“IN SEARCH OF A NAME”

Notes on an address by Miss M. A. Green (Councillor), to the Society at Brandon House on Thursday, 4/7/46.

The topic was stimulated by idle curiosity as to the origin of the name “Austinmer.” Before very long, it was found that the name had been changed prior to the coming of the railway.

In the very early days of the settlement of the Illawarra District, north of Woonona as far as Coalcliff was known as Bulli. Austinmer had carried the name Sidmouth after the name of a farmhouse which still stood as late as 1916. Sidmouth was the Cornish hometown of Robert Marsh Westmacott who, in 1831, arrived in Australia to follow the office of Deputy Quartermaster General.

In 1834, when Governor Richard Bourke paid his visit to the Illawarra, Westmacott came as A.D.C. to the Governor. He was greatly impressed by the beauty and fertility of the district and has left several groups of fine drawings and sketches, together with written descriptions of Sydney, the Illawarra and Port Phillip.

The outcome of his admiration for the Illawarra was his resignation from the Army and his official positions, to take up land in four blocks at Woonona, Rixon’s Pass, Austinmer and Coledale, in all, about 300 acres, known as Bulli.
Following the original topic of research, it was found that Westmacott farmed all four lots and actually built his home and lived at Sidmouth, choosing the fertile little gully as an ideal place for the rearing of horses.

In the course of time, only a few years in reality, Westmacott instigated and became trustee of the Illawarra Steamship Company, recommended the only branch bank in Wollongong, acted as steward at Wollongong race meetings, promoted the Wollongong Agricultural Society and became its first secretary. He was a J.P. and at the same time associated with race clubs at Burwood and Parramatta, and actually kept his Parramatta home open.

In 1841 Westmacott applied to the new mining company to sink a shaft on his property at Bulli. This was possibly and probably the first opening of the old Austinmer shaft, which has been closed and re-opened several times, the last re-opening being during the recent war years. The shaft is now in operation.

Westmacott disposed of his properties in the Illawarra in 1841 and 1846, before which time he had re-settled his wife and family at Parramatta. A chance letter traced Robert Marsh Westmacott's grandson at present resident in Parramatta, who presented the Illawarra Historical Society with a book of drawings by his grandfather, and claims ancestor was responsible in some way for the establishment of King's School, Parramatta.

The subject is by no means closed, there are many clues to follow before a complete history of Westmacott's association with this district can be written and before "Search for a Name" will be completed.