Establishing public parks for the public good was a desire of many in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when enlightened planning ideals for social reform and healthy living were being realised in city planning and new garden suburbs. However, existing cultural and even natural features were not necessarily acknowledged in park planning at that time, and often ignored and even obliterated the fabric and evidence of the colonial history that underlay them. For example, visitors to Robertson Park in Watson’s Bay today see little to alert them to the important role this now bland site played in the shipping, fishing and recreational history of Sydney Harbour since the first years of settlement. All that remains are a few near-senescent Figs and Pines to indicate that this was once the site of the first pilots’ cottages and subsequently of elegant marine villas, occupied since the late 1830s by leading citizens of the colony. The most notable of these villas was ‘Clovelly’, lived in successively by relatives of John Macarthur and finally by Sir John Robertson, five times Premier of New South Wales. Two other marine villas were also built here, of which one was converted into a marine hotel in the early 1850s and remains today as ‘Dunbar House’.

The site’s earliest role began in 1790, when a look-out was established on the bluff of Outer South Head to spot ships intending to enter the harbour. Sailors (midshipmen and seamen of the Sirius) were stationed at the South Head ‘Lookout’ from January 1790. In May 1790 a stonemason’s gang etc. were sent to South Head to build two huts for the sailors who were stationed there. These ‘white-washed cottages’ were situated in a valley near the beach, with a ‘full of fresh water at a stone’s throw on each hand’. Most historians of Watsons Bay agree that this description probably refers to the area that is today Robertson Park, which originally had a freshwater stream running through it. In 1791, the first pilot, David Blackburn, Master of HMS Supply, brought in HMS Gorgon through the Heads, while the following year a man named Barton was appointed to establish the colony’s first fishery at the Bay, and to board all ships coming into the Harbour and pilot them to the settlement.

In 1800, Robert Watson, former quartermaster on HMS Sirius, was appointed pilot and by 1811 had constructed a substantial stone house, with a stone wall surrounding a large garden to its rear. This garden was sited close to the same freshwater creek that rose from the ridge to the south of The Gap and fed the first pilots’ cottages downstream. It was built at the point where a rough track off the newly constructed South Head Road from Sydney to the Signal Station reached the Bay (also in 1811) and made a left hand-turn to the water. An obelisk, which remains to this day, commemorates the completion of the road by a party of 21 soldiers from Governor Macquarie’s own regiment in the impressively short time of 10 weeks. The Bay took its name from Watson, and was henceforth known as Watsons Bay.

As part of his broad programme of public works, Governor Macquarie in July 1816 laid the foundation stone of a new lighthouse to replace the brick column and fire basket of the original signal station. The round tower and two accommodation wings were completed and the light installed in 1818, and Robert Watson was appointed as its first Superintendent. Watson took up residence there, but died the following year.

Meanwhile, other pilots were appointed and took up residence in the Bay. One of these was Captain Richard Siddins, who occupied Watson’s house for some time, before constructing his own house on land promised to him by Governor Darling in 1828. A survey sketch of 1828 shows that Siddins occupied three blocks of land, the largest astride the lower portion of what is now Robertson Park. Attached to its south-eastern corner was Robert Watson’s stone house and walled-in back garden. Siddins also owned a square of land upslope, east of this larger block, shown as ‘Siddins Garden’, through which the stream ran. Both of these blocks lay across what is now the southern...

Figure 1 The 1828 surveyor’s sketch showing the land grants intended for Thomas Watson and Richard Siddins, with an outline of two dwellings and three fenced areas of land already occupied by Siddins. Note the creekline (arrowed) flowing through Siddins’ garden and down through the Watson grant to Watsons Bay.
Figure 2 The 1835 surveyor's sketch showing Siddins' new villa (arrowed) with outbuildings at left, Robert Watson's 1811 house at centre, and an earlier house (lower right) owned by Siddins and later by Patrick Humphries. The latter's new 4-acre grant is shown on the right half of the sketch.

Figure 3 The Campbell subdivision, c.1841, showing 'Zandvliet' on Lot 1 (at left). Meanwhile, Hannibal Macarthur had purchased Thos. Watson's grant. The land which subsequently ended up as Robertson Park is roughly contained within the dashed red line. (Woollahra Local History Centre)

section of Robertson Park. Another pilot, Thomas Watson (no relation to Robert), was appointed in 1819 and was also promised land adjacent to the north of Siddins'. These are shown on the surveyor's sketch. Although the land grants were surveyed in 1828, they were not formalized until 1834.

It would appear that in the early 1830s both Siddins and Watson built marine villas on their land. A surveyor's sketch of 1835 show Siddins' new villa with its outbuildings (possibly earlier). As Siddins and family moved into the Lighthouse Superintendent's house in 1832, either the new villa was built as an investment or, if constructed prior to 1832, it would only have been occupied by the Siddins for a very short time.

