"HEATHCOTE HALL" HEATHCOTE

If, when driving through Heathcote, one. is able to glance over to the eastern side, a tall tower will be noticed rising amongst trees on a gentle slope in the "Bottle Forest" area. This is "Heathcote Hall", and dates from 1883.

Some 50 acres of freehold ground, now known as the "Heathcote Hall Estate" -- although it has of recent years been subdivided -- was, purchased in 1883 by Mr. Isaac Harber, a wealthy brickmaster of that period. Like many other wealthy merchants of those days, he decided to build himself a home on English manorial lines. It was constructed of sandstone blocks, the interior cedar-lined, with tall-ceilinged rooms, paved verandahs around the front ground floor, and wrought-iron balconies above, Over all reared the tall "observation" tower, a landmark for many miles around. It was what it purported to be -- the wealthy home of a wealthy owner,

Unfortunately, Isaac Harber had hardly installed himself in his opulent "Hall" when financial disaster overtook him, for he had made heavy losses in connection with the building of the Imperial Arcade, Sydney. As a result of this misfortune he had to abandon Heathcote Hall for the benefit of his creditors, but the mortgagees into whose hands the property fell did not find the estate a disposable proposition.

New South Wales was then in the throes of the temporary financial collapse that culminated in the bank smashes of 1892. Unable to sell the property at anything approaching its value, the Financial Institution, which had become its possessor, made arrangements with George Adams of Tattersall fame, to dispose of it by lottery. The consultation was issued from Brisbane and Heathcote Hall was made the first prize at a value of £7,000.

The winning ticket was held by Mr. S. Gillett, a Sydney builder of those days. He retained ownership for five years and then sold the whole estate for very much less than its valuation. A mansion and park at Heathcote before the advent of the motorcar, and with only one-train--a-day service, was not a good proposition for any city contractor -struggling through the competitive times of the 1890s.

Early in 1901 Mr. E. R. Brown purchased the Hall, retiring there to end the few short months of life which leading Sydney medical men had advised was left to him. However, Mr. Brown confounded his medical advisers and lived there until he died about 1923.

Since then, the stately Hall has had a variety of tenants. In the depression years it is said to have been a "squatters' camp"; and during the years of the 1939-45 war it was not much better; ugly fibro additions were used to enclose verandahs and so convert it into "flats"; and it became a general dumping yard for scrap collections. The present owners, Mr, and Mrs. Farrelly, have removed all the unsightly fibro and cleaned up the garden as far as possible, and are now turning their attention to renovating the old Hall -- but it is a long and extremely costly business and finances are somewhat limited, They do hope, however, to restore both house and garden as far as possible to their original condition.

(contd,)

With an old house such as this, built many years ago, various stories are bound to be associated with it. During World War I it was stated that a "German spy" used to occupy the tower at certain stated times to signal to a German naval raider. One tale-teller some years ago even knew the name of the "spy" -- "a German bloke named Braun -- but they never caught him -- he got away in time". Poor innocent Mr. E. R.Brown, who lived there throughout World War 1; A similar story was told of this 2nd War --- the writer was quite seriously informed that a "fifth columnist" had been caught while signalling with a torch to a. ship at sea! Ghost stories and apocryphal stories always make an old home more interesting.

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(The basic facts concerning "Heathcote Hall" were obtained from an advertising leaflet circulating about 1924 when the Heathcote Hall Estate was first subdivided: my thanks to Mr. Philip Geeves, R.A.H.S., for making a copy of the leaflet available to me   ... Ed.)

GEORGE'S RIVER PUNTS: After the first Crown Lands sales in the northern part of this "Heathcote District" (the name given to this Shire at that time) in 1856/8, a few settlers came across the George's River, to settle mainly in the Sylvania area, and then spreadtowards Miranda and Caringbah where there was good farming land. From the 1840s there had, however, been a few isolated settler camps, mainly for timber-cutting and the like --- as well as the abortive settlements at Bottle Forest and Wattamolla.

