Historical overview of Birchgrove park, Birchgrove, NSW

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Birchgrove Park and precincts
Birchgrove Park is located at the edge of Snails Bay at the western edge of Sydney Harbour and covers an area of 4.97 hectares. The central sports oval portion of the site was originally mud flats surrounded by Hawkesbury Sandstone landforms, with a steeper benched ridge on the northern side. These landforms would have supported typical Sydney sandstone open-forest containing trees such as Angophora costata and the Sydney Peppermint, Eucalyptus piperita. It is likely that Casuarina species were also found adjoining the mud flats. On the south a creek once flowed into the bay.

European settlement
The land comprising Birchgrove Park comprises a portion of a 1796 grant to Private George Whitfield of the NSW Corps and an area of reclaimed land from Snails Bay. Whitfield received a grant of land measuring thirty acres from Governor Hunter on 15 September 1796. The original grant document states that the area was to be known as ‘Whitfield’s Farm’, although it is uncertain how much of a farm was actually established during Whitfield’s relatively short ownership. One source states that early manuscripts (not cited) refer to Whitfield’s Farm as one ‘upon which dairying and fruit growing were profitably pursued’.

In 1800 Whitfield’s original grant was purchased by a Richard or William Knight who subsequently sold it to Captain E. Abbott of the NSW Corps in 1806. In 1810, Lieutenant John Birch, paymaster of the 73rd Regiment, purchased the property. Birch was the first to build a permanent residence on the site which he named Birch Grove reputedly because of the orange trees growing there at the time. The original house was constructed of stone, probably quarried on the estate. Its roof was made from shingles split from casuarinas growing on the surrounding foreshore. In 1827, Birch Grove was described in the Sydney press as having a garden of about three acres, secured by a strong fence, and containing some five hundred fruit trees. The house was enlarged significantly by subsequent owners, some of these enlargements occurring during the mid to late 1820s.

1833 before selling the property to Captain John McLean in 1838. This sale to McLean is evidently the first registered transaction for the property recorded in the Land Titles Office (Book N No. 565). McLean had borrowed the entire amount for the purchase of the estate and subsequently again mortgaged the property and extra rural land, borrowing over £5000 in 1841. Due to McLean’s substantial debts, the Supreme Court foreclosed on his loans in April 1844.

Things went from bad to worse financially, to a point where by 1849 the then mortgagees – Bloxsome and Turner – applied to the Court of Claims for a new grant. This new grant was issued on 15 July 1850 – after what appears to be some complicated conveyancing – to Bloxsome and a Thomas Icteron, with the property then being sold on to Henry Watson Parker in 1854 and then again promptly on to Didier Numa Joubert in the same year. Parker was a prominent Sydney political figure, later to become the third (though for a fleeting period) premier of New South Wales. Joubert had arrived in the colony (by way of New Zealand) from France some years earlier and had gone into business with his brother. Neither Parker nor Joubert actually ever took up residence on the estate, instead continuing to lease the house to an incumbent tenant, William Salmon Deloitte (father of Quarton L. Deloitte who was later to play a prominent role in establishing the Balmain Cricket Club), and later to a Mrs Wilkinson of Balmain. It was during the brief Parker ownership incidentally that the estate underwent a name change to ‘Hatherton’, a name which he had written into his purchase contract. Parker’s attempt to bind the new owner (Joubert) to this new name was unsuccessful so that the Birch Grove nomenclature has survived until the present day.

