

Haberfield

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Walking around Haberfield's wide, leafy streets, just five kilometres west of Sydney's CBD, and enjoying its intertwining gardens, one might think this is how suburbia has always been. But look east, across the Hawthorne Canal into Leichhardt, and one sees the mish-mash of buildings associated with the appalling living conditions and blight of the nineteenth-century industrial city.

Haberfield, in the municipality of Ashfield, was Australia's first successful planned 'model suburb', embodying the then-evolving international garden suburb principles. Begun at the time of Federation in 1901, it predates British examples such as Letchworth (1904) and Hampstead (1907). This visionary social experiment was so financially successful that it helped lock in the Great Australian Dream of the quarter-acre suburban block with dwelling, which has dominated how Australians seek to house themselves.

There are many reasons why Haberfield encapsulates heritage values at both a state and national level. It is more than the picturesque aesthetics of its streets, shops and single-storey houses, which, while predominantly in the Arts & Crafts and California Bungalow styles, cover the whole range of twentieth century architecture. Haberfield is a research repository of the Federation era, architectural details, house layouts, utility provision, garden design and plant material, and the early planning of public infrastructure.

Haberfield also has national social significance as a place where, from the mid-1970s, residents exerted considerable opposition to the destruction of these same picturesque houses, and is an early example of community statutory management: the Haberfield Development Control Plan is regarded as a leader in this field, with many conservation area management documents emulating its model.

The vision of the real estate entrepreneur and town planning advocate Richard Stanton involved infrastructure provision, plus covenant controls that laid the foundations for local government statutes governing suburban subdivisions – side setbacks to enable access to natural light and ensure privacy, minimum lot sizes and front building lines, separation of land uses and specification of materials. At the time of subdivision, and before any houses were built, Stanton provided sandstone kerbs and gutters, brushbox street trees, buffalo grass nature strips, sewerage, gas and electricity services (100 years on, this remains an issue between government and developers). He also initiated 'vertical integrated business arrangements', providing term finance, building materials, fixtures and fittings and landscape gardeners. Houses were individually designed by the company's architect, John Spencer-Stansfield, and anticipated accommodation for the motor car. Haberfield was a total package, intended for the rising middle class, within 30

minutes by tram or ferry to the centre of the city, and with a marketing slogan of being ‘slumless, laneless and publess’.

Haberfield has a colourful history. The peninsula jutting out into Iron Cove of Sydney Harbour was encompassed by the original 1806 Sunning Hill land grant of 480 acres (194 hectares) to Ensign Nicholas Bayley of the NSW Rum Corps. By dubious means, this was acquired by the emancipist Simeon Lord, then the largest landowner in the colony, and on the Main Roads Board. Lord presented the land as a dowry to his daughter Sarah on her marriage to Dr David Ramsay in 1825 on condition that it was bequeathed only to the issue of that marriage. The estate was renamed Dobroyde and Dr Ramsay pursued his botanical passions there, co-founding the Linnean Society and becoming a Director of the Australian Museum. His wife lived well into her 80s, so that the estate, also known locally as Ramsay’s Bush, escaped the boom and bust of the 1880s. Initially some of her 10 children sold land directly to Stanton, by then mayor of Ashfield Council, until the Privy Council battle over the naming of the post office.

Stanton was an ardent Federationist, as commemorated by the names placed in the streets’ footpaths (representing all but two of the members of the original 1901 federal cabinet) and by aesthetic features within his distinctive house designs – the rising sun motif, waratah and flannel flowers, and the first Australian coat-of-arms in the newly formed Australian Army houses at 146–150 Ramsay Street.

Haberfield is now noted for the post-World War II Italian culinary influences within its small shopping strip along Ramsay Road. Haberfield’s tree-lined streets contain notable landmarks: St David’s church hall (1862 – opened by the Reverend John Dunmore Lang) and church (1868 – its foundation stone was laid by Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh); St Oswald’s church (1927) designed by Walter Burley Griffin’s Sydney partner, the architect John Burcham Clamp; Stanton’s own house The Bunyas (1906) designed by Spencer-Stansfield; and a former post office (1912). The Ramsays’ colonial Georgian residence Yasmar (1856), designed by John Bibb, with its equally important Loudon-inspired nineteenth-century garden, is the only ‘gentleman’s villa’ to survive along ‘the road to Parramatta’.

Among the many people associated with Haberfield are the composers John Antill and Peter Dodds McCormick (who wrote ‘Advance Australia Fair’); the singer Peter Dawson; Joseph Neal Grace, who with his brother founded the Grace Bros department stores; and more recently Jennie George, the president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1990s and later a federal MP; and John Brogden, the former state Liberal Party leader.

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