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## Oran Park

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## Oran Park

*Ian Willis*

Oran Park is a locality on the southwest rural-urban interface of the Sydney metropolitan area. It is an area that has been a zone of transition and contrasts, similar to other parts of the Sydney basin. For some it is a place of loss, while for others it is a place of hope and a fulfilment of their dreams.

The western part of the locality of Oran Park is delineated by the Northern Road, the southern boundary is Cobbitty Road, while in the east the area is bounded by the watercourse of South Creek and in the north Lowes Creek. The area has always had a rural character and in 2001 the population of the Oran Park–Catherine Field area was 1,470, yet within 20 years Oran Park is predicted to grow to 25,000, while the Camden local government area will surge by 390 per cent to a population of over 250,000.

The area has never had closer settlement, and the nearest urban centres have been the hamlet of Catherine Field to the north, the village of Cobbitty to the west and the township of Narellan to the south, along with the new suburbs of the Harrington Park development. The locality was part of Nepean Shire Council until 1948, at which time the shire council was split up between Penrith, Liverpool and Camden Councils. Oran Park was part of the shire's C Riding and was amalgamated with Camden Municipal Council.

Originally Oran Park was part of the traditional land of the Dharawal people, who were dispossessed, and then displaced by Europeans who established their grand colonial estates. Until recently the area largely retained a rural character with open pastures and rolling hills, creating a picturesque landscape reminiscent of rural England. The rural character has never been seriously challenged, although there have been a golf course, a trotting track, and a motor racing circuit, while some had dreams of theme parks. The first developer subdivisions in the 1960s were for small-scale hobby farming, which saw the appearance of stables, small-scale floriculture and horticulture. These urban fringe-dwellers have been recently joined by developer corporations selling dreams to new suburbanites who live in streets named after motor racing celebrities.

### Early estates

The European domination of Oran Park commenced with the two principal land grants, one of 2,000 acres (809 hectares), Harrington Park, granted to William Douglas Campbell in 1815, and another to George Molle in 1815, Netherbyres, of 1,600 acres (647.5 hectares) which ran between South Creek and the Northern Road. Campbell was a member of the British merchant navy, who first visited New South Wales in 1797, and eventually returned in 1801 as master of the brig, *Harrington*. He had trading interests in the Pacific and was a knowledgeable navigator of the Pacific region. He settled on his property in 1817 and named it after his ship. He died in 1827.

In 1829 the Oran Park portion of Campbell's grant (800-acres) was sub-divided from the Harrington Park estate and assigned to John Douglas Campbell, William's nephew. He leased the 800-acre (323.7-hectare) property Oran to Sydney gentleman Henry Keck in 1839 for eight years, with an option to purchase the property for £1,600. The terms of the lease confirm that JD Campbell had commenced building a house at Oran Park before 1839. Historian Rosemary Broomham maintains that 'the price of the property indicates that the house was a substantial building'.<sup>1</sup>

Oran Park, and other colonial estates like it, were part of the spatial pattern and economic structure of the Cumberland Plain established by a powerful colonial elite by 1840. They built themselves impressive homes, and in the Cowpastures their ilk included John Macarthur's Camden Park, George Macleay's Brownlow Hill, John Oxley's Kirkham and Elderslie, Alexander Riley's Rabey, Edward Lord's Orielson, William Hovell's Glenlee, Rowland Hassell's Denbigh and Garnham Blaxcell's Curtis Park. This set, who modeled themselves on the British elite, established a social and economic hegemony over the region that persisted into the twentieth century.

Unfortunately for Keck, the depression of the 1840s resulted in his lease on Oran being transferred to Henry William Johnson. Johnson completed the purchase of the property for £1,600 by raising a mortgage with JD Campbell and later Thomas Barker. Broomham maintains that the 'high price he paid for the property disproves the apocryphal tale that he built the entire house in 1857'. Johnson lived at Oran Park until 1869 when he defaulted and Barker foreclosed on him. Barker (of Maryland and Orielson) was one of the wealthiest men in the colony and a man of influence. He was a member of the New South Wales Legislative Council 1853–56 and the Legislative Assembly 1856–57.

