmly established farming community but the shale soils were reported to be 'worn out by European farming practices...'³ – infertile due to the lack of manure and fertiliser – and it was increasingly difficult to cultivate grain crops. Many early settlers had planted small orchards and vineyards for their own personal use, and experience eventually showed that these provided a better return for their labours than grain crops. By the 1860s a large portion of Seven Hills was planted out with fruit trees, particularly oranges: the hills provided good natural drainage for fruit growing. Stone fruits soon became popular, although they required more attention. When the railway line came through Seven Hills in 1860, the fruit could be picked and transported to market quickly, a major advantage for Seven Hills orchardists. Many of the remaining stands of timber were felled in this period for railway construction, fuel and domestic use.

With the passing of time, the small farms in and around Seven Hills were purchased by the more successful and prosperous men of the district. The major landholders were a small group of men, members of the Pearce, Davis and Best families. Fuller's *County of Cumberland Year Book 1887* stated that the land at Seven Hills

had been confined to two or three families, but lately the proprietorship having been extended the place is opened up, and can now boast of some of the finest orchards in the country.

The soil and geographical position of the Hills district made it famous for many years as the premier orange growing area in the colony. Pearce's orchard, Bella Vista, situated on a large portion of what had been Macarthur's sheep farm, was in 1889 said to be '...perhaps the largest producer of oranges and lemons in these colonies'. The magnificent row of Bunya pines, which occupy the high land overlooking Old Windsor Road and the nearby suburbs of Kings Langley and Bella Vista, are a topographical feature of the district and mark the original driveway into Bella Vista. However many years earlier, 'the most famous grove of its day' had been developed by the Pye family on William Joyce's land grant beside the Old Windsor Road. According to Thomas Pye, some of the original trees were bearing heavy crops of fruit annually some 80 years later. The butt from one of the seedlings grown originally on Joyce's grant was sent to the Paris Exhibition and measured 2 feet 9 inches (93 centimetres) in diameter. The tree from which the butt was taken was about 50 feet (15.24 metres) in height and bore over 40 cases of oranges in one season.⁴

In the early 1900s, trains from Sydney transported hundreds of people to Seven Hills during springtime, just to see the masses of pink and white blossoms. But it wasn't to last. When new irrigation schemes were opened in southern New South Wales, the orchardists of Seven Hills could not compete, and by the 1920s the fruit-growing industry was in rapid decline throughout the County of Cumberland.

Early churches

Seven Hills (including Prospect) was a predominantly Anglican community during the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century.

The first building used as a place of worship regularly in the district was the school-chapel situated somewhere between Prospect and Seven Hills. It was certainly in use during 1825. So deficient was the colony in places for divine service that the Reverend F Wilkinson had to officiate at Prospect in a house notorious as a brothel. Archdeacon TH Scott expressed surprise and tried to have the brothel closed – without success.⁵

Tenders were called in October 1825 to build a brick church and school at Prospect. However a church was not functioning there until St Bartholomew's Church of England was consecrated in May 1841 by Bishop Broughton. An article dated 21 April 1894 in the *Cumberland Argus* gives an account by Archdeacon Gunther of the church opening on 14 April 1841. A dwindling congregation, vandalism and repeated desecration of the church led to its deconsecration on 31 December 1967. On 21 January 2001 the building was reopened after extensive renovations. Blacktown City Council now owns the building and churchyard.

Father John J Therry has been credited with celebrating the first Mass at Prospect, on 16 July 1833. Twenty-two years later, on 19 July 1855, he preached the sermon at a Mass which preceded the foundation-stone-laying ceremony of St Brigid's Roman Catholic Church. The church opened on 27 July 1856 and was dedicated by Archbishop JB Polding. The church was dismantled in 1977. The bricks now form the sanctuary wall and exterior walls of St Michael's Church, Blacktown.⁶

In 1879 Phillip A Pearce offered one acre of land (0.4 hectare) as a site for a new church, as the old St Andrew's Church of England School, built about 1829, was still doing duty as a church on Sundays. There was a great deal of argument throughout Seven Hills about where the church should be, and Pearce withdrew his original offer. The local newspaper correspondent wrote 'Happy is the pastor that hath a quiet flock'.⁷ Tempers subsided and Pearce re-donated the land. Bishop Barker dedicated the completed building on 12 October 1880⁸ and for many years the church and its hall were the focal point of the social and religious life of the village of Seven Hills. The church was closed in 1973. A permanent conservation order now covers the church, hall and rectory, which is privately owned.

St Peter's Anglican Church was sparked to life when George Best presented a block of land to the Church of England in 1914. A wooden church hall was erected and named Fairholme Mission Hall. It was officially opened 26 May 1915.⁹ The church was to be known as St Peter's. A more solid, permanent building was called for in 1951. Money had to be raised and one novel idea was to sell the tall pine trees which stood on the land to the Federal Match Company to make into matches. When the Best family offered their land and house, Fairholme, for sale, the church committee purchased the property and a new brick church was opened on 12 December 1964.

The Seven Hills Church of Christ was opened in 1890. It closed six years after its 100-year anniversary.¹⁰

Early schools

Evidence suggests there was a private school somewhere in the Toongabbie/Seven Hills area in 1816. Charles Wiltshire, a convict 'upwards of seventy years of age', supported by 13 settlers who resided 'on or about the Seven Hills,' petitioned Governor Macquarie for permission to teach the local children.¹¹

Whatever transpired in 1816, another convict, Christopher Limebear Bridges, was teaching somewhere in Seven Hills from 1818 to September 1823. Eight settlers attested that 17 children had attended the school, paying one shilling or sixpence per week.¹² There was a rustic wooden chapel and schoolroom situated somewhere between Prospect and Seven Hills, and in May 1825 14 children, both Protestant and Catholic, were registered at the Prospect and Seven Hills School. The school closed in March 1829.¹³ The building continued to be used as a chapel.

