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Movie making Camden style

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Abstract
Movie makers have always had an eye on the Camden district's large country houses, rustic farm buildings, quaint villages and picturesque countryside for film locations. From the 1920s the area has been used by a series of film makers as a setting for their movies. It coincided with an increasing interest in the area's Englishness from poets, journalists and travel writers. They wrote stories of quaint English style villages with a church on the hill, charming gentry estates down hedge lined lanes, where the patriarch kept contented cows in ordered fields and virile stallions in magnificent stables. This did not go unnoticed in the film industry.

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Movie makers have always had an eye on the Camden district’s large country houses, rustic farm buildings, quaint villages and picturesque countryside for film locations.

From the 1920s the area has been used by a series of film makers as a setting for their movies. It coincided was an increasing interest in the area’s Englishness from poets, journalists and travel writers. They wrote stories of quaint English style villages with a church on the hill, charming gentry estates down hedge-lined lanes, where the patriarch kept contented cows in ordered fields and virile stallions in magnificent stables. This did not go un-noticed in the film industry.
One of the first was the 1921 silent film Silks and Saddles shot at Arthur Macarthur Onslow’s Macquarie Grove by American director John K Wells about the world of horse racing. The film was shot on the race track on Macquarie Grove. The script called for a race between and aeroplane and race horse. The movie showed a host good looking racing blood-stock. There was much excitement, according to Annette Onslow, when an airplane piloted by Edgar Percival his Avro landed on the race course used in the film and flew the heroine to Randwick to win the day. Arthur’s son Edward swung a flight in Percival’s plane and was hooked on flying for life, and later developed Camden Airfield at Macquarie Grove.

Camden film locations were sought in 1931 for director Ken G Hall’s 1932 Dad and Dave film On Our Selection based on the characters and writings of Steele Rudd. It stars Bert Bailey as Dan Rudd and was release in the UK as Down on the Farm. It was one the most popular Australian movies of all time but it was eventually shot at Castlereagh near Perinith. The movie is based of Dan’s selection in south-west Queensland and is about a murder mystery. Ken G Hall notes that of the 18 feature films he made between 1932 and 1946 his film company used the Camden area and the Nepean River valley and its beauty for location shooting. The films included On Our Selection (1936), Squatter’s Daughter (1933), Grandad Rudd (1934), Thoroughbred (1935), Orphant of the Wilderness (1936), It Isn’t Done (1936), Broken Melody (1938), Dad and Dave Come to Town (1938), Mr Chedworth Steps Out (1938). Gone to the Dogs (1939), Come Up Smiling (1939), Dad Rudd MP (1940), and Smith, The Story of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith (1946).

The Camden district was the location of two wartime action movies, The Power and The Glory (1941) and The Rats of Tobruk (1944). The Rats of Tobruk was directed by Charles Chauvel and starred actors Chips Rafferty, Peter Finch and Pauline Garrick. The story is about three men from a variety of backgrounds who become mates during the siege at Tobruk during the Second World War. The movie was run at Camden’s Paramount movie palace in February 1945. The location for parts of the movie were the bare paddocks of Narellan Vale and Curran’s Hill where they were turned into a battleground to recreated the setting at Tobruk in November 1943. There were concerns at the time that the exploding ammunitions used in the movie would disturb the cows. Soldiers were supplied from the Narellan Military Camp and tanks were modified to make them look like German panzers and RAAF Camden supplied six Vultee Vengeance aircraft from Camden Airfield which were painted up to look like German Stuka bombers. The film location was later used for the Gayline Drive In. Charles Chauvel’s daughter Susanne Carlson who was 13 years old at the time reported that it was a ‘dramatic and interesting time’.