Oran Park house was a typical country manor house with panoramic vistas over the landscape and to the important access point of the estate, reminiscent of the English park. It was set on a knoll creating 'an imposing composition set amongst landscaped grounds' and an example of the Summit Model of homestead, sited on a hilltop with the homestead complex. The house was a Georgian form with a symmetrical front, 12-paned windows and six-panelled doors, marble chimney pieces, plastered internal walls and plaster ceilings. It had two storeys, built of English bond brick. It had a lead-lined flat roof behind parapets, a two-storey timber verandah on three sides and an attached three-storey octagonal tower at the rear. The interior had detailed cedar joinery and paneling, particularly in the main entrance hall, and a geometric staircase with a large arched stair window. There was a two-storey servants' wing at the rear. The outbuildings included a cottage, silo and stable. The front of the house had a carriage loop with plantings forming a circle in front of the house, with a driveway to its entrance from the intersection of Cobbitty Road and Cowpastures Road.<sup>2</sup>

Barker sold Oran Park to Campbelltown grazier Edward Lomas Moore (of Badgally) in 1871, the son of an assigned convict. Moore also owned the neighboring property Netherbyres and leased part of the combined property to farmer Thomas Cadell in 1882. EL Moore lived at Oran Park during the 1870s and 1880s and died in 1887 (at his new house at Badgally). After his

death there were questions about the estate and Oran Park eventually passed to John and Frederick Moore in 1904. Frederick Moore was mayor of Campbelltown from 1901 to 1909.

### Twentieth-century changes

In 1907 Oran Park was sold to Essington Moore, who in 1919 leased it and the neighboring Netherbyres, to Charles, James and Andrew McIntosh for seven years. In 1939, after Moore's death, Hubert Harry Robbins, described as a Sydney gentleman, purchased Oran Park and the neighboring properties of Netherbyres and Graham's Farm. Historian Helen Proudfoot maintains that Robbins and ER Smith ran Oran Park as a golf club along with racing and trotting courses. The house was apparently extended in the 1930s, the roof reconstructed, the side verandahs built in and a west wing and front portico added.<sup>3</sup> Robbins died towards the end of the war and in 1946 his wife Joyce, consolidated the three properties into a single title of 2200 acres (890 hectares). She then promptly subdivided the property and sold off a 507-acre (205-hectare) allotment.<sup>4</sup>

During World War II, when HH Robins owned the Oran Park property, 260 acres (105 hectares) were used by the military for the Narellan Military Camp. The camp was located on the intersection of Cobbitty Road and the Northern Road (Green's Corner), and occupied all four points of the intersection. The camp and its facilities, which also occupied parts of Denbigh and Harrington Park properties, functioned as a military base from 1940 to 1944, with all buildings disposed of by 1946. The camp was used for troop training, where raw recruits were formed into units, then mobilised for active service in the Pacific conflict. The camp, which was planned to accommodate over 3,500 troops, was a tented camp with huts for administration, storage, messing and recreational purposes.<sup>5</sup> During the occupation part of the Oran Park property was used as a grenade firing range. It was one of three practice ranges adjacent to the camp.<sup>6</sup>

The 507-acre property changed hands and was sold in 1961 to Edward Alfred Star, a Rose Bay hotel proprietor, and his wife Emily. They subdivided the Hume Highway and Cobbitty Road frontages into 26 hobby farms lots of five acres (two hectares) each. The remaining property was further subdivided into three hobby farms, one of which contained Oran Park homestead and 229 acres (92.6 hectares). Star retained one lot and sold the others, which included the homestead, to Newport investors John and Peggy Cole in 1968.

The Coles sold Oran Park homestead and stables in 1969 to the Honourable Lionel John Charles Seymour Dawson-Damer, a member of the English aristocracy. The Dawson-Damers undertook restoration guided by architect Richard Mann. John 'DD' Dawson-Damer was an Old Etonian and car collector. He was a prominent motor racing identity and was killed in an accident while driving his Lotus 63 at a race meeting at Goodwood, West Sussex in 2000. Dawson-Damer was the managing director of Austral Engineering Supplies Pty Ltd, and was involved with the International Automobile Federation and the Historic Sports Racing Car Association of New South Wales. Ashley Dawson-Damer, his socialite wife, was a member of the council of governors of the Opera Australia Capital Fund and a board member of the National Gallery of

Australia Foundation. After her husband's death she sold the house in 2006, with its historic gardens and 107 hectares of pasture, for \$19 million to Valad Property Group.

In mid-2009 Mark Frinsdorf of the Valad Property Group stated that in the future Oran Park house and the surrounding gardens will become part of a 'high quality integrated heritage residential development as part of the residential growth release area in South West Sydney'.<sup>7</sup> In late 2009 Valad put the property up for sale and then withdrew it six months later.