At first these settlers had to make their own arrangements to cross George's River to Rocky Point Road, en route to Rockdale or Sydney for stores and trading, as well as the collection of mail.

The first commercially organised punt service commenced in 1879, the punt being hand-worked by a coil rope. In 1888 the first steam ferry came on the run, these steam ferries continuing until the opening of Tom Ugley's Bridge in 1929.

By 1910 the Shire had become very popular for weekend excursions, so much so that an extra punt was put on on Saturday afternoons, Sundays and public holidays "when the double service is necessary to cope with the extensive vehicular traffic". A larger punt still was added in 1924 "to augment the service which has for some time been unable to cope with the local traffic requirements".

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(From information supplied by the Minister for Public Works to the late Mr. C .O. J. Munro -- per Mr. D. Kirkby).

Tracing Family History or Names: it must be realised that, owing to the general illiteracy in early colonial days, surnames were often spelt as pronounced, or as the convict clerk supposed they were spelt, so that sometimes there were several variations; e.g., Macdonald as McDonald or M'Donald; Sheehy may be found as Sheedy, Sheen, Shean. Today, even a Governor's name is wrongly spelt -- Fitzroy should be as he himself signed it, "Fitz Roy". Spelling is an important research point to note.

BYE-WAYS OF HISTORY:

Woronora River Name: following a recent article in the St. George/Sutherland Leader by the writer (Bulletin Ed.), there have been some queries concerning the translation of "woronora". When Robert Dixon surveyed John Lucas' grant in 1827 and also mapped the river, he named it "Woronora" -- following instructions from Surveyor-General Oxley that he was to use native names wherever possible. According to Dixon, he was told by local aboriginals that "woronora" meant "black rock"; which is an apt description of the dark rocky outcrops all along the river. However, one local elderly resident has advised me that when a small boy about seventy years ago, an old aboriginal told him that "woronora" meant "the. place where there are no big fish" sharks; none have been seen in the Woronora, although of course they are known to breed in the upper reaches of George's River). One or two members also have this opinion of the meaning of "woronora". It would seem that Dixon's translation may be the more likely: first, he was scrupulous in ascertaining the native names of places, and in 1827 the local natives would have advised Dixon accordingly: second, the translation of "black rocks" is certainly a physical description of the area. It is possible that the suggested second translation may refer to some particular part of the Woronora River. Any further information would be welcomed.

Caringbah Pioneer: A letter was received recently from Mrs. Ethel M. Miller of Caringbah, and it is intended to contact her shortly for detailed reminiscences. Mrs. Miller stated that she had lived in Caringbah for 61 years. As a child, when her family wanted domestic supplies, they walked down to "The Drain" (she remembered this nickname well; it was John Connell jun.'s old timbermilling canal at the north end of Woolooware Rd., now. reclaimed by the Golf Club), and then rowed down "The Drain" and across George's River to Sans Souci, from where they walked to Kogarah to shop. Sometimes they would instead walk to Shell Point (Woolooware Bay) where there was a punt service. They would "ring a bell and wait for the 'Black Fellow', who would then row over from Sans Souci and charge sixpence. That's how we got our stores", recalled Mrs. Miller in her interesting letter.

The Illawarra Railway: the extension of the railway from Hurstville to Waterfall (completed 1886) was let out in sections to various contractors. After passing the Loftus section there was heavy going for the gangs working down the coast.

"As the cuttings draw near completion one is struck with the heavy nature of the work. On Messrs. Miller's section is a cutting which extends for some distance along the face of a mountain, and the excavation from top to bottom is about 70 feet in some places, through sandstone rock; while in Ewart's and Farrow's cuttings depths of over 40 ft. have to be reached ere the level is obtained.

"There is some work at the 30-mile" (beyond Heathcote) "where a tunnel one mile and some chains will be driven. At the 24-mile another tunnel is being driven at both ends, and the contractors express satisfaction with the progress of the work. If all the cuttings and tunnels through the wild and rugged country ahead are finished at the speed already attained, the rail from Sydney to Illawarra will soon be an accomplished fact. When the bridge is completed across the George's River the trains will run to the 24-mile, which will be a great convenience.