The second wartime movie was director Noel Monkman’s The Power and The Glory starring Peter Finch and Katrin Rosselle. The movie was made at RAAF Camden with co-operation of the RAAF. It is a spy drama about a Czech scientist who discovers a new poison gas and escapes to Australia rather than divulge the secret to the Nazis. Part of the plot was enemy infiltration of the coast near Bulli where an enemy aircraft was sighted and 5 Avro-Anson aircraft were directed to seek and bombed the submarine. The Winaway aircraft from the RAAF Central Flying School acted as fighters and it was reported that the pilots were ‘good looking’ airmen from the base mess. There was a private screening at Camden’s Paramount movie theatre for the RAAF Central Flying School personnel.

Camden Park was used as a set for the internationally series of Smiley films, Smiley made in 1956 and in 1958 Smiley Gets a Gun in cinemascopage. The story is about a nine-year old boy who is a bit of rascal who grows up in a country town. They were based on books by Australian author Moore Raymond and filmed by Twentieth Century Fox and London Films. Raymond set his stories in a Queensland country town in the early 20th century and there are horse and buggies and motor cars. The town settings were constructed from scratch and shot at Camden Park, under the management of Edward Macarthur Onslow. The movies stars included Australian Chips Rafferty and English actors John McCallum and Ralph Richardson. Many old time locals have fond memories of being extras in the movies. Smiley was released in the United Kingdom and United States.
In 1999 Camden airfield was used as a set for the television documentary The Last Plane Out of Berlin which was the story of Sidney Cotton. Actor Geoff Morrell played the role of Cotton, who went to England in 1916 and became a pilot and served with the Royal Naval Air Service during the First World War. He is regarded as the ‘father of aerial photography’ and in 1939 was requested to make flights over Nazi Germany in 1939. Camden Airfield was ‘perfect location’ according to producer Jeff Watson because of its ‘historic’ 1930s atmosphere.

In 2009 scenes from X-Men Origins: Wolverine were filmed at Camden and near Brownlow Hill.

In 2010 filmmaker Sandra Pyres of Why Documentaries produced a number of short films in association with the With The Best of Intentions exhibition at The Oaks Historical Society. The films were a montage of contemporary photographs, archival footage and re-enactments by drama students of the stories of child migrants. The only voices were those of the child migrants and there were many tears spilt as the films were screened at the launch of the exhibition.

In 2011 scenes from director Wayne Blair’s Vietnam wartime true story of The Sapphires were filmed at Brownlow Hill starring Deborah Mailman, Jessica Mauboy and Chris O’Dowd. This is the true story of four young Aboriginal sisters who are discovered by a talent scout who organises a tour of American bases in Vietnam. On Brownlow Hill a large stage was placed in the middle of cow paddock and draped with a sign that read ‘USC Show Committee presents the Sapphires’ and filming began around midnight. The cows were herded out of sight and the crew had to be careful that they did not stand of any cowpats. Apparently Sudanese refugees played the role of African American servicemen of the 19th Infantry Division.

Camelot House early 1900s Camden Images

The romantic house of Camelot with its turrets, chimney stacks and gables, was built by racing identity James White and designed by Horbury Hunt was the scene of activity in 2006 and 2007 for the filming of scenes of Baz Luhman’s Australia, starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman. The location shots were interior and exterior scenes which involved horse riding by Kidman and Jackman. The film is about an aristocratic woman who leaves England and follows her husband to Australia during the 1930s, and live through the Darwin bombing by the Japanese in the Second World War.

Camelot was a hive activity for the filming of the 1950s romantic television drama A Place to Call Home produced by Channel 7 in 2012. Set in rural Australia it is the story of a woman’s journey ‘to heal her soul’ and of a wealthy family facing changes in the fictional country town of Inverness in the Bligh family estate of Ash Park. Starring Marta Dusseldorp as the mysterious Sarah and Noni Hazlehurst as the family matriarch Elizabeth, who has a number of powerful independently wealthy women who paralleled her role in Camden in time past on their gentry estates. The sweeping melodrama about hope and loss is set against the social changes in the 1950s and has close parallels to 1950s Camden. The ‘sumptuous’ 13 part drama series screened on television in 2013 and according to its creator Bevin Lee had a ‘large-scale narrative’ that had a ‘feature-film feel’. He maintained that is was ‘rural gothic’, set in a big house that had comparisons with British television drama Downton Abbey.
The 55-room fairytale like mansion and its formal gardens were a ‘captivating’ setting for A Place to Call Home, according to the Property Observer in 2013. Its initial screening was watched by 1.7 million viewers in April 2013. The show used a host of local spots for film sets and one of the favourite points of conversation “around the water-cooler” for locals was the game ‘pick-the-place’. By mid-2014 Channel 7 had decided to axe the series at the end of the second series. There was a strong local reaction and a petition was circulating which attracted 6000 signatures to keep the show on air. In the end Foxtel television produced a third series with the original cast which screened in 2015.

