EARLY EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT in NEW ENGLAND

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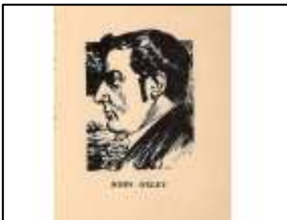


It was thirty years after Governor Phillip arrived with the first fleet into Sydney Harbour when the Surveyor General John Oxley and his party in September 1818 passed through the southern section of the present day New England Tableland. This first official excursion into this highland area was accidental. Oxley's party had been prevented from discovering the pattern of the inland river-system due to extensive floods in the Macquarie River, so they were forced to turn eastwards to reach the sea, and then struggled towards Sydney, travelling southwards along the coast.
Oxley found the ranges east of the Liverpool Plains difficult to climb and the eastern descent precipitous through gorges and rugged valleys, but he was impressed by the undulating 'park like' highland country, with few signs of Aboriginal occupants. Despite his encouraging description, there was little official reaction to his report of the area, which went unnoticed for the next decade.

It is possible that runaway convicts may have joined the indigenous people to live 'beyond the boundaries' but the unpredictable climate of the high country seems to have supported only a small number of scattered groups, who mostly visited this highland region during warm seasons for gatherings and hunting. It was unlike the inland rivers or coast where the warm climate and plentiful food sources suited Aborigines living there permanently. However the Diangatti and Anaiwan people moved in a pattern from coastal rivers to the tableland for ceremonies and to trade tools with their inland neighbours. Although they would have heard about the British arrival, their lives hardly changed following their first contact with Oxley's party.

Distance from major settlement sites, together with the difficulties of the terrain to access the tableland area, were significant factors explaining the delay of British occupation of what later became known as the New England Tableland. It is the second highest surface in Australia of more than 1600 metres above sea level, and on the east is edged with a great escarpment 3000 kilometres in length along the eastern coast of the country. The gorges and cliffs acted as a barrier as the Blue

Mountains had done for Sydney, but it had a totally dissimilar rock formation. Where Sydney has sandstone, New England had remnant volcanic eruptions indicating the Great Escarpment to be part of ancient Gondwana millennia ago. The effect of the world movement of tectonic plates in ancient times was to separate the early Australia from other continents, and included the raising of the New England eastern escarpment and the subsequent variation of river flow into the Pacific Ocean.

In the 1830s, the Governor and Surveyor General knew nothing of this ancient history when a few surveyors were sent to map the region north of Sydney. They had no idea of the scale and difficulty of this task. In Ireland from 1838 to 1852 it took 2,000 men to survey about 300,000 square miles of an island already occupied with farms and villages. At the same time in New South Wales 17 surveyors with a convict workforce of about 100 men were expected to survey a similar area for half the cost, and without nearby supplies of food or equipment. It is not surprising that administration could not keep up with settlers' or government's requests.

In an attempt to control the spreading of free settlers throughout New South Wales, Governor Darling in 1829 gazetted Nineteen Counties (later increased to twenty to include the Port Macquarie region) as the area within which settlement should be confined. This included the Cumberland Plain in the south as far as Goulburn, and Yass, west across the Blue Mountains towards Bathurst and the Macquarie River, and north from Newcastle to the Liverpool Range, including the valleys of the Hunter, Paterson and Williams Rivers. Within this area free settlers with capital could obtain a free land grant and a convict workforce, who they were required to feed and house.

Most of the stockowners in the Hunter Valley, who had been given free land grants and convict workmen from the government, used their capital to build substantial houses.

The type of home within the boundaries was usually constructed of sandstone with stone paved verandahs. In New England with its plentiful forests, timber was used for the early houses and huts, although some Scots followed their traditional practice of erecting harled volcanic stone buildings, if stone was available.

In the 1830s when a severe drought affected the Hunter Valley, some colonists moved over the ranges with mobs of sheep or cattle to find pasture for their animals. They were then 'Beyond the Boundaries' gazetted by the Governor, but were allowed, for an annual £10 licence, to depasture or graze their stock on this distant Crown land. They occupied, but had no claim to the ownership of land. At this time the only official owner of land beyond the Liverpool Ranges was the Australian

Agricultural Company, who had exchanged part of their million acre grant north of Newcastle, for two large areas fronting the Peel River, at Goonoo Goonoo near present-day Tamworth, and further west on the Liverpool Plains at Warrah, near present day Quirindi.

This situation continued from the 1830s for more than twenty years. It did not prevent new and old immigrants from occupying the land, but the uncertainty of ownership, meant that the capital they had brought into the country was invested in livestock and essential supplies for their rural business. They had emigrated to settle and make money, and were prepared to comply with the Governor's conditions and regulations.

