

Belgenny walking tour – script for 'app'

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1. Benkennie – acknowledgement of country

This is a good spot to look east towards the Nepean River and acknowledge the traditional owners of the land – the Aboriginal people who have lived on this land since the Dreamtime.

The Camden district sits at the confluence of boundaries between Aboriginal groups, although details of the boundaries are contested . The groups include the Gundungarra to the west and south, the Dharawal to the south and east, and the Dharuk to the north. The relationship of the Dharawal people with Camden Park has continued for over 200 years since the land grant to John Macarthur in 1805.

They called this area 'Benkennie' or 'Belgenny', meaning 'dry land'. The people belonged to the land and it provided all their needs including food, water, shelter and medicines. The vegetation along the river and surrounding areas was good for hunting, fishing and camping. Despite the loss of their land for traditional living, descendants of the local Aboriginal people continue to live in the area.

2. Cowpastures, the Home Farm and Flying King

This is the grave of Flying King, a thoroughbred racehorse stallion owned by Francis and George Macarthur-Onslow. There's more about the Macarthur horses later, but firstly some information on early European activity in the area.

In 1795 a large herd of wild cattle was found grazing on this side of the Nepean River, thriving without human help. They were the progeny of two bulls and four cows that had wandered off from Sydney Cove in 1788. This is why the district became known as 'the Cowpastures', and it was here that John Macarthur was granted 5,000 acres of land in 1805.

Macarthur's grant, initially known as Camden and later as Camden Park, remained with the family for nearly 170 years. As the estate grew, much of the land was tenanted but the family retained portions for their own use, including the 'Home Farm'. What we now call 'Belgenny Farm' was the centre of the Home Farm.

From the mid 1830s the family lived at Camden Park House about 2km away. In the English tradition of great country houses, the Home Farm supplied them with fresh produce and directly involved them in farming independently of their many tenant farmers on the wider estate.

3. The granary

The granary was completed in 1890 as a 'corn and implement shed' for Camden Park. Implements such as ploughs were housed on the ground floor while corn and other livestock feeds were stored above. The slated walls provided ventilation to keep the corn dry, and tin wrapped around the shed's posts stopped rats and mice from climbing up to the grain.

In the early 1900s the men on Camden Park brought the ears of corn here in horse-drawn tip drays. The women removed the husks from the corn and then stripped the grain from the ears of corn. This was called 'husking and shelling'. Vic Boardman recalls the activities

'they had tip drays, they'd send the men down to pull the cobs off. They'd tip it in Belgenny's there. The ladies would husk while the kids were at school, or little kids would play in the corn dust or on the dirt floor, the kids would play on the dirt and the corn husks and things. They'd shell the corn and put 'em in lofts up there'

The granary is now a function centre that is popular for wedding receptions.

4. Vineyard

500 grape vines in five varieties were planted here in recent times to commemorate one of the first commercial vineyards in Australia, established on the Camden estate in 1820. On the right are vines grown in the traditional method of the early 1800's and on the left are vines on the modern trellis system.

This was not originally a vineyard site. It was a deer park around 1840 and then became horse yards and paddocks. The first vineyard was located south of here.

In 1830 a second vineyard of 9 hectares was planted in rich alluvial soil by the river and in 1840 a third vineyard was planted south of the Camden Park House close to the winery. William Macarthur, son of John, is credited with the work on the vineyards.

5. The dovecote

A dovecote is the name for a structure to house pigeons. This dovecote is the surviving one of two built on the farm by the Macarthurs in what was the farm's horse yards so pigeons could eat grain that fell from the feed troughs, to stop a build-up of rats and mice. Pigeons were also kept for the table, in other words, for eating.

The use of natural tree trunks in the construction of the dovecote is typical of the Gardenesque, a rustic style popular in England from the early 1800s. It is just a myth that the Macarthurs used pigeons to send messages between their farms at Parramatta and Camden.

The horse yards on this site housed stallions that were bred on Camden Park or purchased. They included the Suffolk Punch which is an English breed of draft horse used to haul heavy loads or pull ploughs and other agricultural implements.

6. Creamery and former coach house

This building was constructed in the 1820s as a coach house for horse-drawn vehicles. As part of the Macarthurs' expansion of dairy production in the 1890s, it was converted into a creamery in 1898 by adding an upper storey and an elevated water tank. It became one of four creameries on the estate.

