Curtilages – getting beyond the word: implications for the colonial cultural landscapes of the Cumberland Plain and Camden

One could question the inclusion of a paper concentrating on an area which is essentially now part of greater Sydney – the largest city in Australia – as part of 'The Burra Charter in the Bush'. Perhaps a more apt title for our paper is 'Rural Heritage under siege'. As a community we are gradually destroying the primary evidence of how the early colonists traversed and settled the land around Sydney and how these farms developed into a form that, for a large number of examples, stayed relatively constant until the 1970s. Increasingly, responsible landowners are faced with climbing costs for farming land that provides decreasing returns. Speculative developers, aided by a climate where planning decisions are made on a local level, are successfully arguing that it is impossible to maintain desirable residential land for its traditional agricultural use.

Through Sydney’s insatiable need for raw building materials, at Castlereagh during the past year we have witnessed the disappearance of one of Australia’s most intact lines of small-lot, early land grants dating from 1803. Not just one farm but an entire local area – the one consolation being the comprehensive documentation undertaken before quarrying.

In many cases, the significance of the heritage item becomes historical – to be appreciated in books – any remnants of the item transfigured through their loss of physical context. One conclusion of our study is that these cultural landscapes, encompassing as many do important colonial structures, are simply far too rare and important to be left to the general framework of local government planning policy and mechanisms. In essence, there is a need for innovative planning to manage them for the future. Without sensitive management there is the potential, while preserving some individual items, to render them meaningless.

Background to the study

In 1997, the NSW Heritage Office made a grant under the Heritage Assistance Program to the National Trust of Australia (NSW) to manage a study to identify significant colonial gardens in the Cumberland Plain and Camden area, and to recommend measures for their conservation and management. A list of colonial properties with gardens known to be covered by permanent conservation orders formed the basis for a much-expanded inventory.

However, beyond the garden fences of our early properties is the broader context: vineyards, orchards, paddocks, cemeteries and early roads that once defined the prime areas of European occupation of the Cumberland Plain and Camden. Within this essentially rural – or semi-rural – context, the early farms were visual reference points, often with distinct interrelationships. The siting of these houses remains an important element in the existing cultural landscape. Signaled by mature vegetation, these estates are the punctuation marks that allow the 19th-century landscape to be read and interpreted. Where their original grant boundaries, relationships with traditional transport routes and...
intended viewlines are recognisable, it further accentuates their significance; thus they demonstrate, through their intactness, early estate planning and design within the context of the local landscape.

Increasingly, many of these significant properties are under pressure to be subdivided and developed for housing or industrial use. (Figure 1 illustrates the negative impact such developments can have on the historical landscape character). While the earlier part of the present study had as its emphasis gardens of various scales, it soon became clear that this broader agenda should be considered, and, as a consequence, a major emphasis of the study is the conservation of estates or more extensive cultural landscapes in their entirety, rather than simply gardens. There was little point being concerned about mapping landscape detail when the integrity of the overall estate – of greater significance – was being threatened with serious compromise. Although elements of remnant gardens are touched on in the study, particular attention is given to the issue of estate integrity and curtilage and has been confined to cultural landscapes that have historical, aesthetic, social or technical value and relate to the European settlement period up to about 1860.

**Study area**

The scope of the study was largely guided by the location of the original districts of the County of Cumberland. In geological terms, the Cumberland Plain lies to the west of Parramatta, stretches south to Camden and Campbelltown, north to Richmond and Windsor with its western boundary being the Hawkesbury-Nepean River. For the purpose of this study, remnant historic landscapes in Parramatta were included; beyond the Nepean River near Camden (the traditional boundary of both the Cumberland Plain and the County of Cumberland) the Razorback Range defines the extent of the study area and includes properties which are in the Wollondilly Council area at Mt Hunter and Menangle. To the south-west, important early sites near Appin within the jurisdiction of Campbelltown Council have been incorporated in the study.

