

# History of Agriculture at Camden Park Estate

PRE 1788	1788	1805	1808	1820	1822
The locality was the home of Aboriginal people who had lived here since the dreamtime—the Gundungurra to the west and south, the Dharawal to the south and east, and the Dharuk to the north.	<p>Two bulls and five cows from the First Fleet escaped from the first settlement in Sydney.</p> <p>In 1795 a mob of wild cattle, the offspring of those that escaped were discovered in this locality and it became known as the Cowpastures.</p>	<p>John Macarthur was granted 5,000 acres of land at the Cowpastures to develop the wool industry.</p> <p>He imported Spanish merino sheep from the Royal flock in England.</p>	<p>John Macarthur exported wool to England and it became the mainstay of his estates.</p> <p>Elizabeth Macarthur managed the sheep flocks from the following year until 1817 while John was exiled in England for his role in the Rum Rebellion.</p>	<p>First vineyard planted, river flats cleared to grow wheat and other crops.</p> <p>As well as sheep, they ran cattle and pigs and had a dairy to provide milk and butter for the household and estate workers.</p>	<p>The Macarthur flocks totalled nearly 8,000 sheep.</p> <p>6,800kg of wool was exported to England from the Macarthur estates.</p>
1830s	1840s	1850s	1860s	1870s	1890s
<p>William Macarthur imported the first Camellias into Australia, part of his expanding horticultural enterprises at Camden Park.</p> <p>The estate exported the first Australian brandy.</p> <p>The Macarthur estate at Camden reached its maximum size of over 27,000 acres in 1837.</p>	<p>Camden Park made butter and cheese at its dairy for sale in Sydney.</p>	<p>Camden Park sold its registered Merino flock and ceased to run sheep.</p> <p>Wheat and other crops were now the main products of the estate, along with butter, cheese, wine and horticulture.</p>	<p>The fungal disease known as ‘rust’ destroyed wheat crops and much less was grown. Corn continued to be important.</p> <p>The railway reached Menangle in 1863, providing easy access to the growing Sydney market.</p>	<p>The vine pest Phylloxera devastated the vineyards and production ceased.</p> <p>From 1878 Camden Park sold fresh milk daily to the Fresh Food and Ice Co. in Sydney. The milk was sent by rail from Menangle</p>	<p>Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow established a large dairying enterprise at Camden Park, based on share farming and tenant farming.</p> <p>Four steam-driven creameries were established on Camden Park, including one in this building, to separate cream from the milk. (Mechanical separators had first been imported into Australia in 1882).</p> <p>Cream was churned by machine into butter at the Menangle Central Creamery.</p>
1920s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	
<p>Camden Park established the first of its ‘model’ dairies. They were modern dairies that emphasised hygiene and clean milk.</p> <p>It established the Camden Vale Milk Company and sent its pasteurised milk by rail to Sydney for sale.</p> <p>Camden Park’s dairy herds were certified tuberculosis-free, the first in NSW.</p> <p>Camden Vale Milk Co. merged with Dairy Farmers in 1929 but still sold milk under its own brand.</p>	<p>The rotolactor was completed at Menangle in 1952. It was the brainchild of Edward Macarthur Onslow who had seen one in operation in America.</p> <p>900 cows were milked each day on the rotolactor and up to 2,000 people visited each week to see it in action.</p>	<p>Camden Park Estate was the largest dairy farm in Australia. It milked about 900 cows on the rotolactor and another 600 at its model dairies.</p>	<p>In 1973 Camden Park Estate Ltd. was sold to an investment company, Talga. About 1,000 acres of the original estate remained with the family around Camden Park House.</p>	<p>In 1984 the NSW Government purchased 1,600 hectares of Camden Park Estate.</p> <p>The Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute was established with modern biosecurity laboratories on the land.</p> <p>The NSW Government also created Belgenny Farm Agricultural Heritage Centre Trust to manage the portion which contains the heritage buildings now known as Belgenny Farm.</p>	

# John Macarthur

John Macarthur was born to Scottish parents in England in 1767. By the age of 15 he had joined the military corps to fight in America, but the war ended and the corps were disbanded before he could embark. John returned to a farm in Devon and was re-commissioned as an Ensign (a junior officer) in 1788. In that same year he married Elizabeth Veale.

In 1789 John Macarthur was promoted to Lieutenant in the New South Corps which was newly formed to serve as the garrison in the fledgling colony. He departed on the Second Fleet with his pregnant wife Elizabeth and infant son Edward.



They arrived in Sydney in 1790 where he began a successful career punctuated by controversy and turmoil that somewhat overshadowed his achievements and ability.

In 1792 Macarthur was appointed paymaster to the NSW Corps, more than doubling his Lieutenant's salary, and in 1793 he was appointed Inspector of Public Works.