Joubert in fact laid the foundations of the present day Birchgrove by executing the first residential subdivision. This was undertaken by surveyor William Brownrigg between 1856, following the expiry of Deloitte’s lease, and 1860. Today’s street pattern in Birchgrove was largely generated from what was proposed in this 1860 plan, with the streets named after members of the Joubert family. Birch Grove House was to be retained on a large waterfront block with an access to its lower garden available from The Terrace. The location of Louisa Road was crucial to the subdivision. It had to be aligned along the

Figure 1 1860 painting of Long Nose Point and the Birch Grove House grounds by George P. Slade. Birch Grove House is seen at left with already mature ornamental trees (Figs. Oranges?) in front of it. There is a post and two-rail property fence across Snails Bay in the foreground. (The Balmain Association)
Creating the park

In 1878, a syndicate of three Sydney businessmen (McLean, McGregor and Threlkeld) banded together to purchase all remaining lots of the estate, and then commissioned architect and surveyor Ferdinand Reuss to draw up a new plan for subdivision and sale. Snails Bay was referred to in that plan as 'The Miniature Bay of Naples'. As recorded in a Sydney Morning Herald advertisement for the new subdivision on 19 June 1878, prospective purchasers were promised a park and recreation grounds, land set aside for a church (never built) and a government jetty. This is the first reference to a park/recreation grounds made in the successive land subdivisions at Birchgrove. Importantly, the roads set out in Brownrigg's 1860 subdivision plan were to be retained. In comparison with Joubert's abortive effort of 1860, the 1878 subdivision was to prove much more attractive to buyers. Within several years, all lots had been sold off, including 36 allotments constituting much of what today makes up a large part of Birchgrove Park. These were purchased by the Crown in November 1881 for what was first titled the 'Birch Grove Recreation Ground'.

With greater effort, the Crown, around the same time, was also able to acquire the lot on which the caretaker's residence stands. This lot, no. 9 of section 4 of the Reuss subdivision, was bought by a Mr. David Muir in December 1879. Muir is likely to have been the one to build what is now the caretaker's house (originally known as Bay View House) some time central ridge to create the maximum number of allotments with deep water access, while planned so as not to impinge on Birch Grove House – hence the placement of the bend in Louisa Road. Otherwise the subdivision allowed for the estate to be cut into ten sections "with many villa lots". In the event, sales of the allotments were to fall well short of expectations, with only seven sold by 1866. These sales included three lots adjoining Birch Grove House to its new owner, Jacob Levi Montefiore, who had bought it in 1860. Other sales were made to quarrymen and stonemasons, doubtless attracted by the underlying natural rock on which the Birchgrove estate stood.

The results of this 1860 subdivision must have been disappointing to Joubert. In today's terminology he would be seen as a property developer. He already had a track record with his brother in developing Hunter's Hill and clearly looked at his Birchgrove acquisition as a further commercial property venture. In that regard, he still owed a large sum to Henry Parker on his original purchase of Birchgrove, necessitating that he re-mortgage the property in 1860 to discharge his obligation to Parker. Financing for this was arranged through the Bank of New South Wales and the Liverpool Fire and Life Insurance Company, with the Bank assuming the total mortgage in 1862 when the Liverpool company went into liquidation on 3 December 1862. Seven days later Joubert effectively surrendered his remaining interest in the property to the Bank of New South Wales. In the next sixteen years years the Bank of New South Wales was to make only twenty three sales of further lots from the estate. This probably reflected the overhang in the market arising from the placement by the owners of large areas of the nearby Balmain Estate on the market at the same time. By 1876, eighty two lots of the original 1860 subdivision in Birchgrove remained unsold. Birch Grove House itself meanwhile had been sold again, this time to John Lowry Adams, a Sydney Bank manager, in 1876.
between 1880 and 1885. The proposed resumption was first resisted by the owner, who took the matter to court, where he was eventually awarded one farthing in damages – but was also stuck with the bill for the full costs of the action! The Crown acquired the property soon after anyway.

These purchases and acquisitions for the proposed park came with full local and wider community support. Indeed, the laying down of parklands for recreation and related activities was the object of numerous public petitions in the Sydney of the day, with citizens anxious to preserve open spaces among the subdivisions blossoming throughout the property boom of the 1880s. In 1880 Sir Henry Parkes’ Government passed the Land for Public Purposes Act and allocated some monies accordingly. The Public Parks Act followed in 1884. The land preserved for public use was often of the poorest quality, however, as indeed was the case with the Snails Bay waterfront, which was little more than a wide expanse of mud flats at low tide. Reuss was engaged to design the Park, with a picket-fenced cricket oval as its centrepiece.