"Bridge works are in a most satisfactory state, and the stone abutment

will shortly be in a position to receive the northern end of the ironwork. A most ingenious steam contrivance, constructed by Mr. H. Stephens, is now at work cutting away the old piles under the water. The platform on this side of the bridge is ready, and soon the bridge will be finished".

- Town & Country Journal, May 9, 1885.

Note: subsequent to this, Miller's contract was terminated at Como Bridge owing to an altered route.

Coach Accident: "A special coach, chartered from Wollongong to George's River, broke down with a number of Sydney gentlemen on board, last Saturday night, about eight miles from Coal Cliff. Fortunately, however, Mr. Gill of Como, who was passing with his team, came to the rescue, and ran the passengers safely to their destination".

- Town & Country Journal, May 9, 1885.

(The "special coach" was, of course, a horse-drawn vehicle).

Forgotten Names:

... Silver Beach: was the name given originally to Kurnell Beach --probably named by Dixon.

... Birniemere: this was a locality at Kurnell covering the area of James Birnie's Alpha Farm, The name appeared on the first map of Sutherland Shire and Lands Dept. maps until 1936.

… Holtmere: this was also a Kurnell locality, covering an area of land originally held by Thomas Holt, It, too, appeared on the above maps.

… Mt. Connell,: this was the name given to the highest "mount" (sandhill) in the vicinity of "Holtmere",

Miranda: according to an old Guidebook probably published about 1919-20 "Miranda will become an important little township", possessing then four small shops and a post office. It was also "the centre of a prosperous Fruit growing and Poultry Farming community. A flourishing branch of the Agricultural Bureau is established here. Several Soldier Poultry Farmers are comfortably settled; it is considered one of the best Poultry Farming Districts in the State".

The G.P.O. has, with St. Philip's Church in Sydney (built between 1848 and 1858) been placed on the "A" Presentation List as being an excellent example of the early period of the Italian Renaissance. It was designed by James Barnet, Colonial Architect, who was also responsible for the Lands Dept. Building, the Colonial Secretary's Building, the Australian Museum and the Customs House. The G.P.O. building was begun in 1866 and completed 1874. The Pitt Street section was begun in 1881 and finished with its tower in 1885,

- National Trust Bulletin, Feb. 1968.

'Stonequarry": "The Stone Quarry": those were the old names for the first settlement of the present township of Picton.

Fairy Meadow at Wollongong, is originally thought to have been known as 'Faro's Meadow'; it is referred to in this way in "Settlers & Convicts", a book written by 'An Immigrant Mechanic', published London 1847, and reprinted in Australia 1953.

NOTES ON CONVICT TRANSPORTATION

"All English gaols were crammed with lawbreakers -- many only petty thieves, others hardened criminals. However, for all the more serious criminal offences the death penalty was given, including murder and rape. Orison hulks were used to take the overflow -- these hulks were far worse than the prisons. The loss of the American colonies caused a further 'bank up' of prisoners -- as previously transportation had been to these American colonies.. With the discovery of Australia, the location for another transportation settlement was assured.

"Transportation prisoners were not only drawn from England but also from Ireland (including a number of political prisoners): India, Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, Bermuda, Canada and other places in the British Empire also sent convicts to Australia, but these arrived in relatively small numbers, generally in passenger or cargo. vessels."

-- "The Convict Ships" (C. Bateson)
        (Publishers = Brown, Son & Ferguson Ltd., London)

The First Fleet arrived 1788, bringing 759 (M = 568: F = 191) convicts; the Second Fleet arrived 1790, having left England with a total of 1017

(M= 939: F = 78); this was a 'hell fleet", owing to callous and deliberately inhuman treatment of the prisoners; 267 died on the voyage and over 480 were landed sick at Sydney Cove -- many of these dying a few days later. Although an enquiry was held and action demanded, the masters of the transports escaped punishment. The Third Fleet left with 1694 (M = 1666; F = 28), arriving 1791, having lost 182 convicts during the voyage; Two other ships arrived the same Year, one carrying 150 female convicts, the other (H.M.S. Gorgon, Store Ship) 31 convicts, After the inhuman horrors of the 2nd and 3rd Fleets, stringent conditions were laid down for the transportation of convicts, and a surgeon was assigned to each vessel.