At the creamery, milk was separated into cream and skim milk. Cans of milk were hauled to the top floor from carts parked directly underneath. The milk was tipped into a vat and flowed into a machine called a 'separator'. At the Belgenny creamery there was a single separator driven by a steam engine with its boiler and chimney. The cream was taken to Menangle Central Creamery to be sold or made into butter. The skim milk was fed to pigs on Camden Park.

Within two decades this creamery, along with other unrefrigerated creameries, became obsolete when most milk was separated on farms and the cream delivered to refrigerated butter factories. The second storey was demolished in the 1930s and the building became a farm shed. The shell of the second storey was reinstated in the 1980s but the creamery interior has not been re-created.

7. The old oak tree

This is reputed to be the oldest Oak tree in Australia. It was supposedly grown from an acorn picked up on one of the English Royal estates. The tree has stood at the centre of Camden Park's 'Home Farm', now called 'Belgenny', for most of the estate's lifetime and has witnessed remarkable changes over 200 years or so.

Initially Camden Park ran sheep and cattle tended by convict shepherds and stockkeepers. In 1820 its first vineyard was established and river flats were cleared to grow wheat. The famous Macarthur merinos were the estate's mainstay until they were moved to better sheep country near Taralga in the 1840s.

In the 1860s a disease called 'rust' wiped out wheat production and in the 1870s the pest Phylloxera wiped out wine production. By the 1890s dairying was the mainstay of the estate and by 1965 Camden Park was the largest dairy in Australia.

Camden Park Estate changed ownership in 1973 and the NSW Government purchased part of it in 1984. About 400 hectares around Camden Park House was not part of the Estate and continues to be owned by descendants of John and Elizabeth Macarthur. This old oak tree has stood through it all.

8. Belgenny cottages

There are two cottages in this complex. The cottage that faces west towards the stables was built by Elizabeth Macarthur in 1815 while her husband John was in England.

In 1821 a second cottage, designed by architect Henry Kitchen, was built facing east and it became the main cottage at that time, while the west-facing cottage possibly served as a kitchen. By about 1860 the two cottages were joined by a new wing. Termite damage in the 1880s led to demolition of the east-facing cottage which was replaced about 1900 by the cottage that stands today.

Elizabeth Macarthur stayed at Belgenny Cottage on her visits to Camden and it was here that William and James Macarthur lived from 1818 until Camden Park House was completed in 1835. Their father John, who is well known for his role in the development of Australia's Merino wool industry and his association with the 'rum rebellion', died here in 1834.

Since then the cottages have been used in various ways, such as a residence for the farm manager and other employees, and as an office.

9. Courtyard and bell

The farm's bell signalled the start and end of work periods and meal breaks for farm employees, and it could be heard a fair distance away.

The bell originally hung near the smokehouse until 1935 when it fell on the head of a farm worker named William Arthur Channell as he rang it, and he died as a result. A new brick bell mount was built here in the courtyard as a memorial to him. It also holds a plaque honouring Belgenny Farm with the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' Francis Greenway Restoration Award for 1988.

This courtyard was a busy thoroughfare for Camden Park's Home Farm in the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s. Until the 1980s the main entrance was beside the Community Hall and it led directly into the courtyard. There was a constant stream of workers, horse-drawn vehicles and later, motor vehicles, coming and going.

With the advent of tractors and other motor vehicles, a large red fuel bowser stood beside the bell mount.

10. Community Hall

The Community Hall was built in 1937 as a recreation hall for employees of Camden Park estate and their families. The Macarthur family company gave £100 for materials, with all construction undertaken by employees. The hall was one of the last buildings erected on the Home Farm, now called Belgenny, under Macarthur ownership.

The hall was used regularly for dances, parties and movies. At one stage there was a movie shown here every fortnight, with a dance held on the week in-between.

The hall played an important part in social life on Camden Park. This was in the days before television and before it was common for every family to own a car. That's why these functions were well attended by the large number of estate workers and their families. It is where many young men and women first met and later married.

The hall is now used as an education centre for school children visiting Belgenny.

11. Stables

The main stables were built in the 1820s and are among the oldest surviving farm buildings in Australia. They consist of a timber frame clad with ironbark weatherboards cut by hand on the farm. Close examination shows that fasteners include wooden pegs and hand-made nails.

