

## **Farming – a Garden of Eden**

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the farms and market gardens of St George transformed into suburban house blocks, small-scale farming moved south into the Sutherland district.

In what was now a market gardening centre, grapes, strawberries, blackberries, peaches and vegetables flourished. Many local farmers only survived if a family member worked in casual employment, earning 'off farm' income.

As fruit growing declined in Sydney, farmers in Sutherland Shire turned to poultry which became the district's largest primary industry.

In the 1950s the remaining poultry farms, piggeries and dairies closed, and Sutherland Shire's rural landscape was subsumed by housing and light industry, except for Menai where small farms – established on Crown Land following the Homestead Selection Act of 1895 – continued to operate.

This outlying part of the district remained rural until the 1970s. Much of the farm machinery displayed outside is from that area.

## Farming – a Garden of Eden

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, small-scale farming moved south into the Sutherland district as the farms and market gardens of St George – referred to as ‘the salad bowl of Sydney’ – transformed into suburban house blocks. Although the land south of the Georges River was as fertile as St George, by the 1890s it had become known as a market gardening centre.

Grapes, strawberries and vegetables were grown. Blackberries – later to reach plague proportions – were harvested and Sutherland peaches, according to the *St George Advocate*, ‘were the size of cricket balls and of fine flavour’.

The Samways family moved from Rockdale to Sylvania in 1889 and on a large block of land – located west of where Southgate shopping centre now is – they ran a dairy, an orchard and a market garden. At Highfield (Caringbah) Joe Mondel produced wine from the family’s extensive vineyards where orchards also bloomed.

In 1895 when young Fredric Corbett’s doctor advised him to go to the country for his health, he decided to set up a poultry farm on Willarong Road, Highfield. He also planted a small orchard of mainly peach, plum, pear and apple trees. ‘Common lemon trees’, his granddaughter Patricia Rolland recalled, ‘grew in the chook yards’. In 1901 Fredric married Balmain girl Margaret Warrington. With nine children, the family flourished, as did the farm. Patricia Rolland remembered her grandmother as a happy woman, always ‘singing and whistling’. She ‘enjoyed her lifestyle’. Frederic seems to have as well. His health obviously improved, and they were eventually to share 52 years of married life.

Produce displayed at the Holt-Sutherland Show held at Miranda in February 1898 indicates the range of the district’s produce. *The Sydney Mail* announced that prizes were awarded for the best melons, pumpkins – nine varieties – slipstone peaches, nectarines, black and white grapes, watermelons, rockmelons, red and yellow tomatoes, corn, custard marrows, different varieties of flowers, hen and duck eggs and oaten hay.

Sutherland Shire Historical Society stalwart, Allan McGrath (1925-2006) used to tell how his grandparents settled at Loftus in about 1900. The McGraths kept pigs and sold the porkers to local butchers, the Stapletons. They also ran an orchard and had a well-tended garden that grew produce for the family. While his grandfather worked in casual employment as a well sinker, a stone worker and on the roads, his grandmother did the bulk of the farm work. Allan recalled what a large, capable woman she was and how, ‘there was nothing she couldn’t do’. The memory of her crisp Christmas apples and mouth-watering peaches were sensations, Allan recalled, ‘that stop with you forever’.

Apparently, the small farmer, the fruit grower and poultry breeder could earn a modest living in the Sutherland district – that is if one partner brought in what is now called ‘off-farm income’. As historian Maryanne Larkin has pointed out, tenants who leased Holt-Sutherland land had an advantage over farmers in other areas, as they had less money tied up in land ownership than those paying off mortgages on freehold properties.

Holt-Sutherland leases did not suit everyone. On a high windy ridge west of the Woronora River at Menai – then known as Bangor – was not as fertile as at Miranda. Despite this, small farms were established there on Crown land after the Homestead Selection Act of 1895 was passed. The *St George Advocate* commented in 1901:

a lot of Miranda men had migrated there, and are forming homes which are a great contrast to Miranda. They have lots about 30 acres each for 5/- per annum and they have been paying the Holt Sutherland Company £5 for a lot one-sixth the size they now occupy.

