Garden Archaeology at Elizabeth Farm and Vaucluse House

Elizabeth Farm
JAMES BROADBENT

Archaeological purists and panjandrums may not have approved of the methods adopted or of the sequence of events, but the use of practical archaeology directed specifically to restoring the garden at Elizabeth Farm has been very successful.

At Elizabeth Farm archaeology was not used as a primary research tool nor its fashionable discipline celebrated per se. It was employed neither to suggest hypotheses nor to discover features, but to verify them and locate them precisely. To the chagrin of some of its practitioners it was not the mistress art but a hand-maiden, albeit a valid and indispensable attendant.

No comprehensive archaeological survey of the site had been conducted at Elizabeth Farm when the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales began restoring the garden in 1983, although over the previous decade several practical investigations had been attempted, mainly of the structures and their immediate surrounds. Such a survey would have been justified, perhaps, when the State Government began work on the site in the late 1970s, but by the time the place came under the control of the Historic Houses Trust such a disruptive and expensive undertaking did not appear justifiable. It would have been akin to a surgeon subjecting his patient to a massive exploratory operation without asking first what were the symptoms of his complaint.

By the time the Trust began work on the site some works - like the drive along the northern front of the house, reinstated on the evidence of earlier archaeological investigations - had already been undertaken and further site disturbances had occurred during the restoration of the house. The Trust, moreover, had compiled so much historical evidence from archival sources, both written and pictorial, (Figures 1 and

Figure 1 Elizabeth Farm, circa 1870
2) that it was sensible only to verify the evidence and locate those features precisely on the ground through the use of archaeology, and then only after reinstatement had been decided upon.

It is unfortunate that this historical documentation was not assembled earlier, allowing earlier analysis of the development and historical features of the site. In other words, it is a pity that an adequate conservation and management plan had not been prepared for Elizabeth Farm. This would have saved considerable time, wasted effort, expense and acrimony.

The restoration of the garden at Elizabeth Farm was undertaken in two stages. Before the Historic Houses Trust began preparing the site as a house museum two olive trees - of great age and possibly the survivors of those planted by John Macarthur in 1805 - had been expertly pruned and successfully treated for decay and the drive reinstated in its early twentieth century form. However the garden formed by the Swann family, who bought Elizabeth Farm in 1904 and lived there until 1968, had been considerably modified, through time, and, in the last decade, through neglect. The garden, then, was neither the Swanns' nor the Macarthur's; it was partly simplified, partly restored, partly overgrown with young but fast-growing species: common olives, celtis, jacarandas and camphor laurels, a palimpsest of limited worth which told a garbled, incomplete story. Late in 1983, with the weight of documentation painstakingly sought out and meticulously compiled by the Historic Houses Trust's research consultant, Mrs Joy Hughes, and with the house largely, if not consistently, restored to its appearance at the end of the Macarthur's ownership, it was decided by the Trust to redirect the restoration of the garden to respect more rigorously the Macarthur period and to be more compatible with the restored appearance of the house and its detached offices. If the garden had been intact from the Swann period possibly this decision would not have been taken; certainly without the documentary evidence amassed it would not have been considered.
The decision meant the destruction of much of the Swann family's garden - or at least much of its remaining detail and atmosphere - although where compatible with nineteenth century appearances the larger twentieth century plantings were kept. For example the macadamia nut tree, the impressive crepe myrtle and the larger jacarandas (the latter only after considerable misgivings) remain, but smaller plantings like roses of Edwardian and later vintage were removed in the same way as were the early twentieth century picture rails and fittings within the house. With the agreement of the Government Architect's Office and under the welcome direction of Ms Oi Cheong of the landscape design section, enthusiastically assisted by Miss Julie Whitfield, work proceeded swiftly and happily in the new direction.

The recently restored drive and stone-edged raised bed along the eastern front of the house were removed, to be replaced by a grassed terrace as shown in mid-nineteenth century drawings of the house. In doing this a major garden work of the Swann period was grassed over, (the drive was laid down circa 1908), but regained was an understanding of John Macarthur's architectural concept of a cottage with contrasting garden and entrance fronts. The grass terrace complements the wide French doors leading into the verandah, and the verandah's continuous, and finely moulded, threshold can be seen and comprehended. On its outer side this terrace is flanked by a flower garden and shrubbery.