During the course of the study, we have found a number of intact places but far more examples of places no longer intact and, in many cases, severely compromised. What has been apparent is a lack of understanding of the resource: our colonial cultural landscapes. In some examples, where a heritage impact statement has been submitted, the landscape and often the outbuildings beyond the main house, have been seen as having no significance. In these situations, the house is retained but its physical context is lost: as a component of a rural landscape it becomes unreadable, its significance becomes merely a construct in the mind.

A further observation is that, under current practice, in many instances a property is only assessed when there is a development proposal submitted for a site and that assessment is funded by the proponent. Although this study
attempts to address that situation, it does not fulfill the role of a detailed assessment for each property.

'Setting', 'curtilage' and implications for cultural landscapes

In 1985, the Australian Heritage Commission released a report which used the term 'modified landscapes' and, from a cultural perspective, out of a framework including bioclimatic, cultural and aesthetic perspectives, one of the examples was described as 'landscapes modified early in European history and relatively unchanged'. An important attribute of a landscape of this kind is that the land has significance in its own right and does not rely for its significance on buildings or other structures, or even on the landscape as merely a setting for built elements. The cultural or heritage landscape can be seen as the manifestation of the interaction of human activity, the land itself and time. The landscape is the heritage item. It has a number of components – that may include roads, vegetation, structures and traditional use of the land – that are elements of the heritage item just as a window frame is an element of a heritage item when that item is a building.

From a management perspective, we are dealing with two broad types of cultural landscape: first, landscapes that, on account of their historical context, intactness and consistency of character, can be seen as discrete entities in their own right irrespective of whether standing structures are included; and second, landscapes that can be seen as providing a setting for the main house. The two types are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Agricultural landscapes as heritage items

Independent of structures

An example of a landscape meriting conservation attention in its own right, irrespective of the standing structures or archaeological resources that may be within it, is the extant 1794 grant portions on the Hawkesbury River at Pitt Town Bottoms. Pitt Town Bottoms is remarkable at a national level on account of the high degree of intactness and scale of area. The only other landscapes in Australia containing more than a handful of intact early grant portions together are those along the upper Derwent and Back Rivers, near Hobart. These are about the scale of those at Pitt Town Bottoms though not as early: closer to 1807–1820s.

The fate of the even larger area of grants at nearby Castlereagh provides a sad warning of how recently such rare cultural assets remain so easily undervalued. There is no doubt that the last remaining area of grant portions along Castlereagh Road should have been valued above the non-renewable gravel resource – on account of which almost the entire valley is to be consumed. With the demise of the old Castlereagh farmlands, the smaller area of 1794 grants at Pitt Town Bottoms assumes even greater importance.
Management implications

There is a need to promote an increased awareness and better understanding of rural cultural landscapes of this type through education and advocacy. As a first step, we need to recognise and identify the cultural landscape and assess its significance through an analysis of fabric, layout and views. This step should inform any decision about the future land use of a site or place of importance.

For examples such as Pitt Town Bottoms, the State Heritage Manual defines a 'Composite Heritage Curtilage' as applying to conservation areas, the curtilage being based on the perimeter of the whole precinct, not individual boundaries. The Pitt Town Bottoms landscape contains a number of early high barns, which many recognise as important structures. However, there remains the problem that a precinct may contain very little built form - often only recognised as having importance when no longer used for agricultural purposes.

Where the primary implementation is at a local level, an alternative to defining a heritage curtilage, which is administered under the Heritage Act, may be to designate an Environmental Protection (Heritage or Cultural landscape) Zone. This form of protection has been used by Hawkesbury Council for the area around Hobartville at Richmond which is zoned 7(d1) Environmental Protection (Scenic). One of the objectives of this protection is to control the choice and colour of building materials and the position of buildings, access roads and landscaping. Despite this, the construction of a large, visually prominent, white house has been allowed. Examples such as this and the recent construction of houses on the ridge line near Macquarie Fields House demonstrate the lack of understanding of the visual sensitivity of many of these cultural landscapes.
Cultural landscapes as settings for homesteads

When analysing the colonial estates of the Cumberland Plain, the first type has been further divided into three subtypes based on the siting of the main building group relative to topographic elevation. These are discussed under headings of ‘Characteristics’ and ‘Management Implications’.

