

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TEST-EXCAVATION, 2008.

“A SMALL MISERABLE HUT”, CAMDEN ESTATE.

In 1810, the newly arrived governor, Lachlan Macquarie, visited Mrs. Elizabeth Macarthur on the Camden Estate. The meeting took place in “a small miserable hut”, as described in Macquarie’s Journal. This humble building was the first Macarthur residence on the estate.

By 1984, the NSW Department of Agriculture (now Department of Primary Industries) had acquired 1,583 hectares of the Camden Estate, leaving Camden House and grounds in the hands of Macarthur descendants.

The government established the Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute on the land and also conserved the historic Belgenny Farmstead.

The Belgenny Farm Trust now seeks to extend their current educational and community programme to include the site of the “small miserable hut” and have commissioned the current test-excavation programme.

Historical background.

John Macarthur was born in Devon, England in 1767. He married Elizabeth Veale in 1788 and arrived at Sydney with the NSW Corps in 1790.

As regimental paymaster and inspector of public works, John Macarthur acquired Elizabeth Farm at Parramatta in 1793 and became a prominent landholder in the fledgling colony.

Arrested by Governor King in 1801 after a duel and sent to England for trial, Macarthur

nonetheless escaped court-martial. Instead, using his connections, John Macarthur first published a “*Statement of the Improvement and Progress of the Breed of Fine Woolled Sheep in New South Wales*” in 1803 and then proceeded to secure backing for the development of the merino wool industry in NSW. With the permission of Lord Camden, he resigned from the NSW Corps and then returned to NSW in 1805 with a promise of a grant of 5,000 acres, together with merino sheep from the royal flocks. He was also promised an additional 5,000 acres, if his enterprise flourished.¹



Portions 1 and 4 on the Parish Map of Camden, County Camden, 1880 edition. (Source, Lands Dept, Parish Map Preservation Project).

Hence Macarthur obtained the valuable Camden Estate in the Cowpastures in 1805. However his involvement in the deposition of Governor Bligh in 1808 again saw him absent from NSW from 1809 until 1817. It was therefore left to his wife, Elizabeth Macarthur, to develop the interests of the family in NSW.

Returning in 1817, John Macarthur was able to further develop the merino wool industry, receiving the second grant of 5,000 acres at Camden in 1822 and founding the Australian Agricultural Company in 1824.

John Macarthur was appointed to the newly formed Legislative Council in 1825, then again in 1829-1832. He was declared insane in 1832 and died in 1834. His wife and children continued to develop their agricultural and pastoral interests, with the family connection to Camden continuing to the present day.

The “small miserable hut”.

On 18 December 1805, John Macarthur received a grant of 2,250 acres at Camden (Portion 1, Parish of Camden). It included valuable flood plains and lagoons, which would be ideal for crops, water and pasture for stock. (The remainder of the 5,000 acres was granted at other locations).

John first camped on his land in September 1805 and busied himself with “fixing his establishment at the Cowpasture”.

Interestingly, the ridge of land occupied by Belgenny Farm and the site of the “small miserable hut” were located slightly to the west of this grant. It was not unusual for landholders in the 19th century to find that they had built outside their grant when the boundaries were eventually accurately surveyed.

When Macquarie visited in 1810, the “small miserable hut” was the abode of Elizabeth Macarthur during her visits to Camden. It was only later that Belgenny Cottage (1821) and then Camden House (1834) were built.

When Macquarie again visited in 1815, Mrs Macarthur was by then aware of the situation of the “cottage” and was forced to solicit the governor for this additional block of land.

¹ Australian Dictionary of Biography.

Surveyor James Meehan marked out the land in 1818, mentioning that it was the “present residence” of John Macarthur. In exchange for land at Toongabbie, surrendered to the government, the original instruction for 60 acres was extended and granted on 27 May 1823 (Portion 4, Parish of Camden, 2,065 acres).

Some important points.

Land above the flood level, but close to a watercourse was an ideal location for a farm.