Oran Park house has been under consideration for listing on the New South Wales State Heritage Register since 2004.<sup>8</sup> The lack of movement on this important heritage item reflects the tenuous nature of heritage protection for some New South Wales colonial properties.

### Motor racing

The south-western and western part of the original estate adjacent to the intersection of Cobbitty Road and the Northern Road was the location of the Oran Park Motor Racing Circuit. The main grand prix circuit was 2.6 kilometres long with a mixture of slow, technical and fast sweeping corners as well as changes in elevation around the track. The main circuit was broken into two parts. The south circuit was the original track built in 1962 by the Singer Car Club. It consisted of the main straight, pit lane garages and a constant radius 180-degree turn at the end. The track hosted its first Australian Touring Car Championship in 1971, which was a battle between racing legends Bob Jane and Allan Moffat, and drew a crowd of over 30,000. The north circuit was added in 1973 and was an 800-metre figure of eight.

In 1976 there was a proposal to create a sports and recreation centre on the raceway. The development was raised again in 1981 and was to include a themed entertainment park, an equestrian centre, dude ranch, motel, health and fitness centre, model farm and cycling, hiking and bridle trails. But it all came to nothing. In 1983 Bill Cleary stated to the *Macarthur Advertiser* that his family had owned the property for 38 years. It was subsequently sold in the mid-1980s to Leppington Pastoral Company, owned by the Perich family. Leppington Pastoral Company is arguably one of the largest and most advanced dairy farms in Australia with a herd of 2,000 cows. The Perich family also has interests in Narellan Town Centre, the Oran Park Town centre land release and fertilizers.<sup>9</sup>

Over the years the raceway has been the base for a number of subsidiary activities that included a two dirt circuits, two four-wheel training venues, a skid pan and a go-kart circuit. The racing circuit has been used for a variety of motorsport including club motorkhanas, touring cars, sports sedans, production cars, open-wheelers, motocross and truck racing. The track hosted the Australian Grand Prix in 1974 and 1977. In 2008 a number of organisations used the circuit for driver training, including advanced driving, defensive driving, high performance and off-road driving. The December 2008 V8 Supercar event was the 38th time a championship was held at the track.

The racing circuit was rezoned for housing in 2004, and Tony Perich was launched into the BRW Top 200 rich list and named the 42nd richest person in Australia. The New South Wales Planning Minister, Craig Knowles, announced a partnership between Greenfields Development

Corporation, a Perich family company, and Landcom for the development of the Oran Park raceway for housing.<sup>10</sup>

Sadly for motoring enthusiasts the circuit was eventually closed in January 2010. The track has been silenced, like other Sydney suburban raceways, which have included Amaroo Park, Warwick Farm, Mt Druitt, Sydney Showground, Liverpool and Westmead speedways.

Many racing legends have driven on the track over the years. The list has included Sir Jack Brabham, Sir Stirling Moss, Kevin Bartlett, Fred Gibson, Ian Luff, Bathurst legends Alan Moffat and Peter Brock, and Formula One driver Mark Weber. Many innovations were implemented at the track and included night racing, truck racing and NASCAR racing.

The track was always a crowd favourite. Fans were close to the action and could see the entire circuit. According to David Fitzsimons the crowd had a 'fantastic vantage point on the hills and from the grandstands'. Motoring enthusiasts might miss the spectacle, but they will not miss the basic amenities and the long queues of traffic in and out the circuit.<sup>11</sup>

Oran Park is a place of lost memories and grieving. Motoring enthusiasts have been displaced and dispossessed by a new band of arrivals who have different hopes and aspirations.

### Suburban development

Oran Park and the associated Turner Road precincts (now Gregory Hills) were the first two areas that were developed as part of the state government's South West Growth Centre plan. The government's Growth Centres Commission stated that the South-West Growth Centre stretches from the edge of Currans Hill and Harrington Park in the south to Kemps Creek in the north. The centre is divided in 18 precincts and is eventually planned to accommodate 295,000 people by 2031. The Oran Park and Turner Road Development is expected to house 33,000 people.<sup>12</sup>

In 2007 Tony Perich told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that his development company, Greensfields Development Corporation, planned to build almost one-fifth of the 11,500 dwellings in Oran Park and Turner Road in a joint venture with Landcom. The Planning Minister, Frank Sartor, stated that the state government would create 'liveable communities'.<sup>13</sup> In 2008 the new Planning Minister, Kristina Keneally, declared that Oran Park was 'the biggest residential development we have seen in Sydney for the past 10 years'. The project would incorporate cycling and pedestrian paths, a supermarket, retail complex, medical and civic centre, library, police station and other government agencies. The minister said that

phase one would have two school sites, a display home village, road infrastructure, playing fields, cycle paths, a seniors' living precinct and the first commercial building of the town centre.<sup>14</sup>