They did not build splendid homes with decorative gardens until they obtained legal ownership of the land. Split slab cottages for shelter were erected inexpensively, and shepherds herded their animals by day, putting them into timber yards at night. Their simple huts usually had small gardens for practical purposes to supply vegetables and fruit to supplement their abundant meat supply - the animals that had been driven over the ranges.

HC Sempill

The first British pastoralist into New England in 1832 was Hamilton Collins Sempill, who with his men, occupied the country that Oxley had passed through in 1818. Sempill had formerly been the superintendent of Thomas Potter Macqueen's large land grant, Belltrees in the Scone district of the Hunter Valley. He took over Macqueen's properties and with his stock climbed some 1500 metres onto the southern tableland via the Crawney Pass and the upper Peel River. Another adventurer, Edward Gostwyck Cory, struggled up the Moonbi Pass from the Peel River to occupy the tableland section further north, that he named Gostwyck after his land grant on the Paterson River. Soon after, Cory sold his licence to William Dangar, whose descendants still own remnants of this land.

Early Saumarez 1860s

By 1834 the Dumaresq brothers, Henry and William, had sent ‘beyond the boundaries’ a cavalcade of men with their flocks to occupy land near present day Armidale in New England, while still keeping their headquarters on their land grants at Muswellbrook and Scone in the Hunter Valley.

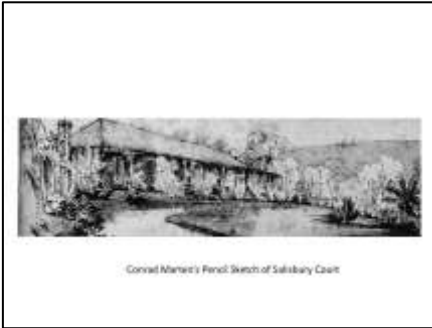
Another early settler was Major Innes, commandant for a time of the Port Macquarie penal settlement, and in the 1840s he persuaded the government to supply convicts to build a track following John Oxley’s inland route to the tableland. Innes sent his stock up this road to occupy Waterloo in the Walcha area, built a store at Armidale and established a station, Furracabad, near present day Glen Innes. None of these early stockowners remained long on the tablelands but returned to the comfort of their established homes and gardens within the boundaries nominated by Governor Darling.

When, decades later, surveyors measured the head stations, small areas of a few hundred acres were sold to existing settlers. Legal ownership of large squatting runs was established from the last quarter of the nineteenth century when permanent brick houses with gardens to enhance the new and substantial homes began to replace the earlier primitive timber buildings.
For most early settlers shelter from rain and the bitter winters was a first priority, and the main hut was supplemented with additional huts for various purposes. The main one was a kitchen, separate from the living quarters, as wooden walls and bark roofs easily caught fire. In this eventuality, only the kitchen hut would be destroyed.

The Everett brothers, John and George, from Wiltshire, England, in the late 1830s took up land near Guyra, which they named Ollera, a local Aboriginal word meaning sweet water. In a letter to England soon after their arrival, John Everett described their first homestead to his older brother William, a clergyman living in their family home, Biddesden House.

‘As I have no pencils to sketch our mansion and estate, I must endeavour to describe it to you in writing. You better first come into the hut, that I may show you the interior arrangement. On entering, mind the step, for altho’ the earthen floor was level with the door sill at first, the frequent brushing out has sunk it not a little & I expect if we lived in here very long we should sink it so very low that we should be just able to look over the door sill. The size of the hut is 20ft by 12 feet, the fire place at one end very large like a farm house in England, the inside of the chimney to the height of about 3 feet is lined with rough stones, the centre one on the top row being a picked one of a triangular shape, which gives a finish of masonry. The remainder of the chimney is rough slabs.
… On the left of the doorway of the store is a ladder, which leads into a place over the store where George and myself sleep. We cannot stand up certainly in our dormitory, but we do not sleep standing in Australia altho’ things are contrary… Before the hut is a small garden fenced round with a three-railed fence. On a line with the hut in the garden is a shed which we use as a workshop, a little further on is a small tenement, a very useful tenement [or dunny]’

By 1845, Elizabeth Marsh who arrived newly married, to Salisbury Court from England, described her new home in these words:
' Ours is considered the most comfortable of all the squatters'places. It consists of a small passage 4ft. wide with a door at each end. One door leading onto the verandah, the other being the main entrance and way from the kitchen, which is another hut about five yards distant…Our bedroom looks really quite comfortable for you do not, as in the sitting room, see daylight through the roof as there is a ceiling of canvas, but the sitting room is only canvassed round the sides, it could be altered but for summer use is best as it is. The whole hut is of wood, long pieces put upright, but not exactly meeting so that if there were no canvas round, it would be airy enough… We moved the meat safe from the verandah to another skilling.'