The roof was originally made of hardwood shingles but these were covered in corrugated iron when the stables, barn, store and feed shed were renovated to form one long, continuous building in the 1890s. The gabled roof vents are a distinctive feature of the design.

Horses were used on the farm for transport and as motive power to pull ploughs, wagons and other machinery. In 1899 there were 118 horses on Camden Park and in 1911 there were 179.

Although the Macarthurs used the latest technology, horses remained the powerhouse of the farm until the 1930s. They particularly used Suffolk Punch draught horses for farm work, and they bred these on the farm, at times using stallions imported from England. In 1909 a Clydesdale stallion was also purchased.

From the 1950s the stables and nearby buildings were little used because the focus of activity on Camden Park became centred around the large automated dairy called 'the Rotolactor' which was at Menangle.

12. Engine room and mill

As larger machinery became essential on the farm, the stables were extended to the south west about 1900. This extension is the engine room which links the once separate stables and mill. The engine room probably housed steam, diesel and petrol engines that drove chaff cutters and other farm machinery.

To the right of the engine room is the mill. It has three floors which suggests it was originally built as a flour mill. This makes good sense because Camden Park was like a small town, with large numbers of employees and their families living on the estate. Wheat could be brought here to be ground into flour to meet the needs of the Macarthurs and their employees.

The estate had to be self-sufficient and this is why the Home Farm, now called Belgenny, included a blacksmith's shop, wheelwrights shop, pit saw, carpentry shop, engine room, shearing shed, slaughterhouse, creamery and flour mill.

13. Blacksmith's shop

The blacksmith's shop was built in 1937 using some of the material from the original shop which was located on the site of the community hall. It was moved when the hall was built.

In earlier days the blacksmith's shop was a busy place and in some ways it was the nerve centre of the farm. Blacksmiths performed many essential, skilled tasks. As well as making horse shoes and shoeing horses they made, sharpened and repaired hand tools and farm equipment. They also made gates, hinges, bolts, spikes, axles, wheels, parts of ploughs, and the metal parts of harness for horses and bullocks. They were multi-skilled and worked in brass and copper as well as iron.

Inside there is a forge with a hand-pumped bellows to bring the fire to a high enough temperature to heat iron until it glows red-hot so it can be bent and shaped. There is an anvil on which to hammer metal objects, and a sandstone water trough to cool them down.

14. Fuel shed

The fuel shed was built about 1939 when tractors and other motor vehicles had largely taken over from horses on the farm. There was now a need to store petrol and diesel in 44 gallon drums to refuel tractors and farm vehicles. 44 gallons is just over 200 litres.

This was in the days before forklifts and bulk handling equipment. The heavy drums of fuel were rolled off the delivery truck onto the platform of the fuel shed which was the same height as the truck's tray. This made it easier to unload the drums without putting them on the ground or lifting them.

Vehicles could then be refuelled at the shed by using a hand pump put into a drum of fuel. Later a large, elevated fuel tank was installed on the southern end of the granary to avoid the need to handle heavy fuel drums and pump by hand.

The fuel shed is now used for sheep shearing demonstrations and other activities at open days.

15. Slaughterhouse

There are two structures in one here. The slaughterhouse is on the left and you can see some of its original roof of wooden shingles. Sheep, cattle and pigs were slaughtered here to feed the Macarthurs, their employees and families. The grooved drains in the stone floor reflect the building's function.

Until refrigeration became available in the 1900s, fresh meat was eaten in the days following slaughter and the remainder was salted to stop it going rotten when kept for longer periods. Some meat was smoked and dried in the smokehouse which is a later stop on the tour.

At some stage the building was extended to the right, incorporating the earlier slaughterhouse. In later years it was used as a stable for working horses and finally as a carpenter's shop with a diesel engine driving a circular saw.

The stone-flagged floor in the right-hand part of building was uncovered by archaeological investigation. It belongs to an earlier, unknown building.

16. Shearing shed and the Macarthur Merinos

Originally this building was a stable for working horses but was converted into a shearing shed in the 1930s. The hardwood slabs are mounted on ironbark posts and the gap under the eaves provides ventilation.