He received a land grant and established Elizabeth Farm at Parramatta in 1793 where he soon became an influential landholder in the Colony. Macarthur became embroiled in disputes with his commanding officer, William Paterson, and with Governor King. In 1801 Paterson challenged Macarthur to a duel during which Paterson was severely wounded.

Having almost killed his commanding officer, Macarthur was sent to England for court martial but it lapsed when the papers were lost. During his forced exile Macarthur took the opportunity to gain support from the government for his plans to develop a wool industry in Australia. Macarthur resigned from the army and returned to NSW in 1805 with an order from Lord Camden for a grant of 5,000 acres of land at the Cowpastures. He named the estate 'Camden' and later it became 'Camden Park'.

He exported wool to England in 1808 and it became the mainstay of the Camden estate. In 1809 John was again forced to go to England, this time because of his involvement in the 'rum rebellion' in which Governor Bligh was deposed. During his exile from 1809 to 1817 Elizabeth managed their estates with great skill and energy.

In 1817 John returned from England and in 1822 he exported 6,800kg of wool, one of the first to export wool in commercial quantities.

John Macarthur was a skilled agriculturist, lobbyist and tactician whose volatile personality was balanced by the persistence, loyalty and ability of his wife and sons to bring stability to Camden Park Estate and enhance its contribution to Australian agriculture and to the Merino wool industry in particular. He died in Belgenny Cottage in 1834.





# Elizabeth Macarthur

Born Elizabeth Veale in 1766 in Devon, England, she became a remarkable woman. Elizabeth survived the privations of the infant colony of New South Wales and weathered the political storms that raged around her husband John for most of his life.

They had seven children who survived past infancy, three girls (Elizabeth, Mary, Emmeline) and four boys (Edward, John, James, William). A baby girl died on the voyage to Sydney in 1790 and a son, James, born in 1793 died in 1794.

Their home was Elizabeth Farm at Rosehill where Elizabeth championed education and created a calm family life away from her husband's political spotlight.

During John's long absence in England from 1809 to 1817, she managed their farms at Rosehill, Seven Hills and Camden with their nephew Hannibal Macarthur. Elizabeth sent regular progress reports to John by mail and carried out his instructions received by return mail. Elizabeth played a pivotal role in developing Camden Park as a Merino sheep stud and thriving wool export enterprise.

Elizabeth had great faith in the colony and escaped the criticism often levelled at her husband. She was no 'stay-at-home' person, for she managed the family estates with great ability, energy and a zest for outdoor activity, which required travel from property to property. Elizabeth conducted herself with grace and dignity, forming close long-term friendships with several high ranking colonial women including Anna King (wife of Governor King) and Elizabeth Paterson (wife of Lieutenant-Governor Paterson).

Elizabeth Macarthur died in 1850.



# William, James and Emily Macarthur

From 1817 through much of the century the next generation of Macarthurs implemented their parents' (John and Elizabeth) vision with dedication and skill.

James and William Macarthur were born at Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta, in 1798 and 1800 respectively. Both sons travelled to Britain and Europe receiving education and observing agriculture and viticulture throughout the Continent.

On their return to Australia in 1817 they planted extensive gardens and the first vineyard on Camden Park in 1820. The two young Macarthurs worked together to shoulder increasing responsibility for management of the Macarthur Estates, initially against the backdrop of their ailing and volatile father, and then in their own right.

From a young age William had classed Camden Park's wool clip and systematically recorded the performance of its stud merino sheep. This continued until the flock was completely dispersed in 1858. William is best known however for his passion and contribution to horticulture. He brought German vinedressers to Camden Park and imported the first camellias into Australia. By 1840 he had established a commercial plant nursery at Camden Park and catalogued 3,000 plants growing there.

James, also involved in the family wool enterprise from a young age, brought a Saxon wool sorter to Camden Park in 1831 to improve the way their wool was prepared for market. James is perhaps best known as a politician and was a director of a number of colonial companies including the Australian Agricultural Company.

James and William were men of global outlook who travelled to Britain and Europe on several occasions as adults, studying overseas agricultural methods and placing orders for livestock and machinery to be exported to Camden Park in Australia.

James married Emily (nee Stone, born in Calcutta in 1806), who arrived in Australia in 1839 and took an active interest in Camden Park. Emily championed the Estate's dairy industry and employed a butter woman in 1843 to make butter and cheese for the Sydney market. Emily also took a particular interest in the Estate's sheep and wool production. She died at Camden Park in 1880.

James died in 1867 and William passed away in 1882 leaving James' and Emily's daughter Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow the sole heir to the estate.



