

Thomas Holt, landowner (1811 – 1888)

In the 1860s wool merchant, politician and businessman Thomas Holt acquired most of what is now Sutherland Shire. Initially called South Botany Estate, this large holding later became the Sutherland Estate. Holt purchased Crown land and a vast acreage from landholders such as John Connell Laycock.

Holt set out to make money, stocking the estate with sheep and later cattle. He authorised timber getters to log the forests and made several unsuccessful attempts at coal mining. The natural environment was modified on a massive scale. Mangroves were drained and a French system of oyster culture that involved digging canals or 'claires' was introduced in Gwawley Bay where his homestead, Sutherland House was built in the late 1870s.

Holt returned to England permanently in 1881 to join his wife and daughters who had left two years earlier. Sutherland House became his son, Frederick's home until 1897. The castellated sandstone residence with 39 bedrooms was destroyed by fire in 1918. The land company – and its later iterations – established to run the estate continued to operate, as it still does today.

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Holt's ventures resulted in the natural environment being modified on a massive scale. In addition to timber getting and what was referred to as 'underscrubbing', native grasses were replaced by extensive plantings of exotic buffalo grass. Mangroves were drained and a French system of oyster culture that involved digging canals or 'claires' was introduced in Gwawley Bay. Oysters were transplanted from Port Hacking, but this also proved to be unprofitable. Nevertheless, writing in the early 1970s, Henry Holt argued that his grandfather's work 'paved the way for the present immense oyster culture in Botany Bay'.

On Gwawley Bay, not far from the 'claires' and adjacent to a complex of estate buildings, the main homestead, Sutherland House, was built in the late 1870s. This was just one of the Holt family's five grand mansions. From this area – now the suburb of Sylvania Waters – a track meandered through the estate until it reached the old Connell/Laycock homestead near where the crew of the *Endeavour* had landed nearly 100 years earlier. This was a significant site for Holt – born and bred in Yorkshire – and in the early 1870s he had a monument erected to mark the centenary of fellow Yorkshireman James Cook's arrival in Kamay Botany Bay.

Reference:

- Henry E. Holt, *The Energetic Colonist*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1972