To allow the full development of Birchgrove Park, further land had to be hived off Birch Grove House grounds, with J. L. Adams agreeing to surrender a portion of the waterfront-facing land of Birch Grove House in 1886. Initial fencing of the recreation grounds commenced in 1883 and was completed in 1885. A practice cricket pitch was laid out in 1885 (at which time, too, major levelling-off works were carried out). The Balmain Observer from September 1885 reported that requests had already been made for construction of toilet blocks and shelters in the park. A dozen bench seats were also purchased around this time for the park. In 1887, Thomas Rose, a man with botanical experience, was engaged to carry out planting and landscape work in the park.

Almost from its foundation in 1882, the newly constituted Birchgrove Park Trust pressed for Government support for a large-scale program to reclaim the mud flats in the bay, using filling from the Sutherland Dock then being excavated on Cockatoo Island. As a result, a large portion of the mud flats was steadily reclaimed from 1886 and a rough dyke wall to support the oval was begun in 1887; by 1904 this reclaimed land was fully incorporated into the park. Of passing interest is that, although maps from the early 1880s show the land purchased by the Crown as being reserved for public recreation, it was not until 6 July 1894 that Birchgrove Park was formally proclaimed (Government Gazette: 4351).

The development of the park did not proceed evenly, with an extended hiatus occurring during the depression of the early 1890s. Work resumed again in 1897, however, when further filling using clay from Davison Street (above White Bay) was laid, thus enabling an extension of the line of reclamation beyond the 1887 dyke-wall, and thereby the construction of the sandstone block seawall present today. Some changes were made to the land surrounding the new park. By the mid-1880s the northern arm of The Terrace had been terminated at its current end point; thenceforth the only vehicular access to Birch Grove House was from Louisa Road. Earlier issues of the Balmain Observer (from 1885) also record that at that time gates had stood across The Terrace at Ferdinand Street, presumably to limit vehicular access across the park and developing cricket ground. These gates were subsequently removed. The owner of Birch Grove House (Adams) meantime had himself moved out of the mansion in 1897, leasing the property to Richard Bennetts in 1899. In 1900 Adams subdivided the Birch Grove House grounds into 12 lots. Mary Scott bought the lot containing the mansion, and in 1911 subdivided it further, into 5 portions.

**Sport for all**

The tennis courts near Rose Street were laid out around 1902 and the Birchgrove Tennis Club was launched in 1904 and celebrated its centenary last year. Although on Crown land, it is controlled by Leichhardt Council and is currently leased to the North Western Tennis Association. In addition, a single tennis court with an adjoining pavilion was built c.1910 at the request of St John’s Church at the south-east end of the park near Grove Street, but was not officially opened until 1920. It was known as the Parkview Tennis Club, and its members still play weekly. The Balmain District Cricket Club was founded in 1897, with an inaugural match held in September that year. In 1910, the Secretary of the Park Trust was able to describe Birchgrove Park as covering seven acres and containing three cricket or football spaces. Already, by 1902, a small grandstand near the

![Figure 4](https://example.com/figure4.jpg) Looking north across Snails Bay c.1891, at which time the reclamation and sea wall works were under construction (beyond the right side of this image). The original sea wall and the sandstone retaining wall upslope from it are also visible on the far side of the bay. Birch Grove House is at the top left of the image. Note the mature Norfolk Is. Pine and (probably) Fig Trees that surround it. At the foot of this image a white picket fence is already in place along the southern boundary of the park. (SLNSW, Mitchell Collection Small Pictures File)
caretaker's residence had been built; it was demolished in 1989.

From the very beginning, then, it is evident that the park's raison d'être was as a venue for substantial sporting activities. Indeed, it is probably no exaggeration to see the development of the Park through the first half of the twentieth century as pretty much synonymous with the development of the Balmain District Cricket Club. A number of prominent Balmain identities associated with the Club were also associated with the Birchgrove Park Trust.