Camden airfield was in action again and used as a set for the Australian version of the British motoring television show Top Gear Australian in 2010. Part of the show are power laps in a ‘Bog Standard Car’ were recorded on parts of the runways and taxiways used as a test track.

Camden Showground became the set for Angelina Jolie’s Second World War drama Unbroken in 2013. The main character Louis Zamperini, a former Olympic runner, and Onslow Park was used as part of the story of his early life as a member of Torrance High School track team. The movie is about Zamperini’s story of survival after his plane was shot down during the Pacific campaign. The filming caused much excitement in the area and the local press gave the story extensive coverage, with the showground was chosen for its historic atmosphere. Camden mayor Lara Symkowski hoped that the movie would boost local tourism and the council was supportive of the area being used as a film set. The council had appointed a film contact officer to encourage greater use of the area for film locations.

Edwina Macarthur Stanham writes that Camden Park has been the filming location for a number of movies, advertisements and fashion shoots since the 1960s. They have included Smiley (1956), Smiley Gets a Gun (1958), Shadow of the Boomerang (1960) starring Jimmy Little, My Brilliant Career (1978) was filmed in Camden Park and its garden and surrounds, and The Empty Beach (1985) starring Bryan Brown, House Taken Over (1997) a short film written and directed by Liz Hughes which used lots of scenes in the house. In the 21st century there has been Preservation (2003) described a gothic horror movie starring Jacqueline Mackenzie, Jack Finsterer and Simon Bourke which used a lot of the scenes filmed in the house.

In 2005 Danny De Vito visited Camden Park scouting for a location for a movie based on the book “The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle”. In Sleeping Beauty (2010) an Australian funded film was shot at Camden Park and the short film La Finca (2012). In September 2014 Camden Park was used as a location in the film called “The Daughter” starring Geoffrey Rush. Extensive filming took place over 3 weeks and members of the family and friends and Camden locals played the role of extras.

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In 2015 the Camden Historical Society and filmmaker Wen Denaro have combined forces to telling the story of the Chinese market gardeners who settled in Camden in the early twentieth century. The project will produce a short documentary about the Chinese market gardeners who established vegetable gardens along the river in Camden and who supplied fresh product to the Macarthur and Sydney markets.
In 2015 an episode of the Network Ten TV show of The Bachelor Australia was filmed at Camden Park in August 2015. They showed scenes of the Bachelor Sam Wood taking one of the bachelorette Sarah on a romantic date to the colonial mansion Camden Park. There were scenes of the pair in a two-in-hand horse drawn white carriage going up and down the driveway to the Camden Park cemetery on the hill overlook the town. There were scenes in the soft afternoon sunlight of the couple having a romantic high-tea on the verandah of Camden Park house with champagne and scones and cup cakes. In the evening there were floodlit images of the front of Camden Park house from the front lawn then scenes of the couple in the sitting room silting of the leather sofa sharing wine, cheese and biscuits in front on an open fire and candles. Sarah is gobsmacked with the house, its setting and is ‘amazed’ by the house's colonial interior.

June 1, 2016 in Camden, Entertainment, Heritage, Leisure, Modernism, Movies. Tags: Camden, Camden Airfield, Camden Park, Charming Camden, heritage, RAAF Edit
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