Authorisation was given by the Church and Schools Corporation on 28 August 1828 for a brick schoolhouse to be erected at Seven Hills.¹⁴ The school was situated on the eastern side of Seven Hills Road North near the junction of today's Abbott Road and Station Road. Wesleyan missionaries who were active in the district used the schoolhouse as a chapel. By 1863 the school building was disintegrating around the 54 pupils who were in attendance: it was soon demolished.

A new schoolroom was opened in February 1864. A government inspector's report in 1880–81 stated the school was a 'certified denominational school' and known as 'St Andrew's Church of England School'. Following fierce arguments between local residents, a new school was built close to St Andrew's Church which had been erected between October 1879 and October 1880. The new school was opened in January 1885 and named Seven Hills Public School. A private school, St Andrew's Grammar School, was opened in 1895. It was closed by late October 1896.¹⁵ When a new public school was established beside Lucas Road in 1953, the older school was renamed Seven Hills North Public School.

On 3 November 1890 the Meadows Public School was opened on the southern side of the railway line where the population was increasing.

From farms to suburb

With the passing of the fruit growing industry there was an influx of poultry and dairy farmers throughout the district. A Grantham Stud Poultry Farm was established at Seven Hills on 118 acres (48 hectares) of land purchased, with the homestead Melrose, in 1906. It was reputed to be the 'largest stud poultry farm in the Commonwealth'.

The Department of Lands established the Returned Soldiers Settlement Scheme in 1917. Training was available to assist in the rehabilitation of the invalid soldiers. James Hadlington Jnr, the manager of the poultry farm, promoted the Grantham site as a State poultry farm, with the surplus land to be utilised for the use of returned soldiers. Forty-two acres (17 hectares) of land would be used as a breeding farm to supply stud stock and arrange purchase of bulk feed for the group of farms at Seven Hills and the various soldier settlements throughout the State.¹⁶ The land was divided into five-acre (2-hectare) lots, each with a small house for the invalid men and their families.¹⁷ The settlers attempted to make a living but it proved to be an unsuccessful scheme.

By late September 1923 the Seven Hills Soldiers Settlement no longer existed. However 42 acres (17 hectares) was kept and became the Government Poultry Farm.¹⁸ By 1939 the farm was conducting experimental work into the problems and requirements of the poultry industry. The farm was renamed Poultry Experiment Farm, Seven Hills.¹⁹ In 1947 there was a serious hatchability problem in the poultry industry which 'threatened to wipe out Australian flocks'.²⁰ Dr McClymont discovered that the problem was one of vitamin deficiency and it was quickly rectified. The Poultry Experimental Farm was credited with saving the poultry industry of Australia. After many years, numerous name changes and great research success, the Seven Hills Agricultural Station was closed in the early 1990s. Because of the research carried out at Seven Hills, the Australian chicken meat industry was developed as a separate entity and the egg industry became one of the most efficient in the world.²¹

Between the two World Wars, speculative subdivisions throughout the district divided larger properties into smaller holdings for market gardens, poultry farms and housing.

Rural village life in Seven Hills came to an abrupt end when the NSW Housing Commission began in August 1945 to resume large tracts of land.²² The population at the time was less than 900. The first houses to be built were situated on the southern side of the railway line and by the mid-1950s the Housing Commission estate at Lalor Park/Seven Hills was complete. The electrification of the railway in 1955 had an immediate impact, attracting an urban commuter population. With population growth came industry, and Seven Hills ceased to be a rural community and became part of Sydney's ever-increasing urban sprawl.

Jack Brook is a local historian and a member of Blacktown and District Historical Society

Endnotes

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- 4 FT Bowman, *A History of Citrus Growing in Australia 1788–1900*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1956
- 5 Archdeacon Scott's letter book No1, State Library of NSW, Mitchell Library A850, Scott to Wilkinson, 1 December 1827
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- 7 *Cumberland Argus*, 12 July 1879
- 8 Commission of Inquiry 1981, report to the Hon E Bedford by Commissioner W Simpson, 18 March 1981
- 9 *Cumberland Argus*, 29 May 1915
- 10 Souvenir booklet, Church of Christ, Seven Hills 100 Years Anniversary 1890–1990
- 11 State Records, 4/1736 pp 98–99
- 12 State Records, Colonial Secretary's Papers 5/1772 Reel 6059 P120
- 13 State Records, 4/322A, Clergy & Schools Lands Corporation, Letters Received
- 14 State Records, 9/2703, Church & Schools Lands, Proceedings, p 127
- 15 J Brook, *The Seven Hills: A Village Divided, a Suburb United*, the author, 2004, p 74–78
- 16 J Brook, *The Seven Hills: A Village Divided, a Suburb United*, the author, 2004, p 147
- 17 Grantham Poultry Farm Conservation Plan November 1990, Partridge & Davis, Architects, Pymble
- 18 NSW Dept of Agriculture Records, Sydney, File NoASF32
- 19 Grantham Poultry Farm Conservation Plan, November 1990, Partridge & Davis, Architects, Pymble
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- 21 Ross Macindoe, 'You Don't Know What You've Got 'til It's Gone', NSW Dept of Agriculture and Fisheries, Sydney, c1983
- 22 *Government Gazette*, 10 August 1945