One of these was Quarton L. Deloitte, president of the cricket club in its very early years. Earlier, Deloitte Avenue, which had been laid down in 1904 after completion of the reclamation, had been named after him, partly in appreciation for his leading role in the Park Trust since 1884. He contributed both a great deal of time and money to the Park. With Mr A. H. Fitzhardinge, he is credited with having been instrumental in the planting of some 300 trees and palms in the park, presumably in the period 1905-1925. Deloitte was to become one of the most prominent sporting identities in Sydney, making a major contribution to the establishment of rowing on the river. However, he maintained his close links with Balmain Cricket Club until his death in 1929. The Deloitte Gates were erected in his honour the following year at the entry to the park off the jetty, but were melted down during World War II for use in the war effort. Today, the only reminder of the Deloitte Gates is the plaque fixed to the edge of the sea wall.

Rugby League was also played there, with the first First Grade League game actually being staged at Birchgrove Park on 20 April 1908. The game was between North Sydney and South Sydney, with Norths defeating Souths by 11-7. A second game the same afternoon was between Balmain and Wests (Balmain won 24 to nil), with other games simultaneously being played between Newtown and Eastern Suburbs and Glebe and Newcastle at nearby Wentworth Park. Birchgrove Park remained the home ground of the Balmain Rugby League Club until 1933.

Figure 6 Birchgrove park today.

In 1932 Birchgrove Park eclipsed the previous record for hosting a local cricket match when, over two Saturdays, a crowd of some 20,000 attended to watch Donald Bradman play for St George against Balmain. Special trams had to be laid on to bring the large crowds to the oval for the match. Cricket (and Rugby League) continued to figure prominently in usage of the park through the twenties and thirties and, indeed, after WWII, into the fifties and sixties.

The Birchgrove Park Trust ceased to exist in 1948 because of limited funding available, and management of the Park was taken over by Balmain Council until the latter was subsumed into Leichhardt Council the following year. In 1953, Council also took over management of the tennis courts adjacent to Rose Street, leasing the land to the Balmain Tennis Association for twenty-five years. In 1954 the courts were changed from lawn to a clay/loam surface, making it a less exclusive club. From 1962 Council undertook a four year plan of improvement to the courts, which included replacement of the original timber clubhouse and turning the courts into a truly hard surface. A new lease was negotiated in 1976 when the Balmain Tennis Association amalgamated with the North-Western Tennis Association, still the current lease holder. The two tennis courts adjacent to Louisa road were constructed in early 1970 in a passive landscape space at the north-west corner of the Park.

Plans for a substantial upgrade of the caretaker's house were prepared in 1988-89 by architects Windass Hamer. These were carried out, and it is now in good condition. At that time too, the old, small grandstand was removed, and although proposals were made to replace it within the same general footprint, this did not occur. The old timber change rooms nearby were also demolished and not replaced, as was a picket fence along The Terrace. However, a new picket fence was constructed around the entire oval in the early 1990s, replacing one of a succession of earlier fences in that location. The architects recommended that a landscape architect should be engaged to prepare a landscape plan for embellishment of the carpark at the corner of Rose Street and Ferdinand Street and for general improvement in the Park. This, however, did not occur, and the entrance still requires a substantial upgrade.

Endnotes

2 Presumably planted by Whitfield, but possibly by Knight or Abbott, the successive owners before 1810.
3 South, S. The Birchgrove Subdivision: A search plan, Balmain Association inc. 1996.
5 Balmain Observer March 1886.
6 It is also worth noting that, according to Water Board Plans, the large sandstone block retaining wall at the eastern end of the propety was already in place by 1893, showing that was part of the Birch Grove House property, and not built as a result of the 1900 or 1911 subdivisions.
7 William Salmon Deloitte, his father, was a tenant of Birch Grove House from about 1850 to 1865.
8 For example, the Sydney Botanical Gardens provided 24 trees to the Birchgrove Park Trust in July 1911.
9 Minute to Town Clerk from Municipal Engineer, 16 February 1988.