

McKell Park, Darling Point



The establishment of the park – 1983-1985

McKell Park, situated at the waterfront end of Darling Point Road, was officially opened by the Hon. L. J. Brereton, MP, Minister for Public Works, Ports and Roads on 17th February, 1985. Mr. Brereton's connection with the project had begun in 1983 when, as Minister for Health, he had announced that the site of *Canonbury*, a Federation house that had served as a hospital from 1920 until 1981, would become a public park. The land had been once part of the grounds of *Lindesay*, the earliest house built on Darling Point, which still stands today as a National Trust held property, adjoining the Park at its southern boundary.

The design and construction of this new public space was to be a joint effort between the State Government and the Woollahra Council, with funding contributed by both parties. The preservation of elements of the former buildings on the site became a key feature of the landscape design, as well as a monument to the site's history.

At the opening ceremony, the Mayor of Woollahra, Alderman J. M. MacCallum unveiled a plaque to dedicate the park, and invited residents to take time to wander through the area, remarking, 'I believe it will soon be accepted as one of the most magnificent harbour locations in Sydney.'

Twenty years later, this is indeed the case, and the park is well used, especially at weekends. Secluded and well suited to passive recreation, visitors to the area and local residents alike find McKell Park an ideal setting for picnics and weddings. The elevated harbourside setting commands a spectacular view, and the conscious decision to preserve remnants of the history of the site within the landscape design adds an exceptional component.

In the same year as its opening, Woollahra Council was to receive an award for landscaping excellence from the *Landscape Contractors Association of New South Wales*.

The name of the park commemorates Sir William McKell, a former Premier of New South Wales and Governor General of Australia.

History of the land : the *Lindesay* property

The traditional owners of the area now known as Darling Point were generations of the Birrabirrgal people, who occupied the foreshores of the harbour, living from its yield, their culture and way of life based upon its physical proximity and spiritual influence.

The history of European occupation of the Point begins in 1828, when one Arthur Kemmis applied for a grant of land on the projecting point between Rushcutters Bay and Double Bay. Here he intended to install a whaling establishment. His Excellency Governor Darling, however, refused the grant to Kemmis, on the grounds that the area was *specially reserved for public purposes*, and the applicant was forced to seek land elsewhere, eventually settling on 2½ acres in the Neutral Bay area.

Governor Bourke, in 1832, justified his predecessor's decision in a letter to Under Secretary Hay, noting :

The point of Double Bay [Darling Point] and the whole ridge is beautifully situated and adjacent to Woolloomooloo, and Rushcutters Bay, where handsome villas are built and building, and it is proposed to sell this land in small allotments.

Notwithstanding Darling's earlier decision, however, some 16 acres of land at Darling Point was shortly after, in November 1831, reserved for the Colonial Treasurer, The Hon. Campbell Drummond Riddell, by the Acting Governor, Colonel Lindesay. This move, not surprisingly, prompted an exchange of letters between the rebuffed applicant Kemmis, Under Secretary Hay and the new Governor of the Colony, Richard Bourke.

Despite the protest, and a number of other bureaucratic obstacles placed in his way, Riddell eventually secured ownership of the land – although not by direct grant. The successful applicant for the 16 acres was instead James Holt, cousin of Daniel Cooper and a clerk in the firm of *Cooper & Levey*, who paid £527 for the grant in November 1833. Riddell was thus required to purchase from Holt, paying £797 in January 1834. Holt made a tidy profit of £270 on land he had owned for barely six weeks, but Riddell had finally acquired the coveted site. Here, between 1834 and 1836, he built his house, named *Lindesay* after the friend who had vainly tried to reserve the position for him years earlier.

The origins of McKell Park : the *Lindesay* site divided

Lindesay was sold in 1837 to Thomas Mitchell (later Sir Thomas Mitchell, knighted for his achievements as an explorer and Surveyor General) who quickly re-sold to the pastoralist Thomas Icely in 1839. During Icely's period of ownership, in 1841, the *Lindesay* property was subdivided and a plan of allotments drawn up by Surveyor Edward Knapp. In the same year, Lots 4, 5 and 6 of this subdivision were sold, and when later consolidated with part of Lot 3 (at some time prior to 1888) the site of the present McKell Park was formed.

The first dwelling on the site : *Lansdowne*

The McKell Park site had various owners between 1841 and 1846, when it was purchased by a Mr. & Mrs. Brackensberg (whose surname is spelt variously throughout the records) for whom a single-storey house, *Lansdowne*, was built on the land. The footings of this early house are preserved today within the landscaping scheme of the park.

Lansdowne was transferred in 1850 to Mr. Arthur Dight, who added a second storey to the house. Part of Lot 3 of the Lindesay allotments was added at some point subsequent to this sale; it is shown as part of the *Lansdowne* property in an 1888 City of Sydney Survey plan.

Harry Rickards and *Canonbury*

When Mr. Harry Rickards, a wealthy theatre entrepreneur, purchased *Lansdowne* in 1904, he apparently gave orders for the immediate demolition of the existing house, and lost no time in beginning construction of *Canonbury*, a large, Gothic style, Federation dwelling designed by Clarence Backhouse. The house was built of brick with a gabled slate roof and consisted of two storeys set above extensive cellars. Its foundations incorporated those of the earlier *Lansdowne*.

From private home to public facility

In 1919, *Canonbury* was sold to the Australian Jockey Club, a note on the deeds of this transaction indicating it was to be leased as a hospital for returned servicemen. From this time forward, the house functioned as a hospital, eventually becoming an extension of the Crown Street Women's Hospital. During these years, a number of new buildings were added to the site, and extensions made to the main building. A study made of the site in 1983 by architects and conservation planners *Howard Tanner and Associates* judged that many of these additions were ugly and worthy of removal. Ultimately, the consultants recommended the demolition of the main house in its entirety, and most of the outbuildings, as a first step towards landscaping. By this time *Canonbury* was vacant, having ceased to function as a hospital in 1981 as part of the overall closure of its Crown Street headquarters.

The realisation of the plan

Within four years of its closure as a hospital facility, the site was again serving the community as a spacious harbourside park. As recommended in the architects' report, the area had been opened up by the demolition of *Canonbury* and various other buildings on the site. An important and distinctive feature of the landscaping is the retention of the footings of *Lansdowne*, and other elements of the earlier structures and their grounds. Of particular interest is the restored sandstone water storage tank that dates from 1864 - a reminder of a time before the advent of piped town water. This had been converted into a therapeutic spa bath during the 1930's, in an interesting and resourceful renewal of function.

More recently, a small cottage in the grounds has been restored for community use, and named *Canonbury Cottage*, to commemorate Rickard's house. The history, age and

original purpose of this structure has been disputed by various studies, although there is some evidence that the building was standing on the site in 1905, and may perhaps, in part, have pre-dated *Canonbury*. The cottage is variously assumed to have served as stables, garage or domestic quarters – or possibly all three at different times. Today it extends the relevance of McKell Park to the local community, and is an example of how the park has continued to evolve to meet new needs.

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