Conrad Martens's Pencil Sketch of Salisbury Court

Some Scots settlers, brought up in stone buildings, preferred to build in stone rather than the universal timber, which was prevalent and practical. In 1840 the licenced run, Ohio in the Walcha district, was bought by Abraham Nivison, who had already purchased J.H. Boughton's land grant, Tillimby, near Paterson. The Nivisons soon replaced the original three slab huts with a stone house, kitchen and store before they acquired legal title to the land in the 1850s.

Ohio, Walcha (c. 1906)

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By the 1860s Strathbogie, north of Glen Innes, also first occupied by a Scotsman, Hugh Gordon in the 1840s, had replaced its first slab timber building with a granite single storey house and extensive garden.

It took decades after the 1850s and 60s for pastoralists, to progressively formalize their ownership of the original holdings, and to acquire title to the greater part of their properties. It was not until after the Robertson Selection Acts of the 1860s, that rural properties could be established under varied forms of conditional purchase or lease. By the early twentieth century, with their ownership confirmed, they were then able to extend the new technology of water pumps with windmills for a water supply, replacing dunnys with indoor toilets, candles with electric lighting, and other practical improvements for their homes and gardens. As well as supplying vegetables and fruit, gardens were used to decorate the house, to provide out door enjoyment and beautify the surrounding areas of the family home, entertaining friends and family, with sports such as tennis, and even golf.

It took usually two generations before pastoralists built up sufficient capital, and had confidence that government would, in due course, approve their land ownership. It should also be understood that the price of land in Australia was more than double that asked at the same time in Canada, South Africa and other British colonies. For many immigrants, it took about fifty years before their income was sufficiently stable to afford the luxury of splendid homes and gardens.

The large houses of New England with noteworthy gardens both in the countryside and towns were built in most cases towards the end of the Victorian period and into the early twentieth century. Sometimes they were built by the same family who had occupied the first simple slab buildings, and sometimes were built by owners who arrived in the area at a later date. Large houses were not built until ownership of the land had been achieved. By the end of the nineteenth century new houses were mostly built of bricks made on site.

Examples of these phases include the following houses:

Amongst the earliest were Saumarez, built before the town of Armidale was established.
The original 1830s slab building at Saumarez, with its 1860s brick addition, was superseded by the by the brick homestead of the 1880s, located a distance above the original farmstead site, and then in 1906 a top storey was added, to make the house we see today. By 1906 Saumarez, doubled in size, had a garden and drive reflecting the family growth and prestige of its successful owner. A

garden surrounded the buildings, and an orchard and vegetable garden were established to add variety to their food.

Booloominbah (c. 1888)

F J White’s uncle, F.R.White, also in 1888, employed the renowned architect, Horbury Hunt, to design his new family home, Booloominbah at Armidale. The White family moved from the Hunter Valley, leaving his son to take over Harben Vale at Blandford. Booloominbah, made of brick fired on site, symbolized the prestige of its owner, as he indulged his interest in the fashionable architectural style of the time.

Although Gostwyck had been owned by the Dangar family since the 1830s they continued to live in style on their Hunter Valley properties However after World War 1, the present house at Gostwyck was built when a later generation of the Dangar family made the Uralla property their main home. The earlier expensive investment in 1851 had been the splendid octagonal shearing shed still in use today.

Stonehenge (c 1860)

Another interesting home was built near Glen Innes, where again a bark- roofed house was replaced with a prefabricated house imported from England.

Langford (1904)

The Walcha run was subdivided by the Fletcher family, with John Fletcher, a former manager for Major Innes building a house, Oorundunbi, in the 1880s, and his son William in 1904, built the splendid two storey house, Langford, on the edge of the town.

In the 1920s, the Henry E.White designed Mirani, was built at Walcha, and at the same time the castle-like Kings Plains, near Inverell, showed the continuing interest in building large rural homesteads.

The production of fine woolled sheep and various breeds of cattle were, with forestry, the principle income earners of New England, although the excitement of gold mining in the nineteenth century briefly attracted people seeking their fortune. Long term, the high altitude suited animal production, and this region, separated from the capital cities by distance and climate, acquired a distinctive character with its fine homes and gardens. By the beginning of the twentieth century transport, trains and towns had brought populations onto the Tableland. The Commonwealth of Australia had been created and a new era had arrived for the New England region.

Jillian Oppenheimer, October 2013

Ohio 2005