Siddins' new villa was purchased by Colonial Architect Mortimer Lewis in December 1836. He may well have upgraded it, since the following year he advertised it for sale or lease, the house being large enough and suitable for 'a respectable family or Boarding School'. This is the building, which after many owners and transformation into an hotel, remains today, known (irrelevantly) as 'Dunbar House', named after the famous shipwreck. It was purchased from Lewis in 1839 by Cape Town-born Pieter Laurenz Campbell, Colonial Treasurer, who named it 'Zandvliet', an Afrikaans word meaning 'sandy meadow'. Although Campbell quickly purchased some adjacent lots, he got into financial difficulties late in 1840 and returned to South Africa in 1841, putting his land up for subdivision. The colonial administration meanwhile bisected the original Siddins' grant by a track identified as 'Reserved Road'—later known as Toogood Street and finally Clovelly Street. The subdivided lots, however, sold only slowly.

Thomas Watson offered his 'beautifully chaste and neat marine villa' for sale in 1835, which suggests it had been commenced somewhat before he got legal title to the grant in 1834. It was described as containing 'six rooms, kitchen, three excellent cellars, together with coachhouse, stabling, all necessary out offices and a large yard'. It was leased to Hannibal Hawkins Macarthur, a pastoralist, politician, and businessman, member of the legislative Council since 1830 and chairman of the Bank of Australia from 1835. Hannibal was a nephew of the late John Macarthur, founder of one of the most prominent families in the colony. His wife Anna Maria was also from a prominent family, being the daughter of former Governor King. In 1840 Macarthur purchased the residence and its fine gardens which went down to the harbour for £1000. He named it 'Clovelly', after the village of that name on the north coast of Devon, near where he had grown up. His aunt, Elizabeth Macarthur, widow of John Macarthur, spent three summers with Hannibal's family from 1847. She died there in 1850.

Hannibal Macarthur's youngest daughter Emmeline, who had grown up at 'Clovelly', married Henry Watson Parker. Parker bought the house from his father-in-law in 1848 and enlarged the estate by acquiring a small parcel of adjacent land from the Crown in 1851, a further three lots adjoining his property to the south (from the 1841-47 'Zandvliet' subdivision) and a further piece of land (section 7) to its north, when the 'Roddam Farm' estate was finally auctioned in 1855. On the expanded grounds he then established a garden of exotic trees and
Figure 4 Survey c. 1850 of the Marine Hotel (formerly Zandvliet), its grounds and neighbouring allotments. Note the Reserved Road between Government Road (now Military Road) and the track leading off Government Road (now Robertson Place) to the front of the Hotel, with a branch off it directly to the Bay. This track did not join Reserved Road (now Clovelly Street) at this time. By 1850, Henry Parker had acquired some of the 1841/47 subdivision lots of Campbell's estate. These are on the left-hand side of Reserved Road. (Woolloomooloo Local History Centre)

shrubs, of which some Moreton Bay Figs and Norfolk Island Pines still remain. He also extended the house, behind which was a kitchen and a row of servants' quarters, stables and a coach-house; however, in 1848 there was no carriageway to it. By this time Parker was a member of the NSW Legislative Council, and later became Premier. He was knighted in 1858 and returned to England soon after.

Campbell's 'Zandvliet' was leased to former squatter, now a Sydney gentleman, Thomas Macquoid, who continued in residence even after it was purchased by the Sydney merchant Thomas Woolley in 1847. A further effort was made that year to sell the unsold (or default payment) lots of the 1841 subdivision. In 1854 Woolley in turn sold 'Zandvliet' and its surrounding acreage to Sydney merchants Ralph Robey and Elias Weekes, who had plans to promote Watsons Bay as an excursion destination for day-trippers by boat and holiday makers from the city. They built a wharf near Laing's Point (after they acquired 'Roddam Farm'), and renamed 'Zandvliet' the Marine Hotel. They then established a ferry service to the Bay based on the steamer Victoria.

After leasing the newly established Marine Hotel to Charles Smith in 1854, Robey sold lots 1-4 (the villa and grounds) to John Young, innkeeper. Young only held the property for a few years before on-selling it to Alfred Toogood, also an innkeeper. Toogood built a pier at the front of the hotel, and renamed it the Greenwich Pier Hotel. The street that is now called Clovelly Street was initially named Toogood Street from its proximity to that hotel. In the following decades, the building changed hands and names several times — but still as an hotel, until it was purchased in 1924 as Council Chambers for the newly formed Vaucluse Council. It was acquired in 1949 by Woollahra Council when it was combined with Vaucluse Council, and has remained in Council ownership ever since. It now serves as part restaurant, and part branch library.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, 'Clovelly' was leased and then owned by Sir John Robertson, who was five times premier of New South Wales. During that period, Sir John acquired a considerable amount of land at Watsons Bay, including much of that originally granted to Siddins. After he died in 1881, however, the land was gradually sold off, and the villa decayed. It was demolished in 1903, and in 1906 Vaucluse Council resumed ownership of the 'Clovelly' estate to create a public park. This was consolidated in 1910 with the purchase of some neighbouring lots.