**William  
Macarthur**

**James  
Macarthur**

**Emily  
Macarthur**

**Merino  
sheep**



**Horticulture**



**Butter**





# Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow

Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow was born at Camden Park in 1840, the only child of James and Emily Macarthur and granddaughter of John and Elizabeth.

In 1867 Elizabeth married Captain Arthur Onslow and they had eight children, of whom five sons and one daughter survived to adulthood. Her husband Arthur died in 1882.

After the death of her uncle, Sir William Macarthur, in 1882 Elizabeth Onslow inherited the Camden Park estate. Ten years later Elizabeth officially changed her surname to Macarthur Onslow.

Elizabeth was patron of a number of voluntary organisations including the Camden School of Arts and the Camden Agricultural, Horticultural and Industrial Society, which held the first Camden Show in 1886.

With her daughter Sibella, Elizabeth championed women's volunteer work in the district. This included home front patriotic fundraising, sending soldiers comforts abroad, and creating the St John's Mothers' Union which was a precursor to the Camden Red Cross branch established in 1914.

In 1887 Elizabeth took her six children to Europe for their education. During her two-year absence she studied dairying in southern England and the 'metayage' system of share farming in Italy.

In 1892, using the insights gained overseas, Elizabeth established an innovative dairying complex at Camden Park under the management of Captain Astley John Onslow Thompson. The complex included dairies operated by sharefarmers, tenanted dairies, pig production based on skim milk, bacon curing, and a growing network of creameries to separate the cream from the whole milk.

In 1899 Elizabeth converted Camden Park Estate into a private company with her children as shareholders and directors.

When Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow died in 1911 she had laid the foundation of Camden Park's modern approach to dairying that enabled it to become the largest and best known dairy in Australia by the 1960s.



Butter



Pigs



Cream



Whole milk



# Astley John Onslow Thompson

Astley Onslow Thompson was born in Wales in 1865, the eldest of nine children who survived past infancy. He attended England's prestigious Rugby School, immigrated to Australia at the age of 18 and initially worked as a public servant.

In the late 1880s, under the wing of his Onslow cousins at Camden, Astley became manager of Camden Park when dairying was about to become vital to the estate's ongoing prosperity. He studied dairying in England and Europe with Elizabeth Macarthur Onslow and returned in 1889 to restructure agriculture at Camden Park.

Elizabeth as owner and Astley as manager worked together to establish an innovative dairying complex. It included share farming, a network of creameries, butter production and the sale of whole milk to the Sydney market.

Astley was a man of many talents and achievements. He was on the Board of CSR and the Commercial Banking Co. of Sydney, chairman of the Camden AH&I Society and a lay preacher.

He helped to raise the Camden Squadron of the NSW Mounted Rifles in 1892 and later commanded the regiment, which became known as the 2nd Australian Light Horse. When World War I broke out he joined the army in August 1914 as a Lieutenant Colonel and was posted to the 4th Battalion.

Astley took part in the ANZAC landing on 25 April 1915 and was killed in an attack on a Turkish position the following day. He was 'Mentioned in Despatches' and is buried in the 4th Battalion Parade Ground Cemetery at Gallipoli, Turkey.



Whole milk



Butter





# Edward Macarthur Onslow

Edward Macarthur Onslow was born at Goulburn in 1909, a direct descendant of John and Elizabeth Macarthur. He attended The Kings School in Sydney and then joined the Royal NSW Lancers. As Captain he trained the mounted troops on the family property, Macquarie Grove.

As Assistant Manager of Camden Park Estate in the 1930s Edward was responsible for initiatives such as the construction of the Camden Vale Inn and the Belgenny Community Hall.

Edward became a pilot and started a flying school at Camden in 1937. He established a private aerodrome there in 1938 which became a pre-war training school for pilots joining the RAAF. He sold it to the Government during World War II and it became the Central Flying School.

Despite his interest in flying, Edward enlisted in the Australian army in World War II and attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He served in North Africa and New Guinea, winning the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) in 1944.

After the war Edward became Managing Director of Camden Park Estate and focused on the reorganisation of its dairying enterprise. During a study tour of the USA and Britain, he visited a rotolactor in America and returned to Camden Park with enthusiasm to build one at Menangle. When completed in 1952 the rotolactor was the first in Australia and only the third of its kind in the world.

Edward's decision to build Australia's first rotary dairy was far-sighted, requiring him to overcome many challenges in the process. Such was its success that up to 2,000 people visited Menangle each week in the 1960s to see the rotolactor in operation.

The rotolactor was decades ahead of its time, the forerunner of rotary dairies and 21st century robotic dairies that use a rotary milking platform.

Edward Macarthur Onslow also contributed significantly to the local Camden community and was president of many local organisations in the district. He died in 1980.