The Midgley family – also active in Sutherland Shire Historical Society – were among these ‘Miranda men’ who moved west. A Welshman, Owen Jones, said to have been the first settler at Menai, was a community minded man. He made his humble home available in 1902 for use as a school room until a purpose-built school was constructed. While the eastern part of the Shire grew vigorously, this outlying part of the district remained rural until the 1970s.

By 1911, Sutherland Shire was described as a district of ‘snug little poultry farms’, and vibrant nurseries growing flowers for sale in Sydney. A promotional edition of *Australian Country Life* included this glowing testimonial from a fruit inspector:

I have inspected nearly every orchard in the Sutherland district, and I am pleased to say that the best of stone fruit can be grown in any part of it. I have seen the famous Briggs May peach grown to perfection at Miranda ... at Sylvania they grow some splendid crops of quinces and Lisbon lemons, and at Highfield the strawberries grow to perfection. At Sutherland I have seen the best grapes in any vineyard on the south coast.

The ‘Old Farm’, the geographical centre of the district with its relatively fertile soil, had been the hub of Holt’s Sutherland operations. After the Holt-Sutherland Estate Land Company was formed in 1881, tenant farmers settled where the Five Ways – originally the Six Ways – now is, and the village of Miranda developed from there.

Miranda became the rural heart of the district, where in 1916 a cooperative was formed. This expanded into the Miranda Co-operative Society Ltd and operated until the mid-1970s. Such organisations, aiming to give local farmers stronger bargaining power were common in rural areas. Later Miranda Agricultural Bureau Ltd. Produce Store became the Miranda branch of the government sponsored NSW Agricultural Bureau. Maryanne Larkin has described the co-operative as an ‘enduring achievement’ that was more ambitious and successful than similar organisations elsewhere.

While the Sutherland district may have been a Garden of Eden, fruit growing in the Sydney metropolitan area and adjacent areas was in decline in the early years of the century. An increasing proportion of land in New South Wales was under agriculture, a trend given impetus by the construction of the Burrinjuck Dam in 1907. Water from this dam helped open up the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area where fruit and market garden crops were produced.

In the wake of the closer settlement movement, small farms proliferated in NSW. As a result, farmers in Sutherland Shire and other parts of Sydney gradually turned to poultry

farming which could be successfully managed on small holdings with relatively poor soil. The 'snug little poultry farms' of Sutherland Shire prospered and became the district's largest primary industry.

Farms such as Hotham's on the corner of President Avenue and North West Arm Road were large operations. In 1924 Hotham's had 6000 layers and one of its 'mammoth hatchers' had a 20 000-egg capacity. By 1947 this farm, under new management, specialised in the sale of day-old white and khaki Campbell ducklings.

A third of the Shire's poultry perished in January 1939 from the combined effects of a bush fire and a severe shortage of water. In the 1950s, 118 full time and 22 part-time poultry farmers employing a total of 220 permanent workers, ceased operation.

In the inter-war years many of Sutherland Shire's small but productive farms had already closed down as land was sold for suburban development. Although the greater portion of Sutherland Shire had been subdivided into home sites, there were still market gardeners and poultry farmers operating at Menai and in parts of Sutherland, Caringbah and Sylvania. The demand for housing, especially since transport had improved, meant these small farms would disappear, marking the end of the semi-rural landscape that had attracted many to the district. Market gardens, orchards, piggeries and poultry farms went out of business as suburbia spread.

Nevertheless, in the early 1950s four commercial piggeries still operated in the Caringbah-Kirrawee area and systematically collected food scraps from Cronulla's hotels and boarding houses for pig feed. Gradually these closed down. Every's market garden on the corner of the Kingsway and Miranda Road was subdivided in 1955, as was Gilmour's orchard, at Kirrawee bounded by Acacia Road, Waratah Street and Gilmour Avenue.

Livestock would also soon disappear, particularly as dairies turned off the milking machines. There had been five dairies in Caringbah in 1947. One 36-acre dairy run by returned soldiers ceased operating when Sutherland Shire Council acquired the site for Woollooware Golf Course which opened in 1955.

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