This is exactly the situation of Belgenny Farm and the “small miserable hut”. In addition the house site overlooked some of the richest farmland in Australia. In 1822 it was described as “the first agricultural establishment in the colony”.

The Camden Estate is exceedingly rare from many points of view. It is one of the only estates where we can see the progression of residences so clearly, from hut (by 1810) to cottage (by 1815), from Belgenny Farm (1821) to Camden House (1834).

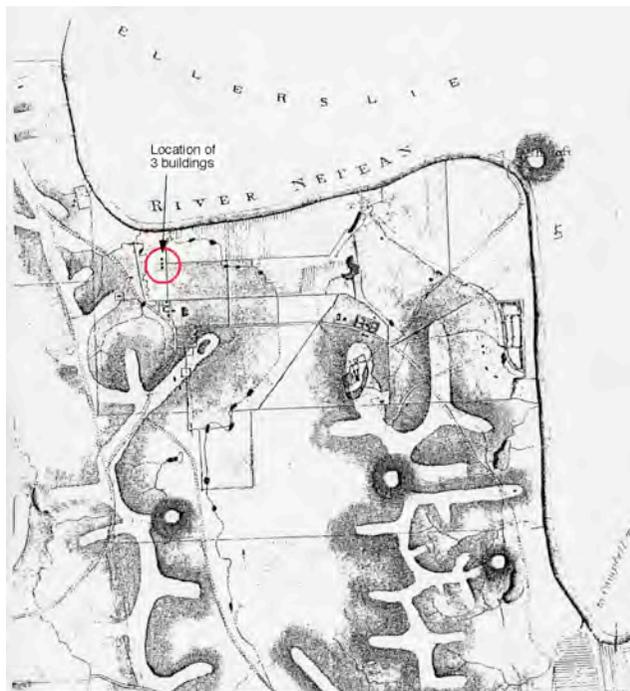
It exemplifies the advice later given by James Atkinson: 2

“The time and expense bestowed upon setting up the requisite buildings, are among the greatest drawbacks upon the success of the new Settler; and on this point the best advice that can be offered to him is, to proceed with extreme caution, and to build nothing that he does not feel to be absolutely and indispensably necessary....The capital that would be required to build a good house and offices at the first commencement of a Settler’s career, if invested in live stock, and employed in the cultivation and improvement of his land, would

soon afford him the means of erecting those buildings out of the mere proceeds;”



Above - Conrad Martens' watercolour as reproduced in Susanna De Vries, *Strength of Spirit: pioneering women of achievement from First Fleet to Federation*, Millennium, Alexandria, 1995.
Left - Plan of the Camden Park Estate in the 1840s. Belgenny Farm Trust.



Camden is also rare in possessing a historical plan showing improvements and outbuildings, dated to the 1840s and also a painting by Conrad Martens of the original hut, dated to either 1835 or 1836. These illustrations, together with the other historical documentation, allow us to locate the potential position of the “small miserable hut”.

What do we hope to find?

The presumed site of the “small miserable hut” has not been cultivated for many years. The mounds and undulations associated with occupation are still clearly visible.

The site was assessed and planned in 2006-2007 and an excavation permit for test-excavation obtained.

Three buildings are shown on the 1840s Estate Plan. These buildings can be approximately located on the ground, but we are not at present able to identify which, if any, is the original “small miserable hut”.

The initial test-excavation will help identify the original hut site, or alternatively show how this hut of 1810 grew into the cottage or residence mentioned in 1815 and 1818.

The excavation will also reveal some of the occupational material, allowing us to date the buildings more precisely and identify their usage. Will the archaeological evidence indicate buildings occupied by landowners or those working on the estate?

2 James Atkinson. 1826. “An Account of the State of Agriculture and Grazing in New South Wales”. Facsimile edition. 1975. Sydney University Press. p.94-95.

Archaeological excavations by
Dr. Edward Higginbotham.
Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd.
PO Box 97, HABERFIELD, NSW 2045.
www.higginbotham.com.au
Mobile: 0418 86 1788.
Historical research by Terry Kass, 9749-4128.
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