Meanwhile, from c.1841, another marine villa was built, possibly over one of the original pilots' cottages, just to the north of 'Zandvliet', across the Reserved Road, by pilot George Bainbridge. It was acquired in 1855 by Robert Cork, another pilot, who named it 'Zenleith'. This villa remained in place until c. 1910, when it was demolished during the formation of Robertson Park.

Throughout the nineteenth century the site of Robertson Park was a lively, vital and important place, containing pilots cottages, marine villas, ferry jetties, and hotel facilities for day-trippers and holiday makers. It was flanked on the north and

Figure 5 Early panoramic etching c.1835 looking west down the harbour from Watson's Bay. Siddins' house is the second building from the right edge of the image, seen with its service wing coming off the back of it. What appears to be Robert Watson's 1811 house with its stone garden wall lies in the centre foreground, with Westland's house beyond it, and Humphrey's house to the left. The building on the far right may be a cottage built by one of the first pilots. (Woolloomooloo Local History Centre)
south by fishermen's cottages, and on the east by The Gap, a major tourist site for over a century. By contrast, this vital space became unrecognizable after its acquisition by Woollahra Council to establish a public park. All the nineteenth-century fabric was cleared away, leaving only the Figs and Pines. The area was mostly grassed over, with a rotunda built toward the eastern end in 1914, in front of the footprint of 'Clovelly'.

A 1930 aerial photograph shows a mostly bare park, with only a scatter of trees. The subsequent two pathways, following pedestrian desire lines, were put in between 1930 and 1940; the main path was planted on both sides by the then fashionable Canary Island Palms. This followed precedents established at Hyde Park and other places, adopting the basic principles of the 'city beautiful' style. The layout of Robertson Park was probably done by the Council's Chief Engineer.

In the 1950s, picnic shelter sheds were installed in the park, and in the 1980s additional plantings were put in, principally Norfolk Island Hibiscus and Port Jackson Figs, plus some Coast Banksias and Casuarinas. Some of these plantings prospered, while others did not. During the late 1980s, the Canary Island Palms succumbed to Fusarium Wilt, and replacements also failed. They were all removed in late 2002.

Shortly beforehand, some new Norfolk Island Pines were planted along the secondary axial pathway, apparently without thought as to whether they would effectively cut the park in half visually, and block views from The Gap down the park to Watsons Bay. Also without much thought, a toilet block was constructed right on the north-western edge of the footprint of 'Clovelly', while a children's playground was built on the south-western edge. In so siting these facilities no respect was paid to the curtilage of the previous villa.

Although Woollahra Council prepared a Plan of Management for Robertson Park in 1996, no heritage study was undertaken, so its important nineteenth-century role was scarcely known and not taken into account. Fortunately this was rectified when Council commissioned a heritage study to accompany a new Plan of Management prepared during 2003. The heritage study assessed the Park as having high heritage significance, at State level, not really for its twentieth-century layout and fabric but principally for the major role which the site played in the nineteenth-century history of Watsons Bay – pilotage and signalling for ships entering Sydney Harbour, residential site for leading citizens, and day-tripper/holiday/tourist venue. The continuing presence of one of the 1830s villas, now 'Dunbar House', on its edge and a scatter of remnant Figs and Pines are the only readily visible evidence of that period. It is hoped that the new Plan of Management and its accompanying landscape master plan will succeed in demonstrating the site's rich past.

In the preparation of the current Plan of Management, the head consultants, Environmental Partnership of Sydney, took into account the findings of the heritage sub-consultant (the writer of this article) and discussed with him the preparation of a new landscape master plan for the Park. The writer's preferred re-positioning of the Park's twentieth-century elements is based on a desire to provide a clear curtilage for the footprint of former 'Clovelly' house, as well as a clear sight-line between

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**Figure 6** The western façade of 'Clovelly', seen here in 1884. (Woollahra Local History Centre)

**Figure 7** The rotunda or bandstand in Robertson Park, built 1914. (Woollahra Council archives)

**Figure 8** This 1961 aerial photograph shows the simple axial pathway laid diagonally across Robertson Park, bordered by an avenue of Canary Island Palms. Doyles restaurant and jetty is at bottom left. Source: LPI
Figure 9 Sketch showing the footprint of 'Clovelly' with the twentieth-century toilet, rotunda and playground crowding its curtilage.

Figure 10 The writer's preferred location for twentieth-century elements of the park.

The Gap and the Harbour. It should be noted that not all of the preferred (re)locations for functional twentieth-century park elements put forward by this writer or the head consultants have been adopted, principally because of other considerations by Council and its planners.

Endnotes
1 Sydney Gazette 29.8.1835 p.3
2 Comber, J. 'Historical archaeological survey of Robertson Park to locate the remains of the Clovelly estate'. Report to Woollahra Council, 1991, 4-5.