

Camellia

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Camellia is an industrial suburb about five kilometres east of Parramatta city centre, on the south bank of the Parramatta River. The suburb is located between Clay Cliff Creek to the west, Duck River to the east, and Grand Avenue. The major roads dissecting the suburb are Grand Avenue (east-west) and James Ruse Drive (north-south). The rail link between Rydalmere and Clyde and the spur line from it to Camellia railway station were important transport links, as were the roads that opened the suburb for industrial use. This little suburb has had no school, post office or retail outlets (other than 'a lunch shop' on Grand Avenue near Devon Street) to sustain the nearby industrial workers during the week.

The first inhabitants and visitors

The Burramattagal clan were the indigenous people who inhabited the land at the head of the harbour 'where the eels lie down'. The southern riverbank and the mostly freshwater stream now known as Clay Cliff Creek were vital sources of their food and living resources. In their seasonal rotation of campsites around their territory, the clan would have found that the reasonably abundant fish, shellfish, bird life, reptiles and marsupials large and small contributed greatly to their daily quest for food. The agreed boundary between Burramattagal country and their neighbours, the Wategora clan, seems to have been the Duck River.¹

The historical significance of Clay Cliff Creek is considerable. Having tramped along the riverbank from their Duck River landing, Governor Arthur Phillip and his party of officers and marines decided to camp on the creek's banks on the evening of 23 March 1788, because of its fresh water. On the day following their overnight bivouac, Phillip found the landforms which he named the Crescent and Rose Hill

In his *Journal*, surgeon John White recorded:

We followed this branch westward for a few miles, until we came to a small fresh-water stream that emptied itself into it. Here we took up our quarters for the night, as our halts were always regulated by fresh water, an essential point by no means to be dispensed with, and not very abundant or frequently to be met with, in this country. We made a kettle of excellent soup out of a white cockatoo and two crows, which I had shot, as we came along. The land all around us was similar to that which we had passed.²

The 'small fresh-water stream' has its headwaters in Merrylands and is romantically depicted in Joseph Lycett's 1822 painting of Elizabeth Farm from the northern riverbank.³ The campsite was probably in the vicinity of where today's River Road crosses the creek, where fresh water met the ebb and flow of tidal water. Unfortunately this historic spot is now a stormwater drain shrouded in concrete. The creek was the common boundary of the land grants to early recipients John

Macarthur and Charles Williams (Chris Magee), and the creek was their source of fresh water. It was also the reason for James Ruse's choice of the historic first land grant there.

Early land grants and settlers

Charles Williams (alias Christopher Magee), who had recommended himself to Phillip 'by his extraordinary propriety of conduct as an overseer' and the fact that he was 'bred to husbandry and had lived eight years in America',⁴ was the first person granted land in Camellia: it comprised 30 acres (12 hectares) and was located on the southern bend of the river leading to Parramatta.

Williams had been sentenced to seven years' transportation for the theft of a quantity of clothing, and he arrived on the transport *Scarborough* on the First Fleet. He married Eleanor McCave (or McCabe) in August 1788 and they settled on his land. A son James was baptised in November 1789 but died in late January and was buried at Rose Hill. A daughter was baptised in January 1791.⁵

Watkin Tench visited Magee in December 1791 and found that he was successfully farming his property and suggested that, should he continue so, he would surely succeed.⁶ However Magee did not follow either Phillip or Tench's expectations, and 'gave himself up to idleness and dissipation ... and became much degraded'. The couple were known throughout the small colony 'for their general immorality of their conduct ...'⁷

Another grantee was Lieutenant William Cummings, who was born in County Kildare and probably arrived with the second detachment of 20 of the New South Wales Corps under their commandant Major Grose on the transport *Pitt* on 14 February 1792. He sought a grant of land, even though there was no approval for army officers to be granted land. In expectation of the *Instructions* being altered on Phillip's recommendation to Whitehall, Grose settled a New Year's gift on the young lieutenant.⁸ With no acreage or limit of numbers specified for the grants now available to military and civil officers, Grose determined that a grant of 100 acres (40.4 hectares) would be suitable. Accordingly, he granted Cummings another 100 acres contiguous to and east of his existing land on the river on 1 April 1794.⁹

Magee sold his grant to Lieutenant Cummings, 'house, crop and stock', for the inflated price of 'less than one hundred pounds,'¹⁰ drank the proceeds and moved to the Hawkesbury where he gained another land grant.¹¹

The land grants of Magee and Cummings were purchased by John Macarthur, who extended Elizabeth Farm's holdings to over 1100 acres (445 hectares) by acquiring another grant which he called Glenfindless Farm (825 acres, 334 hectares) granted 8 October 1816. These were consolidated by Macarthur with the original Elizabeth and Edward's Farm into his Elizabeth Farm Estate. Macarthur thus gained the complete river frontage between the township and Duck River.

