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Beulah and Sydney's urban sprawl

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Abstract
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Beulah and Sydney’s Urban Sprawl

Beulah is an historic farm property on Sydney south-west rural-urban fringe. Beulah has a frontage to Sydney’s notorious Appin Road and is an area of Sydney’s ever increasing urban sprawl. The property is caught in a pincer movement between two new land releases at Appin and Mount Gilead. These developments threaten to strangle the life out of Beulah is a vast sea of homogenised suburbia by swallowing up local farmland.

In 2015 NSW Planning Minister Stokes declared that Sydney’s ‘urban sprawl is over’ with the Mount Gilead land releases, while Professor Peter Phibbs, planning expert, stated that the land release meant that there was ‘urban sprawl plus’. Needless to say these sentiments are not new and have been expressed in the Macarthur region before in 1973 and urban sprawl continues.

Beulah

Beulah is a heritage gem and possesses stories about local identities and events that add to a sense of place and construction of a local identity. Beulah was purchased by the Sydney Living Museums in 2010 as part of its endangered houses fund project.

The Beulah estate is located on the eastern edge of the clay soils of the Cumberland Plain abutting the Sydney sandstone of the Georges River catchment. The property contains an 1830s stone farm cottage with a number of out-buildings, a stone bridge and 60 hectares of critically endangered woodland. Beulah’s sense of place is constructed around stories associated with the Campbelltown’s pioneering Hume family best known for Hamilton Hume and his overland journey to the Port Phillip area in 1824-1825 with William Hovell. Hamilton Hume was granted 300 acres at Appin for this work, which he named ‘Brookdale’, and in 1824 the Hume and Hovell expedition to Port Phillip left from this property on the Appin Road north of the village, near where the Hume and Hovell Monument now stands. The Hume Monument was erected in 1924 by the Royal Australian Historical Society to commemorate Hume’s 1824 expedition.
The earliest European occupation of the Beulah site, according to Megan Martin from Sydney Living Museums, were emancipated Irish convict Connor Bland who constructed the farm cottage around 1835-1836. Boland put the property up for sale in 1836 and called it Summerhill. The Hume family purchased the property in 1846 and then leased it out. In 1884 the property was renamed Beulah and members of the Hume family lived there until 1936 when it was left to the RSPCA while Hume family associates were given occupancy rights and lived in the house until the 1960s.

According to the State Heritage Inventory

Ellen Hume and Beulah were featured in “The Australian Home Beautiful” in 1934 in an article by Nora Cooper, photographs by Harold Cazneaux and descriptions of Hume family furniture. The forest which Miss Hume treated as a private sanctuary The Hume Sanctuary received special attention. It was Ellen’s wish that her trees be left to the nation….

The Beulah estate was purchased by developers in the 1970s who anticipated land re-zoning linked with the 1973 New Cities Structure Plan for Campbeltown, Appin and Camden. The state government released the New Cities Plan as part of the 1968 Sydney Region Outline Plan. The plan was based on the utopian dream of British New Towns like Milton Keynes and plans for the development of Canberra. Some of the new Campbeltown suburbs that appeared in the 1970s followed the Radburn model developed in the United States, which had houses facing a shared green space with no back fences. They turned out to be a disaster and the state government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars reversing these houses so they face the street in suburbs like Macquarie Fields, Minto and Ambarvale.

The original New Cities Plan turned into a developers dream and created the notion of ‘Ugly Campbeltown’ in the Sydney press by the end of the 1970s around public housing . Camden and Appin escaped the worst of the housing releases of the 1970s. Sydney’s urban sprawl reached the Camden LGA in the 1980s at Mount Annan and Currans Hill, while Appin has only seen extensive land releases in recent years. The 1973 Macarthur Growth Centre failed to materialise in its planned form and in the process cannibalised Campbeltown’s main street and left it a shell of its former country town self.
In 1973 the State Planning Authority, according to the State Heritage Inventory, conducted a survey of significant 19th buildings in 1973 and identified Beulah and Humewood as significant. The National Trust of Australia (NSW) did a study on the property and classified it in 1980. In 1983 Campbelltown City Council proposed an interim conservation order and a permanent conservation order was placed on the 19th century cottage in 1987. The owners were ordered to make repairs to the property in the early 2000s, and in 2010 the NSW Office of Heritage and Environment acquired the property as part of the state government’s Biodiversity Offset program.

