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The early days of Elderslie

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Abstract
In 1929 Madeline Buck the granddaughter of Elderslie pioneer James Hawdon published a series of letters written in 1828 to friends in England. Hawdon had lived in Elderslie for five years from 1828. Hawdon's letters surfaced in England in 1929 amongst old family papers and have many interesting insights into life in the early days of the colony.

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Back then ...

The early days of Elderslie

By Dr Ian Willis

I
n 1929 Madeline Buck the grand-daughter of an Elderslie pioneer, James Hawdon, published a series of his letters written in 1828 to friends in England. Hawdon had lived in the Elderslie area for five years from 1828.

Hawdon's letters surfaced in England in 1929 amongst old family papers and have many interesting insights into life in the early days of the colony.

At Elderslie Hawdon leased the Elderslie estate and supported four convicts, his wife Margaret and baby son.

Historian Alan Atkinson maintains that “Hawdon apparently tried to keep up an English tone, with the slave-driving Botany Bay element as a minimum. He was a good master and even admired his convicts. He did not take any convicts for punishment at the Cataract Bench between 1825 and 1830.”

Hawdon was concerned about freight costs between Sydney and the Cowpastures and according to Atkinson “could make a good profit only because his carriers were his own convicts, who cost him next to nothing. The journey to market and back took a week.”

In 1879 a journalist for the Australian Town and Country Journal described Hawdon as “I am only doing justice to a good old colonist, and by expressing the general opinion by stating that Mr Hawdon is about one of the finest representatives of the true British gentleman in the colony. Honour, hospitality, and generosity are the characteristics which have marked his long life of usefulness in working and opening out with a few other pioneers this rapidly peopling district.”

In his obituary in 1881 the writer maintained that: “With his we believe, passes away that last of the brave men who did so much, to open-up the pastoral west of Australia and to give her the name of the finest grazing country in the world.”

At Elderslie he ran dairying and cheese making and later his property at Bodalla. He contracted to supply provisions to the road gangs making the Great South Road.

Hawdon’s views on Aborigines in the Elderslie area:

Hawdon grew hay for the Sydney market which was used to fatten cattle for market, and by the 1830s hay was more important than grain for the property owners in the Cowpastures. Hawdon’s convicts took the hay to the Sydney market and sold it for 6/9d a hundredweight in 1832. He also grew a small amount of tobacco, which according to Atkinson, was ‘very profitable’ for those who knew how to grow it.

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Hawdon wrote of the social life at Elderslie and Mrs Buck stated that the social life on the Cowpastures a hundred years ago was not as dull as one might think.

The Camden Historical Society is pleased to welcome popular authors, speakers on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30pm at the Camden Museum on John Street Camden. Interested persons and new members are most welcome.

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