Silas Sheather and Camellia Grove Nursery

Macarthur's sons leased five acres (two hectares) of land to Silas Sheather in 1852, on behalf of their brother Edward, who had inherited the Elizabeth Farm Estate that covered a portion of Magee's grant.¹² Sheather had arrived in Sydney aged 14 in April 1839 on the *Royal George*, with his father Henry, who was contracted to work at Camden Park for Sir William Macarthur in his plant nursery. Silas was also employed as a nurseryman and was probably associated with Sir William's later seedlings, particularly camellias.

Silas subsequently married Anne Bellamy of Baulkham Hills in July 1850 and worked for George Oakes at Newlands in Parramatta and at Elizabeth Farm.¹³ Now a family man, in 1852 he approached Sir William Macarthur for permission to lease 'three acres more or less' of land of the Elizabeth Farm Estate, located on the Parramatta River bank east of the Clay Cliff Creek. Here he established his Camellia Grove Nursery,¹⁴ from which the suburb gained its name.

A formal 21-year lease was entered into in May 1852, and Sheather was required to improve the land and build a house, and was advanced £100 for its construction.¹⁵ In 1874 Silas extended the lease and in 1889 purchased the land, now considered to be five acres (two hectares), for £1,000 from Septimus Alfred Stephen, who had acquired the Elizabeth Farm Estate from the widow of Sir Edward Macarthur. Apart from a small portion, the land was intact until sold to James Hardie and Company in 1916.¹⁶

By 1870 the house was surrounded by fruit trees, shrubs and beehives as well as the camellia nursery. The nursery was well established and ferry-boat travellers noted the nursery as a landmark and appreciated the aroma of the flowers as they approached it from the river. Visitors could travel to the nursery by the paddle-wheel steamers, using the wharf adjacent to his property at the end of River Road West. A bridge, known as Sheather's Bridge, crossed Clay Cliff Creek to his property.

Sheather advertised a long list of camellia species for sale, and many had not been previously listed in other nurserymen's catalogues. It is probable that most of these varieties were grown from Sheather's own seedlings.¹⁷

On Sheather's death in 1906,¹⁸ his land was leased to two Chinese gardeners named Charlie and Jimmy who sold their produce at the old markets in George Street.¹⁹ Some of Sheather's land had already been purchased for a railway, and the balance was subdivided and gradually sold to small investors. The southern boundary of Sheather's land apparently became River Road West.²⁰

Transport to Camellia

Initially, transport to the area was difficult. Charles Edward Jeanneret, entrepreneur and pioneer of Hunter's Hill, operated a fleet of steam-powered shallow draft bow-paddle-wheel ferries from Sydney to The Queen's Wharf at Parramatta in the 1870s.²¹ Having amalgamated with and gained a controlling interest in the Joubert ferry fleet, he operated the largest fleet of ferries on Sydney

Harbour and the Parramatta River. A youthful Andrew Payten operated a horse-bus service for ferry passengers between the wharf and Parramatta township.

With the growing competition from the speedier train services to Parramatta established late in 1855, Jeanneret was forced to initiate a bolder scheme to protect the investment for which he was heavily indebted to his bankers. Faster screw-driven ferries would upgrade his service, but he was still faced with the problem of the gradually silting of the Parramatta River beyond Silverwater, where deeper-keeled craft would face problems. On the rising tide of the popularity of the steam tram, a recent innovation in the colony, Jeanneret decided upon the innovative scheme of building a deepwater wharf and running a steam tramway from the Domain Park Gates at Parramatta to Redbank at the junction of the Parramatta and Duck Rivers, thus allowing a speedier through journey to Semi Circular Quay. With this plan, Jeanneret hoped to monopolise the Parramatta River trade.²²

The Parramatta Borough Council approved Jeanneret's plan for a tramway, and in August 1881 the NSW Parliament passed a private bill, *Jeanneret's Tramway Act*, authorising the construction and maintenance of the tramway. The Act allowed for a maximum fare of 3d per passenger and 1 shilling per ton for goods or part thereof. It was the first private enterprise tramway to be built in the colony.²³

Mr Morrell was the Chief Engineer of the construction project, opened in 1883, and the contractor and provider of the rolling stock was Thomas Wearne.²⁴ The line travelled along its right of way leased from the Elizabeth Farm Estate and crossed a specially built bridge over Clay Cliff Creek. This bridge, the second built for the tramway, was constructed on RSJ bearers manufactured by Dorman Long, a name later associated with the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The tramway maintained Jeanneret's competitive edge in river transport, but there were several other advantages. With the subdivision of the Macarthur land, the steam tramway became an important factor in opening the industrial sites of Camellia. Industrial customers such as Meggitt's at Parramatta depended on the tram/ferry as an inexpensive transport medium both to and from its works. In turn, the subdivision of a township to house workers followed, with convenient inexpensive transport to and from Parramatta.