Generally, transportation on sentences were for seven or fourteen years, or for life; some of the political prisoners (particularly after the Irish up-risings), although charged with sedition, were not convicted and sentenced if they voluntarily accepted "exile", usually for life. In this way, they were not "convicts attained", and were socially acceptable in the Colony; they were invariably men of education and means, but only a few were allowed this.

Under certain conditions, the early Governors were given the power to grant Pardons in mitigation of sentence; and were also empowered to give free grants of land to emancipated convicts whose conduct had warranted it --whether or not they had had any previous farming experience (other than what they had. compulsorily learnt while under sentence).

A "Ticket-of-leave" was usually the first conditional freedom; this was a pass enabling the convict (still not free) to work for wages and to select his own master. A 'Governor's" or "Conditional Pardon" was granted by the Governor, the convict being free on condition he remained in the Colony, obeyed the law and supported himself/family; he remained "attainted" and could not return Home. Very rarely was an "Absolute Pardon" granted, and this had to be authorised by the English Parliament,

By 1820, 1352 convicts had been granted "Governor's Pardons" and 3,617 were "expirees" whose sentences had been completed; these "freed men" formed almost 28% of the total white population of serving convicts, soldiers, Government officers and the big landholders. They owned

35,000 acres by grant and some extra 50,000 by purchase, and were fast laying the nucleus of an increasingly wealthy emancipist-merchant class of some power -- with the blessing of Gov. Macquarie. The powerful upper-class landholders, led by Macarthur and Marsden, petitioned the Home Office for an investigation into the Colony's position, this resulting in the fact-finding tour of Commissioner Bigge 1819-21 and the recall of Macquarie.

In 1817 the Court of King's Bench had ruled that unless a "Governor's Pardon" carried the Great Seal of England (and practically none did) these persons remained "convicts attainted" without power to maintain personal actions, or to acquire, retain or transmit property. This Act became effective in N.S.W. in 1820 and opened the way for the wealthy landowners. to acquire by devious means many small properties which they coveted. The emancipists immediately appealed against this and Dr. Redfern was sent to London on their behalf. The NSW Act 1823 was passed, providing that all previous Pardons would carry the full force of the Great Seal. In 1832, as a direct result of Bigge's visit, an Imperial Act was passed, which deprived all freed convicts from owning property or for their children to inherit or to sue for recoverable debt. It was not until the Transportation Act 1843 that all final discrimination was removed against emancipists.

Over a period of 75 years a total of approximately 130,000 convicts, men and women, were transported to Australia. In the early years a number of children, all boys from about 10 years of age, were transported, but were assigned to suitable work, particularly in Tasmania where a special depot was opened for them, These were mostly half-starved, homeless little street-Arabs belonging to pickpocket gangs; generally, they led a far better life than they could ever have hoped for in England -- if they had survived -- and the great majority developed into useful and law-abiding settlers, many being suitably apprenticed and others settled on the land.

The female convicts were quite a different story -- they were mainly the gin-sodden dregs of the cities -- prostitutes, thieves, receivers of stolen goods and the like; and throughout transportation they generally created increasing problems of hopeless control. A small proportion were rehabilitated and became the loyal and hardworking wives of emancipist settlers; but the majority soon reverted to their old life on arrival.

After continuous pressure, both in the Colony and in England, transportation was first partially abolished by an Order-in-Council in 1840, except for Tasmania and Norfolk Island; in 1849 it was finally abolished in N.S.W., and by 1868 it had ceased altogether in Australia.

-- M.H.N.

At Woodbridge Barracks, where the Lancashire Militia are quartered, two hen's eggs had been placed under a cat, who actually hatched two chickens, and suckled three kittens at the same time. This little family is said to live together on the most affectionate terms.

-- Sydney Gazette, May 5, 1805.