

THE OLD STONE JUG - TRANSFORMED

The old two-storey house at the intersection of Allen Street and Gipps Road has been a Mount Keira landmark for as long as anyone now living can remember. The land on which it stands was part of 1,000 acres (Portion 7, Parish of Wollongong) promised by Sir Thomas Brisbane in 1825 to James Stares Spearing, one of the most enterprising and versatile of Illawarra pioneers. Spearing was also promised a further 1,000 acres adjoining, and his wife Harriet was promised 1,800 acres - an irregular block extending as far north as Bellambi. As the custom was, the Spearings moved in and built their home (near the present site of the Mormon Church) without waiting for the actual grant.

The estate, in the Spearings' time known as Paulsgrove, was sold in 1835 to Lieut.-Colonel John Thomas Leahy, who renamed it the Mount Keira Estate. Colonel Leahy died intestate, unmarried and, according to a contemporary diarist, 'unprepared', about four years later. The property passed to his heir-at-law, his brother Daniel, who was living in Ireland. Daniel appointed two Sydney merchants, Robert and Charles Campbell, his attorneys, and conveyed the land to them on trust for sale, so that when the grant finally issued in 1841, it was in the Campbells' names. (It seems at first sight that these dates must be wrong; but because of the delay in issuing grants a practice had developed of buying, selling and mortgaging promised grants as if the grant had actually been made).

The Campbells subdivided the estate into numerous lots of varying sizes, from about 7 to about 70 acres. The land around the Mount Keira foothills was slow to sell - it was probably too rough and hilly to attract purchasers. At last Lot 31, of about 14 acres bounded on the north by Gipps Road and on the west by Mount Keira Road, found favour with Henry Osborne of Marshall Mount, and he entered into a contract for its purchase, together with several neighbouring lots, for the sum of £280-8-4. Osborne, though already the lord of many thousand acres in Illawarra and the Riverina, seems to have been always ready to add a bit more to his domains; but in this case he probably had a special reason - he was engaged in the opening up of the Osborne Wallsend Colliery a few hundred yards further up the mountainside.

But before the conveyance was completed Henry Osborne died, and his

executors, though they took title, lost no time in disposing of the land to Thomas Armstrong. The Armstrong family held it for over twenty years, but after the deaths of Thomas and his wife, Thomas's executor Andrew Armstrong further subdivided the land into small 'suburban-sized' blocks, which developed into the township of Mount Keira. Lots 1 and 21 of Section 1 of Armstrong's subdivision were bought in 1889 by Thomas Lloyd Shipton of Mount Keira, Miner, and his wife Isabella for £50. Lot 1 was a more or less conventionally-shaped block with frontages to Gipps Road and Allen Street, Lot 21 was a triangular block adjoining it on the south, with a frontage to Allen Street.

Mount Keira was changing. The Mercury of 14th August 1890 published a report 'from a Correspondent' to this effect:

THE KEIRA STREETS - In consequence of the dull coal trade, the contractors for the forming of our streets have a good deal of time on hand, and have therefore been enabled to push on much more vigorously with the work. As a matter of fact, the contractors are now pretty well all finished, and after a spell of dry weather should be in fair order, though they should receive a good coating of ballast, to make them as perfect as the residents could wish. The Mount Keira-road, however, is in a very bad state after the late rains, and the Trust should look after it now that the weather is settling somewhat. If they have not got the means they certainly should see about getting it.

BUILDING - Mr. T. Shipton is going in for a new style of architecture in this quarter. Until the unlocking of the lands here a few years ago the miners lived in humpies. When that worthy band of workers, however, became possessed of their own allotments, they put up comfortable weatherboard cottages, so that they might live like other classes of workmen. Some of these cottages are very ornate, and as the bulk of them boast of a well-kept garden in front and at the back, it may be taken for granted that the colliers take great delight in improving their homes. But Mr. Shipton intends erecting a two-storey building, the first of its kind on the mountain. It will be of rubble-stone and brick, and when finished (which will be about Christmas) will put all our other buildings in the shade.

There can be no doubt that this is the house. The description applied, as many older residents remember, up to the 1960's.

Thomas Shipton was then long dead. His widow in 1924 sold the house and both lots to Thomas and Sarah McNamara for £350, and they in 1939 sold to John Thornton at the same price.

In 1964 the house was sold, with one block, to Mrs. Helen Carr. But to do this yet another subdivision was required. Lot 1 and Lot 21, divided by an east-west line, were transformed into Lots A and B, divided by a north-south line, and the house was left sitting on a very

oddly-shaped lot with street frontages on three of its four sides. Though one would need to be a surveyor to be positive about this, it seems likely that the Shiptons built across the original dividing-line.

The house, when it came into Mrs. Carr's possession, was in a very run-down state, calling for extensive interior alterations and a transformation of its exterior.

The alterations and renovations were so successfully planned by Mrs. Carr, and carried out by her husband and sons, who were builders, that the house (now owned by their daughter Miss Sally Carr) was written up as 'House of the Month' in the Advertiser of 4th September, where there is a detailed description of the house as it now is. (But it is not, as the headline proclaims, 'Illawarra's Oldest' - not by many years).

There are two local traditions, whose authenticity I cannot guarantee, about the house. One is that it was built with surplus stone dug out of Mount Keira mine. The walls now being cement-rendered, it would be hard to say whether this could be true. The other tradition is that the house was built for a pub, and a licence application was under way. But there was a strike at the mine, some of the strikers unfastened trucks standing near the head of the incline, and gave them a gentle push which sent them careering down the incline to pile up in a heap of wreckage at the bottom. While this was going on, the prospective licensee was sitting on the roof cheering the strikers on; the mine manager saw him, swore he would never get a licence, and made the vow good (or, if you prefer it, bad).

There are two comments one hears on this: that, even without a licence, the Old Stone Jug, as it was locally known, catered very successfully for Mount Keira's thirst; alternatively, that Mount Keira people never needed a pub - they made their own, principally from the ubiquitous blackberries.

(Alec Fleming, at a Society Christmas meeting, once produced some bottles of 'Blackberry Nip', claiming that it was Illawarra's authentic vin du pays).