Private railway lines

While the main railway line to Parramatta led to the opening up of suburbs along its length, there were also other railway developments that were critical for Camellia's growth. A new railway station was opened in 1880 at Clyde, to service the new engineering works of the Hudson Brothers Ltd, and six years later John Bennett gained parliamentary approval to open a private track from Clyde to his newly constructed racecourse at Rosehill. Bennett's patrons benefited from the river excursion journey and fares to the special gate erected for tramway punters on Grand Avenue.

The rail line also connected to the recently established Australian Kerosene Oil and Mineral Company works and the riverbanks at Sandown. Construction commenced in 1886 with Hudson Brothers erecting the steel bridges for the creek crossings.²⁵

The second purpose of the line was to transport kerosene shale from the mines at Joadja and Newnes to John Fell's refinery near Sandown. Ready approval was given to this privately funded extension, as it would reduce the shipping traffic in Darling Harbour and the growing problems there caused by the existing bridge. It was hoped that a new port would open on the riverbank, to service the industries planned nearby. The first wharf, named Black Wharf, was constructed with the Sandown platform adjacent to it and it opened on 24 October 1892, complete with a steam crane and a turntable. Remains of the Black Wharf are still visible from the river..

The line was opened to Carlingford in April 1896 but the revenue from freight and passenger haulage did not reach projected estimates and the company was taken over by the government in June 1899.

Public Works re-opened the service to Carlingford in August 1901. The first station beyond Rosehill was named in 1885 Subiaco for the monastery across the river but was renamed Camellia on 14 September 1901 after Sheather's flower gardens.²⁶ It was here too that the Sandown Line branched east and Jeannerett's steam tramline crossed the rail lines. Today an overpass has replaced the level crossings.

When the Bennett private line was taken over by the government, Sandown station changed its ownership also on 1 August 1901.²⁷ The Sandown station, opened privately in October 1892, has since closed but the line is still in operation to serve the industries along the riverbank. There were two other later platforms on the line, those for Hardie's (April 1938) and Goodyear's (January 1934). Both of these companies had private rail sidings into their factory sites, as did Wesco, Cream of Tartar, and the Shell Company.

During the years of World War II, for defence reasons, the spur line that ran into Shell was joined with a new branch line that ran from the main Clyde-Carlingford Line to enable a loop line to be formed.

Camellia's industries

Camellia's growth was clearly tied to ongoing industrial development. The expanding pastoral industry needed fencing, inspiring Arthur and St John Lysaght to begin a galvanised iron and wire netting works in 1884, on a riverside block. Their father, a Bristol iron manufacturer who exported iron products to Australia, provided capital for the venture. Success saw the company move to Newcastle, where expansion into corrugated iron products alone demanded resources that were not available via the Parramatta River. After a humble start in Camellia, Lysaght's became a subsidiary of the Broken Hill Proprietary Company Ltd.

In July 1885 the Australian Kerosene Oil and Mineral Company purchased 67 acres (27 hectares) of the Elizabeth Farm Estate from Hudson Brothers for £300 an acre. Hudsons had paid £50 an acre only shortly before. The company had been mining shale oil for its kerosene content at Joadja since 1874. The 1887 private rail extension allowed the crude oil to be shipped to their works by rail from Mittagong for further processing. About 170 men were employed in the manufacture of kerosene, axle grease, soap and candles that were marketed under the brand name of 'Southern Cross'. Government contracts were held until the duty on kerosene was lifted in the early 1890s. This and the severe depression forced the mine to close, as did the Camellia refinery in 1894. The buildings were not sold until 1916.²⁸

Anschau's Tannery was opened in 1895 on land adjacent to the Sandown Meat Co to purchase and tan the ready supply of skins from the slaughtered animals.²⁹ The company closed when the Meat Co burned down in 1923. Anschau's site was taken up by Continental Grain Ltd, the firm that purchased Meggitts Ltd, linseed oil manufacturers in Macquarie Street, Parramatta and other grain milling companies. When the flour milling company Brunton's was also purchased, Continental Grain inherited a number of grave memorials to the founder's dogs. These elaborate memorials disappeared when the site was taken over by a concrete and stone recycling company in about 2000.

