

The Town of Watsons Bay subdivision

The Town of Watsons Bay subdivision was the second attempt to subdivide and release for sale the twenty-acre *Roddam Farm* property, initially granted to Edward Laing in 1793. The grant area took in, in current terms, the localities of Camp Cove, Laing's Point, the waterfront area of Watsons Bay and part of present-day Robertson Park.

Laing left the colony in 1794, and the grant passed through a number of hands before purchase by members of the Donnithorne family, who like earlier owners appear to have had no intention of occupying the land acquired. Judge Donnithorne was a seasoned investor in land¹ and the family was settled throughout his lifetime and beyond at *Cambridge Hall* in Newtown. Here he died in 1852, and here his daughter Eliza was to later gain notoriety as a celebrated recluse, arising from which grew unsubstantiated suggestions that her story provided Dickens with the basis of his fictional character Miss Havisham.

The Donnithorne family attempted to sell their Watsons Bay holding in 1843, subdivided into portions described as 'suitable for marine villa residences'. The sale was advertised in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the promotional literature extolling the low-lying area between Camp and Cove Streets as a 'rich, swampy spot', at the centre of which was a source of water 'known to many a sportsman of former days as the Wild Duck Pool'. This same area was, the advertisement stated, at one time reserved for general use as a public water supply: 'a circular spot is kept back as a reservoir'.² After extensive filling in the early years of the twentieth century the area referred to would become Camp Cove Reserve.

Donnithorne's subdivision was withdrawn from sale only two weeks after advertisement, and without explanation³. It is possible that Judge Donnithorne withdrew for the same reason as later vendors were forced to postpone sales – because this same 'rich, swampy' locality was subject to flooding, and that this liability was exposed at an awkward time for the nineteenth-century sales campaign. After Donnithorne's abrupt newspaper announcement it would be over a decade before any further attempt was made to sell *Roddam Farm*.

In March 1854, Sydney merchants Ralph Meyer Robey and Elias Carpenter Weekes purchased *Roddam Farm* for £600 and readied the land for sale as 141 allotments – the first substantial land sale in the Watsons Bay area. The forthcoming sale of the land was announced one year after their purchase by auctioneers Bowden and Threlkeld through the pages of the *Illustrated Sydney News* under the name 'The Town of Watsons Bay'.⁴

The purchase of Laing's former grant would seem to have been part of a concerted effort by Robey and Weekes to develop Watsons Bay as a tourist destination, from which they planned to benefit through a number of initiatives and approaches. The pair were directors of the *Sydney and Melbourne Steam Packet Company* which, in the same year of their purchase of *Roddam Farm*, made the earliest attempt to establish ferry services to the district, running the steamer *Victoria* to the bay, and building a wharf known as 'the Victoria' at the foot of Victoria Street, within their Town of Watsons Bay subdivision. Two months before their

¹ J. S. Ryan, 'Donnithorne, Eliza Emily (1826? - 1886)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 4, Melbourne University Press, 1972, p. 86.

² *Sydney Morning Herald* 13.2.1843 p. 3

³ *Sydney Morning Herald* 27.2.1843 p.3

⁴ Martin Megan Martin, Megan "Thematic History of Watsons Bay", *Watsons Bay Heritage Conservation Study* Syd, WMC 1997 p. 43.

purchase of *Roddam Farm*, in January 1854, the pair had also acquired the marine villa *Zandvliet* (present day *Dunbar House*, situated on the Marine Parade frontage of today's Robertson Park) for conversion to and operation as the *Marine Hotel*.

The auction sale of the Town of Watsons Bay was set for 16th April 1855, but the subdivision was temporarily withdrawn from sale after heavy rains exposed the deficiencies of the area's drainage shortly before the planned auction. In the event, only the *Marine Hotel*⁵ was offered for sale to the original schedule, with sales of the 'township' beginning later in the year. Early sales were concentrated along the Marine Parade, and among the early buyers recorded are the names of Azorean mariners, who settled in Watsons Bay from the 1840s forming a distinctive Portuguese-speaking community.

Much of the land remained unsold in 1859, when the affairs of the *Sydney and Melbourne Steam Packet Company* were wound up. These unsold portions were transferred to prominent Sydney solicitor George Wigram Allen in October 1859 for £3,000. Allen gradually divested himself of this investment over the 1870s and early 1880s.

Another concentration of allotments from the 'Town of Watsons Bay', which had come into the hands of Sir John Robertson of *Clovelly* were put up for sale after his death in 1891 as part of a 'great clearance sale' of his property⁶ ordered by the mortgagees of his estate in March 1892.

Today Laing's grant supports a mix of residential property - late twentieth century housing mingled with restored fisherman's cottages dating from the second half of the nineteenth century. Remedial drainage work has continued to be a council imperative over the years, a problem which appears not to have eroded the desirability of the area. Its popularity stands in current times for the same reasons noted in 1843, when Judge Donnithorne offered the land as the setting for 'marine villas':

*a very little architectural skill or art is required to finish that which nature has already half done ...*⁷

Information compiled from resources in the Woollahra Local History Collection

⁵ Research by Colin Brady *Dunbar House : conservation Management Plan* Syd., Colin Brady/Mayne Wilson, 2002 p.8 indicates that the hotel was not sold at this time but continued to be operated under a lease established in 1854, eventually selling to John Young, innkeeper, in 1857.

⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald* 19.3.1892 p. 15

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald* 13.2.1843 p. 3