Not everyone was so sure about these developments and in 2007 the *Macarthur Chronicle* greeted the news with a headline, 'Home invasion'. 'The rural landscape surrounding Camden will be engulfed by suburbia'.<sup>15</sup> Even at this early stage journalist Catharine Munro predicted that the urban development would be 'as dense as some of Sydney's most congested areas'.<sup>16</sup> In

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2008 Chris Patterson, Camden's mayor, stated that 'locals were bracing themselves for an onslaught of new residents.'<sup>17</sup>

Rob Elliott, the president of Macarthur Regional Organisation of Councils, was concerned about the provision of adequate infrastructure and predicted that new residents would be 'busy sitting on Narellan Road stuck in traffic'.<sup>18</sup> His words were prophetic, as morning commuters will currently attest. The poor provision of public transport has meant that the Camden local government area has one of the highest car ownership rates in the Sydney area, a trend likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

The first Oran Park home sites were released for sale in late March 2010. Buyers camped out for days in the hope of purchasing their part of the Australian dream. A shortage of new-home sites in the Sydney basin has resulted in a pent-up demand for housing. According to the buyers, the attractions of Oran Park are the community concept and the affordability of the development.<sup>19</sup>

A thematic approach has been taken throughout the master-planned estate and the developers have paid homage to the raceway, rural themes and token gestures to the area's history. Robert Sullivan, spokesman for Landcom, stated that

future residents will be able to see an artist's version of a chequered flag where the old finish line used to be; buy a house along the main straight; live in streets named after Brock, Moffat and the ilk; relax in Wayne Gardner Reserve; and let their children play on the pedal cars on the miniature racetrack opposite the sales centre.<sup>20</sup>

A statue of a cow is located outside the sales centre, and a herd of cows provided a backdrop to the carpark on the open day, while the Perich family continue their dairy business on the farm adjacent to the development site.

In reality the new fringe dwellers are just part of the extension of Sydney's urban sprawl, although Landcom's Robert Sullivan vehemently denies this. He maintains that, 'we're putting a new town on the map of Sydney' and draws a comparison with developments at Rouse Hill.<sup>21</sup>

### **A new suburb**

An associated part of the Oran Park precinct is the new suburb called Gregory Hills. It is part of the Turner Road release and was established in 2008 east of Camden Valley Way. Gregory Hills is located in the upper reaches of South Creek and constitutes the conjunction of the boundaries of Oran Park, Catherine Fields, Currans Hill and Smeaton Grange. The development is made up of 415 hectares of Marist Brothers-owned land that was part of St Gregory's college. The name Gregory Hills is derived from the original St Gregory's Chapel on the Marist Brothers land and the topography of the area.

There was controversy over the naming of the locality after the developer, Dart West Developments, wanted to call it Camden Hills. There was local opposition and other suggested names included St Gregory's Hills, Gledswood Hills, Chisholm Hills and Scenic Hills. In 2007 planning consultants Development Planning Strategies stated that the site should have a 'sense

of identity and one which is easily recognisable to the area'. The consultants maintained that the name Gregory Hills would provide residents with a 'sense of community ownership and awareness of the historical land uses and foster a sense of place'. The name Gregory Hills was registered with the Geographical Names Board in 2008.

Building community in these greenfield developments is a challenge and developers' promotional material is rich in its rhetoric. Community building is about participation and the creation of social capital. New arrivals might live on the rural fringe yet their heads are firmly located in the metropole. New suburbanites are part of the Otherness. They are outsiders trying to get on the inside. It is a challenge most will aspire to, few will succeed.

The commodification of the rural setting and local history area constant themes for land releases in the Camden local government area. The Dart West website claimed in 2009 that their development is 'located in the historic and beautiful Camden district, combining the best of Camden country living'. New residents' houses, the developer maintained, will be 'set in rolling paddocks and bushland ridges and valleys in a beautiful rural environment'.<sup>22</sup> These values are at the heart of the existing community's sense of place and identity, and attract the new suburbanites. The new arrivals come looking for a place where 'the country looks like the country'. Yet the paradox of the whole situation is that in time they will convert the area into something that they are trying to escape, Sydney's urban sprawl.

*Ian Willis is a professional historian and President of Camden Historical Society*

### Further reading

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