Summit Model

Characteristics

The summit homestead type refers to an early building group that has been sited on a prominent local knoll, bench, plateau, escarpment or ridge line such that, with the (intentional) accentuation of mature trees, the group assumes a local landmark quality. There is an obvious similarity with the traditional approach to the siting of churches, where early church buildings, in either rural or urban contexts, were generally sited on an elevated landform in order to accentuate the structure’s prominence, especially with the addition of a tower and spire. In the case of the homestead siting model, the church tower and spire is replaced by tall trees – particularly evergreen conifers such as Bunya Pines and cypresses.

Examples of this siting model include the following homesteads and, because important elements of the cultural landscape remains, the sites of some former homesteads: Harrington Park, Oran Park, Bella Vista, Macquarie Fields House, Glenfield and Horsley. A special case where a different rural structure performs the same role is the Mt Gilead mill ruin which remains highly visible as a local landmark from the Menangle area to the west, Appin Road from the east and the former Kilbride to the north.

The building/tree group often contrasts with the surrounding open agricultural land in terms of elevation, prominence and density and type of vegetative cover. As this sharp juxtaposition defines the place’s quintessential character it becomes an important aspect of cultural significance. The retention of this character would therefore be a high priority in any future decisions for the place.
Management implications

This is the most difficult type of siting model in which to introduce new development that is not, by nature, for agricultural use. Replacing the extensive open or lightly wooded fields beyond the summit homesteads immediately results in the loss of the sharp contrast of 'mass and void'; exotic and indigenous; and, when the surrounding residential plantings have matured, the intentional prominence. In essence, the quintessential character of the place is lost. Recent examples of housing development that does not allow a sufficiently generous area of open space within the retained curtilage are readily seen at Eschol Park (the area of its once internationally famous vineyards now lost under a sea of housing), Englorie Park, Horningssea Park and Glenfield. Other potential candidates include Harrington Park, Macquarie Fields House and Horsley.

At Harrington Park, a Commission of Inquiry in 1983 determined that development on the estate should be on the open rural land within the traditional viewlines from the house. Residential development will compromise the open rural character of the estate and threaten other important aspects of significance, such as the ability to appreciate the prominent homestead group in a rural setting. It will similarly threaten the serial visual experience of driving the old carriage way and the key visual connections with the spire of St John's, Camden, with its old historical neighbour, Orielton, with its more recent historical neighbour, Studley Park and with the Razorback Range. These concerns are currently being borne out with respect to the development south of Narellan Creek. There is a need to ensure the early building/tree group remains pre-eminent visually within, at least, the estate by retaining its traditional character and relationship to its domain – particularly the extent of contrast between the homestead group and the landscape beyond in terms of elevation and density and type of vegetative cover. For all three models this can be achieved by allowing a generous area of open space around the main building/tree group – preferably in traditional agricultural form – inclusive of all important related estate components based on archival and physical evidence.
Mid-slopes or Loudon Model

Characteristics

This is effectively the model for siting buildings in ‘hilly countries, or in any country where the surface is varied’ that was recommended by the influential Scottish writer on landscape taste John Claudius Loudon and further espoused in Australia in the 1830s by Thomas Shepherd. It is similar to the previous model except that the buildings are sited further down the ridge line or knoll with ‘the rising grounds behind being planted both for effect and shelter.’

This observation merely notes the coincidence of Loudon’s estate planning advice in relation to the siting model as apparent in various homesteads within the study area. It is uncertain if any direct influence can be attributed to these ideas, or those of other contemporary authors with similar concerns, without further detailed research. Examples of this siting model include Meadowvale, Beulah, Orielton, Epping Forest, Glenmore, Elizabeth Farm, Experiment Farm, the former Veteran Hall, Glenlee and Belgenny farmhouse.