Some of the famous Macarthur Merino sheep have been shorn here. When John Macarthur was in England in 1801 to face a Court Martial (which did not proceed), he promoted the colonial wool industry to the British government and returned in 1805 with a commission from Lord Camden to develop the industry in New South Wales.

John Macarthur first exported wool to England in 1808 and wool production became the mainstay of the Camden estate. While he was exiled in England from 1809 to 1817 his wife Elizabeth took control of sheep breeding. The Macarthurs were among the first to export quality wool in commercial quantities. In 1822 they exported 6,800kg of wool to England.

Wool production declined at Camden in the 1840s and the flock was moved to better sheep country on the family property at Taralga. Later part of the flock was moved to Victoria under changed ownership. There the breed was kept pure and in 1880 part of the flock was returned to Camden. All of the Merino sheep on Belgenny Farm today are descended from those animals.

17. Carpenter's shop

The Carpenter's shop was possibly built in the 1890s. Note the decorative barge boards (these are the timber boards on the outside at the top, on the front and back of the building). They are similar to those on the granary, suggesting the building was constructed by James English and sons who were builders and carpenters on Camden Park at that time.

The narrow doors and poorly lit interior indicate the building may have been used for something else before becoming the carpenter's shop. Herb English, a carpenter at Camden Park for many years, kept his tools and equipment in the carpenter's shop. One of his many jobs was to repair furniture and other wooden items brought to him by the Macarthurs.

Annette Macarthur-Onslow recalls that broken chairs and other items lined the walls and there was always a pot of aromatic glue bubbling on a spirit flame.

18. Well

The well has been covered for safety reasons. It was built in 1895 to provide water for the farm.

Before the well was constructed, water was brought from the river by horse and cart for domestic use in the nearby cottages and for horses, other livestock, steam engines and general farm use.

19. Pigsties

This building consists of pigsties at the southern end, with sheds and garages on the north.

The Camden Park piggery was located elsewhere on the estate and this building was probably never a full scale piggery. It was more likely used as short-term holding pens for pigs brought here for slaughter in the slaughterhouse.

20. Smokehouse

The smokehouse was built in the 1830s or 1840s. It is a rare, surviving example of a smokehouse from the colonial era.

The smokehouse was used to smoke pork and other meat to preserve it in the days before refrigeration. Salting and smoking were the two methods available to stop meat from going rotten so it could be eaten long after animals had been slaughtered.

The smokehouse reminds us of how self sufficient the Camden Park estate was. With its combination of slaughterhouse, smokehouse and the whole range of other facilities and tradesmen such as blacksmiths and carpenters, the estate could meet most of the day to day needs of the Macarthurs, their numerous employees and families living on the estate.

The smokehouse was originally free standing, probably to reduce the fire hazard, but was joined to the creamery building by the 1860s. Former employees remember beef, mutton and pork hanging in the smokehouse to preserve or 'cure' it, and a fire burning there all day. The inside of the smokehouse was blackened from the smoke.

21. Horse works

Here is a great example of technology from the 1800s that was used on Camden Park. It literally shows horse power in action. A horse was harnessed to a wooden pole and walked round and round in a circle. This turned a large metal wheel that was connected via a drive shaft to a gear box which spun a drive pulley at a higher speed. This combination of machinery was called a 'horse works'.

The pulley was connected by a belt to the chaff cutter that you see here. The chaff cutter was used to chop hay into smaller pieces to be fed to horses. In 1899 there were 118 horses on Camden Park so feeding them was a large and important job because horses did all the work that tractors and other vehicles do on farms today.

22. Reception cottage

You have almost finished your walking tour of Belgenny Farm and are heading back to the office.

The office building was formerly a duplex of two houses joined together in the middle, each self-contained. These two residences were part of over 50 cottages provided on the Camden Park estate for workers and their families.

For much of the estate's history, most of those who worked on the estate also lived on it. They were part of a self-sufficient community who lived, worked and socialised here. Some met future partners in the estate's Community Hall during social functions.

Before the duplex was converted to an office the residences were occupied by former employees or their spouses who had been given life tenancy by the Macarthurs. The office therefore reminds us of the rich social history of Camden Park and the generosity of the Macarthur family towards those who worked for them. [150 words]

Credits

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Narrator: Garth Russell

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Further information/contact details

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