At first it was decided to replace this drive, which was needed to connect the entrance front with the present street, with a new drive skirting the shrubbery. However another mid-nineteenth century drawing indicated the point where a secondary drive branched off the front drive and, on opening the ground in preparation for the new drive, evidence was found of the alignment of this secondary drive. Simple exploratory trenches indicated that this drive appeared to lie within the present confined boundary of the site and that its reinstatement was feasible. It was immediately decided to reconstruct it rather than probe a new one. Mr. Ted Higginbotham was then engaged as archaeologist to delineate this drive more carefully before its reconstruction. Fortunately there was no interference to it from later, larger plantings.

With this drive reconstructed well away from the house the intervening shrubbery was then formed and planted, following closely all the pictorial evidence available, replanting and positioning species as shown in illustrations such as an unusually sited Eucalyptus tereticornis, pink chintz roses, a bay tree and various (flag leaf) plants. A further guide to planting was found in the extensive number of references to plants in the voluminous Macarthur family correspondence and in the 1840s catalogues of plants which the Macarthurs grew at their nursery at Camden Park. The layout of paths within the shrubbery is totally hypothetical, however, although paths were suggested in various illustrations.

This method of planting or replanting based on documentary evidence extended over the whole site during the summer and autumn of 1984, leading to the removal of much suckered, seedling and confusing planting. The pretty but misplaced seedling jacaranda which had begun to cast an attractive, romantic, dappled 'Hardy Wilson' shade over the Oak Tree Court with its lime-washed walls was cut down, to be replaced by the court yard's eponymous species which shaded it throughout last century; a fine Lady Hillingdon rose in front of the house gave way to a pampas-grass; cordylines and bananas were planted where they were growing in the mid 1860s and, even by the following winter and to the dismay of architectural purists, vines had begun to festoon the verandahs as they did in the nineteenth century. And to the dismay of modern horticulturists 'weeds' appeared everywhere; not only pampas-grass but coreopsis, oxalis, prickly pear and convolvulus!

When Elizabeth Farm was opened to the public in June 1984, the garden, although still raw in parts, was generally received with enthusiasm. Preferences of taste, prejudices for or against currently fashionable or unfashionable plants and a concern over the wisdom of redirecting the restoration were mostly assuaged by the clarity with which the house, its design and
Figure 3  Elizabeth Farm: Garden plan after restoration.
historical setting could now be understood. Some elements of lesser heritage significance had been destroyed, but this was done in favour of a fuller understanding and appreciation of the place's greater heritage significances.

One feature of the garden, however, remained unresolved and confusing to the public: the landscaping of the entrance front. The rough mown grass (contrasting with the mown lawn of the garden front) and the pampas-grass were understood, if perhaps not always appreciated, but the drive had been reinstated only in front of the house. The return or outer side of the loop was only suggested, inadequately, by a wide, mown grass path. This interpretation was no longer consistent with the policy of reconstruction adopted for the rest of the garden. There was adequate pictorial evidence, as well as evidence in the form of the ground (despite recent regrading) to decide, here also, to reinstate the Macarthurs' carriage loop and again Mr Ted Higginbotham was engaged to determine, by a series of archaeological trenches, the precise alignment of this feature. It is hoped that the later fill over parts of the drive will be removed soon and a new gravel surface laid on the drive, leaving the old foundation undisturbed.

There was a danger in the approach taken by the Historic Houses Trust to restoring the garden at Elizabeth Farm. Commendably, it does rely on a rigorous analysis of extensive research material, on clear thinking and a willingness to consider a wide range of factors and not to shrink from the responsibility of making decisions. But the restoration policy did evolve - albeit quickly and surely - in a more ad-hoc way than its formulators would have wished, largely owing to the complicated recent history of the conservation of the site, the absence of a comprehensive conservation plan from the beginning, the Historic Houses Trust's late direction of the project and the importance of opening the museum without further delay. This opened up the possibility of the restoration becoming an insidious process of haphazard reconstruction. That it did not was because all concerned were aware of such a danger, and because firm restraints were imposed by respect for the original fabric, and the fulsome body of archival research at hand. Further archaeological investigations at Elizabeth Farm could perhaps have been profitable: during excavations for the foundations of the new tea-room, shop and lavatories and, in particular, of the site of John Macarthur's proposed bedroom wing where foundations were prepared and filled in and plans changed again and again during the last, sad years of his life before his proclaimed insanity. This area was disturbed twice during the restoration of Elizabeth Farm - firstly to reform the Swanns' drive, and secondly to remove it - but no adequate study was made to try to determine exactly what Macarthur, in his madness, had planned. In these cases archaeology could perhaps have assumed a dominant role and provided evidence unavailable through other means of research, but it is unlikely that any evidence found would have been significant to the garden restoration.