Being sited generally below the brow of a hill, the homestead group is not as prominent in all directions as those sited on the basis of the previous model, though at least in a particular direction it may be very prominent. The fact that the building group is lower than the top of the landform does not diminish the visual importance of this upper landform. Retaining the integrity of the landscape visible above the level of the main buildings is just as important as doing so for the landscape below the buildings in the case of the previous model.

The building/tree group often contrasts with the surrounding open agricultural land in terms of elevation and density and type of vegetative cover. As this sharp juxtaposition defines the place’s quintessential character it becomes an important aspect of cultural significance. The retention of this character would therefore be a high priority in any future decisions for the place.

Management implications

This type is marginally less difficult to deal with than the previous Summit model. An example of a less-than-successful attempt at integrating a new residential subdivision with this type, though it had the potential to have a better outcome, is St Helen’s Park (an 1880s building of G.A. Mansfield) off the Appin Road near Campbelltown. A potential candidate for the same fate is Orielton. Epping Forest at Kearns near Campbelltown retains a semblance of ‘rural’ land around it to some extent, but the ability to appreciate the original entrance from Raby Road has been lost; it has been given a suburban street front address with full kerb and gutter and has had new residential housing encroach close on one side. Although an item of State significance, Epping Forest is currently under threat of further subdivision – Campbelltown Council having recently approved a further development application.
Again there is a need to allow a generous area of open space around the main building/tree group, preferably in traditional agricultural form. Particular attention should be given to the compositional relationship between the homestead group and the landscape visible above and around it when viewed from key locations.

**Lowland or Flatland Model**

![Diagram: Cultural landscapes - Lowland Model](image)

**Characteristics**

Homesteads sited on the basis of this model either make use of a slight rise within a broad valley floor, such as Hadley Park and neighbouring Nepean Park, or are positioned on a broad, flat area within more undulating to hilly land. While the topography may not be dramatic, the homestead group may still have some visual prominence in the context of its surrounding landscape, as the homestead Clydesdale at Marsden Park well demonstrates.

The traditional landscape context for these homesteads is generous open space where, despite the absence of dramatic topography, the flat open character allows good vistas to the building and immediate garden group. As a result of the relative lack of elevation, the background landscape may assume greater significance such that it is important to retain unencumbered both the space in front of the homestead and the space between the homestead and the background landscape. Another aspect of significance for sites applicable to this model is the sharp contrast often evident between the main homestead group and the surrounding rural landscape in terms of density and/or type of vegetative cover.

**Conclusions**

Rural cultural landscapes as a valuable resource need to be identified and assessed. This assessment should be undertaken by an appropriate practitioner independent of any proponent for a scheme for a site. It is essential to analyse fabric, layout and views to define the significance of the place. It is important
that the comparative significance of a place is assessed – although there may be other similar landscapes in the same locality, further investigation may reveal that those landscapes are rare on a regional, state or national level. This was certainly the case for the 1803 grants at Castlereagh and Pitt Town Bottoms.

An acknowledgement of the significance of the cultural landscape must be incorporated into state and local planning instruments and inform any decisions about future land use. There is a need to educate practitioners and consent authorities of both the value of significant rural landscapes and the visual sensitivity of many of them. The elements beyond the main house and the visual impact of future structures and any future plantings need to be considered when determining a ‘Reduced Curtilage.’

Within the greater Sydney region the economic arguments against the retention of rural land are becoming stronger each year. There is a need to examine ways to manage important colonial landscapes which will guarantee their retention. This may require utilising a different approach to management or a different zoning to that normally required for rural land within a local government area. Where the resource is an item listed on the State Heritage Register we should consider providing appropriate incentives (at Local, State and Federal government levels) to assist in the responsible ongoing custodial management of early estates.

endnotes
3 Ibid.