Another prominent industrial development was Wesco Paints (West Coast Kalsomine Co Aust Ltd), registered in 1920 and initially producing powder paints under the trade name of Kalsomine. This was a very popular interior decorating paint in Australia. Over the years, the Wesco industrial chemists, keeping abreast of paint technology in the surface coating industry, by 1965 had developed a wide range of paints and enamels based on alkyd, epoxy, PVA, PVA Acrylic copolymers, polyurethane and silicones, and unique architectural finishes based on cement.³⁰

The James Hardie Company, an asbestos-cement products manufacturer, was established in 1916 and operated until 1996. Ten acres of relatively inexpensive land, originally owned by Henry Hudson at Camellia was purchased in 1916. With its access to water rail and road transport and a nearby labour market, the site was ideal. Using the brand name 'Fibrolite' the company began asbestos sheet cladding manufacture. In 1917 their corrugated sheets met with instant success as a roofing medium. Gradually the range was expanded to include cement water pipe and plumbing accessories, moulded brake and clutch linings, heat-insulating materials. The marbled finished 'Tilux' for use in bathrooms and kitchens was accepted widely for low-cost housing.

After both World Wars there was great demand for Hardie's products. In 1954-55, of the 28,882 homes built in NSW, 15,050 were built of asbestos cement. By 1965, 1,500 people were employed by Hardie's with a payroll of £2, 500,000 annually. The unprecedented growth required more land and factory space. Product storage space shortages became acute and expansion plans were thwarted for the want of more land and so the company obtained approval to purchase the houses and streets of the Camellia township, where many Hardie employees lived.³¹

Hardie's great strength became its great misfortune. Asbestos proved to be carcinogenic and dangerous. When the company vacated the site at the end of the twentieth century, it was unusable without extensive remediation.

In 1925 the Ford Motor Company purchased a very large area and commenced construction of a huge works in Camellia, but made little use of it because of the depressed financial period. In 1935 it constructed a new assembly plant on Parramatta Road, located with a rail link to the Homebush Abattoir Line. It then sold all of its land to the Shell Oil Company.³²

The Stauffer Chemical Company (Aust) Pty Ltd entered the Australian market in 1926 when it formed a partnership with Kemball-Bishop Ltd of the UK and TJ Edmonds Ltd of New Zealand. They formed the Australian Cream of Tartar Co Ltd and operated several other chemical companies, including Wesco Paints Pty Ltd, located in Camellia.

Goodyear Tyre and Rubber Company (Australia) Pty Ltd began production in Camellia in 1933 in depressed times, and gained sales through introducing cheaper tyres than their competitors. They also manufactured components for the motor industry. Their investment in land, buildings and machinery amounted to £800,000. The growth of the motor industry assured the extensive growth of the industry. The company relocated recently.³³

The Commonwealth Oil Company was formed in London with a capital of £2 million, and began mining shale oil at Newnes in the Wolgan Valley in 1906. They began retorting the shale oil in June 1911 but encountered technical and financial difficulties within months because of the rich content of kerosene in the shale. The company had acquired 140 acres of land on the confluence of the Duck and Parramatta Rivers in 1908, when John Fell and Company acquired the company's assets.

Scotsman John Fell, experienced in distilling oil from shale to keep pace with growing demand for higher-octane motor spirit, added to the output of the Newnes plant and introduced more advanced distilling machinery, and operations spread south along the Duck River.

The township of Camellia

The developer of the land to the south of River Road West was William Peter Noller of Parramatta. Noller was a builder in Parramatta and Sydney and involved in local government in Parramatta for over 40 years. It appears that Noller offered his land – mostly nine lots purchased in 1892 as the Riverview Estate (DP 2737) – for sale and hoped to erect buildings on them. The sale of the land was hindered by the 1890s depression, a time dominated by mortgage defaults and bankruptcies.³⁴

The homes of Camellia, many of which reflect the times as 'interwar bungalow style', served the workers of the nearby industrial areas. They were well serviced by steam tram and rail and with their own ferry wharf – and the township was close to a racecourse!

Camellia in the twenty-first century

Today, there is no water transport to the original Camellia industries. The rail spur is used by Shell Oil, with a rail terminal in the adjoining suburb of Rosehill. Most recent industries rely on road transport to and from their sites. With the exception of the southern portion of the former township area, the James Hardie sites are bereft of buildings. The sites are bare, particularly the former manufacturing plant. During the 1960s, the company acquired more land for expansion and gradually the local houses were removed. The area was used for the storage of asbestos products and some houses were relocated to Harris Park. In effect, Camellia became a 'lost township'. Remediation of the site has not been fully undertaken. The former township, to the west of the rail line, has the skeleton infrastructure of light posts and paved streets, but its future is unknown.

John McClymont was a historian, particularly of the Parramatta area. He contributed this article to the Dictionary of Sydney before he died in 2007

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