On other sites, under other circumstances, garden archaeology could have a dominant role to play, to locate unknown feature - paths, walls, plantings - and to elucidate the history of the site. At Elizabeth Farm this was largely unnecessary owing to the completeness of other sources of evidence. Archaeology here performed an executive rather than a directive or formative role.
Vaucluse House

PETER WATTS

A house has stood on the site of Vaucluse House in Sydney from the earliest years of the nineteenth century. A stone cottage was built there about 1803 by Sir Henry Browne Hayes, an eccentric Irish knight transported to New South Wales for abducting an heiress at Cork in 1797. Hayes arrived in Sydney in 1802 and in 1803, at a cost of 100 pounds, acquired 105 acres including land where Vaucluse House now stands. In 1812 Hayes left the colony and the house was leased to Lieutenant Governor Maurice O'Connell. By 1814 Captain John Piper, the Comptroller of Customs, had acquired control of the estate and advertised it for lease in the Sydney Gazette of 10 June, 1815:

To be let...the beautiful Villa and Demesne of Vaucluse (lately Colonel O'Connell's Country Residence); the house is very roomy, and finished in the highest style, with extensive attached and detached Offices, Stables, Coach-house, Dairy, etc. the Garden extensive, in excellent order, and well-cropped with choice Fruit and ornamental Trees; and the Farm well-known as best calculated of any in the Environs of Sydney for a Dairy.

In 1827 Captain Piper was suspended from his office for failing to account for 12,000 pounds and the estate was sold by auction to William Charles Wentworth. An advertisement in the Australian of 22 June, 1827 described it as:

A most desirable property consisting of 105 acres of land, with a genteel dwelling house, containing 8 rooms, stables and outbuildings, consisting of a detached kitchen, a dairy, two large gardens (situated near the home) well stocked with fruit trees, and containing a choice collection of plants.

Reporting on the sale five days later, the Australian implied that the property had been allowed to run down during Piper's ownership; Captain Piper's sale...Mr. Wentworth obtained Vaucluse, with the house and out offices, and gardens attached for a sum of 1,500 pounds. This charming and delightfully situated spot had those natural beauties which it still possesses, first developed, taken advantage of, and improved upon by the tasteful and well-directed efforts of Sir Henry B. Hayes, the original possessor, who from a wild and uncultivated tract reduced it to the rustic little paradise which it is said to have appeared not many years ago.

Wentworth immediately set about improving the property. Writing to Captain Piper on 30 May 1828, he noted:

I have as yet made no improvements at Vaucluse. But I am about to begin a range of offices which you are aware will add greatly to the conveniences of the place. In fact, it is at present a very uncomfortable residence.

By June the renovations had begun.

Wentworth clearly had plans for a much grander house, as the Australian reported on 24 March 1829, that 'W.C. Wentworth Esquire, is about to add to the natural beauties of Vaucluse by the erection of a new and elegant chateau'. The Sydney Monitor was probably better informed when on 30 March it noted that 'Mr. Wentworth we understand intends either adding to the snug cottage on his estate at Vaucluse...or of erecting an entire new mansion on that beautiful spot'.

Conrad Martens' sketch from Vaucluse Bay (1840) shows the "new and elegant chateau". (Figure 1)

Wentworth carried out further work on the main house in the late 1840s including adding the verandah crenellations. In Martens' pencil sketch, 'Vaucluse from the Road', vegetation is seen immediately in front of the residence, and cultivated fields to the west. In both sketches, fencing runs east/west on the seaward side of the residence between the vegetation and open grazing land and possibly fencing from the entry road. By the time Wentworth left for England in 1854 the garden was well-established.