The State Heritage Inventory considers the estate to an important example of early conservation planning that resulted in the retention of an ‘entire cultural landscape’ containing a homestead group, stone bridge and garden layout. Sydney Living Museums have undertaken considerable conservation and restoration work on the farm house and the stone bridge on the access road to the farm house.

New land releases around Beulah

Beulah and its heritage curtilage is potentially threatened by Sydney’s urban sprawl with new land releases in 2013 at Appin to the south along the Appin Road, while to the north there is the Mount Gilead land release adjacent to Campbelltown’s southern suburbs. Both of these land releases are a repeat of the 1973 housing releases. They are low density horizontal developments that add to urban sprawl. They are problematic and fail to add to the existing identity of the area and take decades to develop their own sense of place.

The urban sprawl that is encroaching on Beulah from the south is part of the NSW State Governments 2013 The Metropolitan Strategy for Sydney to 2031. A structure plan developed for the Appin area states that there will 18,300 housing lots release over a 25 year period from around 17,000 hectares. Walker Corporation stated that there is a strong demand for new housing releases in the Appin area and in 2013 26 lots were sold within 2 days of the June land release [1]. There low density houses were similar to in nature to the planned housing developments of 1973 that failed to eventuate.
On the northern approaches to Beulah are the Mount Gilead land releases on a property formerly owned by Lady Dorothy Macarthur Onslow who died in 2013. Mount Gilead is proposed to have 1700 housing lots from 210 hectares which Campbelltown City Council endorsed in 2012 [2]. The property contains the historic tower-mill believed the last one in New South Wales along with a homestead, stone stable, and granary dating from the early 19th century.

Appin Road a deadly lifeline

The issue of urban sprawl is complicated by the inadequate road access, Beulah and the Appin and Mount Gilead land releases all front the Appin Road one of Sydney’s most dangerous stretches of road. A major unresolved issue in the area around Beulah and land releases at Appin and Mount Gilead is the upgrading of the Appin Road.

The Sydney Morning Herald stated in early 2016 that the Appin Road was Sydney’s deadliest road. Between 2015 and 2000 23 people were killed on the Appin Road with the latest fatality in January 2016. While the state government has plans for road improvements this will take a number of years meanwhile there is increased traffic generated by new land releases and general population growth of the Campbelltown area.

The Appin Road has always been an important access route between the Illawarra and the Campbelltown area. Before the South Coast railway was extended to Wollongong in 1887 the Appin Road was used as the main access route to the Main Southern Railway at Campbelltown, which opened in 1858. There was a daily coaching service running between Campbelltown Railway Station and Wollongong. There is still is daily coach service between Campbelltown and the Illawarra via Appin, although these days it mainly caters to university students.

The poor state of the Appin Road is just one of the issues created by Sydney’s urban sprawl. Other issues include fire risks, urban runoff and food security, public transport, waste, water supply, loss of prime farm land, community facilities, pollution, energy, social cohesion, and equity challenges. Beulah is part of story of the Sydney’s rural urban fringe which has been a landscape of hope and loss for new arrivals and local alike. It will be interesting to see the part this important heritage asset plays in this narrative and how the construction of sense will effect new residents surrounding it.

Further reading


Notes


November 18, 2016 in Appin, Attachment to place, Campbelltown, Colonialism, Communications, community identity, Farming, Heritage, Historical consciousness, history, Local History, Macarthur, Place making, sense of place, Settler colonialism, Sydney's rural-urban fringe, Transport, Urban growth. Tags: Campbelltown, heritage, Macarthur, sense of place, Settler Society, Sydney's fringe, Sydney's rural-urban fringe

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