

Submission by Peter Gibbs 14/1 /2019

Varroville NSW. Summary of Significance.

1) The Architect and House.

There have been three dwelling houses on the site since the 1810 grant to Robert Townson. Townson was known as 'The most educated man in the colony' and his portrait by Augustus Earle resides in the State Library of NSW.

Townson's modest cottage, the first house, survives and is one of the earliest extant houses remaining in Australia from the period of Cox's Cottage at Mulgoa. Unbelievably, this cottage and its coach house have been excised from the current title, but the important visual connection between the buildings, survives.

The second house, located almost certainly, on the site of the present tennis court, has disappeared and was last mentioned in a sale advertisement of 1876. It was most likely destroyed by fire between 1876 and 1906.

The third, or 'big house' was constructed in 1858 and is a house of architectural pretension, being designed by the Colonial Architect, William Weaver. Weaver was an architect/engineer and had the distinction of being rigourously trained by the greatest engineer of the Victorian age, I. K. Brunel.

Weaver arrived in NSW in 1851 at the age of 23 and rapidly found himself in the post of Colonial Architect in 1854, after Blackett left to design the Sydney University buildings. How he did this is unknown, but it is likely, that being a pupil of Brunel, gave him an ace up his sleeve that no-one could match.

Weaver designed and built exceptionally well, with the Classical rigour that places his style similar to Pender in the Hunter Valley. Further research needs to be done on Weaver. Clive Lucas is the most knowledgeable authority on Weaver but has postponed publishing until more detail emerges on his short life. Weaver was found dead in a hotel room in Geelong in 1868, at the age of 40.

His architectural legacy is however, significant, given his short period of activity. Like John Verge and Mortimer Lewis before him, Weaver designed some outstanding country houses. His most substantial double storey house is Burrundulla at Mudgee, (1864). This large house was built for the Cox family and is the only great colonial house in NSW, apart from Camden Park, which survives with its contents in the family for which it was built, now seven generations later.

Varroville is Weaver's most substantial single storey house. Both houses share a design based on a cruciform motif, with views of the landscape in four directions and both houses survive in a remarkably original state. It is likely that Weaver was inspired by the work of Andrea Palladio, particularly the Villa Rotonda which is the single most influential building in Western Architectural history. Palladio's 'Four Books of Architecture' was published in 1570 and no serious architect since has considered this as anything but a primary study. Indeed, Clive Lucas has stated with respect to Varroville that he is unaware of any other Australian Colonial House where the landscape view from the rear door rivals that from the front.

2) The Landscape, Relationship to the House and Need for Permanent Curtilage Protection.

From the outset, Townson introduced landscape and agricultural features that have been shown to be unique in Australia. As a classical agricultural scholar, he revered the great writers of the Roman Augustan Age on the subject. Cato, Columella, Pliny the Younger and in particular, Marcus Terentius Varro, after whom, he named his estate, were his heroes. With Gregory Blaxland, Townson was considered a leader in viticulture in NSW, however he introduced something to the Colony that no-one else had done. He used the Roman idea of trenching rather than the usual terracing, to grow grapes. To date, no other extant example of this technique has been found in Australia. A large area of the subject curtilage extension, retains the vineyard trenching which survives in such good condition, that it still holds water in heavy rain, 200 years later. This must be the subject of curtilage protection so that it can be preserved and be the focus of further study. Is it a co-incidence that by the time Weaver comes along that he continues the thematic, Roman overlay, or did he recognise and continue it?

A subsequent owner, Captain Charles Sturt, who was a pioneer in water conservation and drought management, enlarged the chain of ponds into a network of dams that remain to-day and contribute to the clear landscape park intention within the estate, as found by our heritage consultant Geoffrey Britton. This feature of water conservation now has enormous contemporary relevance and likewise, being a large area of the subject curtilage extension, warrants permanent protection due to its significance.

The combination of the house and 'manipulated' landscape form a remarkable example of a Humphry Repton style landscape park of the early 19thC, which, when viewed from the house, has a remarkably 'English' accent to it. No-one fails to notice it. For Repton, the relationship between the house and the surrounding landscape was paramount. He argued that they be considered as one. Rather than deploy the vast earthworks, typical of Brown and Kent, Repton felt that country houses were better presented with the help of terracing and garden beds in the immediate surroundings and the usage of an undulating natural landscape, appearing to be a cradle for the house, within its wider context.

The views of the dams from the Drawing Room and Library of the house recall a plate from Ackermann's Repository in 1815 (published in the Australian Garden History Journal Vol. 21 No. 4, 2010, page 19) which shows through a window, a virtually identical, idealised, Arcadian landscape, in the Reptonian style of the day. This feature excites every landscape historian who views it, indeed anyone who visits, and is one of the main features of the power of house/landscape combination. As well, these water features have a dynamism that was a feature of the English models of Capability Brown and Repton. In heavy rain, the dams cascade, which, not only enhances the view from the house, but can actually be heard from it. These aspects of movement, sound and light were all features of the use of water in the English models. The sight of cattle lounging around the dams further conjours up the calm, bucolic dignity of a Claudian idealised paradise, the concept of Arcadia, as written about, discussed and painted for centuries.

For no other reason than this, this landscape must be the subject of curtilage protection, because without it, a large part of the significance of the house would be lost.

Very few remaining Colonial properties, show the overlay of 200 years of unbroken rural activity within the framework of a rational, organised, Arcadian setting. It is noteworthy that nearly all, of Townson's original grant, survives, surrounding the estate core. Indeed, because the inner garden

retains its naturalistic evolution, it dissolves seamlessly into the surrounding landscape, enhancing the picturesque qualities of decay and renewal. In an era of imagined, 'Disneyland' and manufactured heritage, it is remarkable that this has not fallen to unsympathetic modernisation. (Witness the miles of box hedges and 'Iceberg' roses that are characteristic of the destruction of the naturalistic gardens of the Southern Highlands...gardens that have been manicured out of their minds.) As more properties fall victim to unsympathetic change this makes Varroville **increasingly significant and rare** because it is real. It is a heritage resource that is increasing in cultural value daily.

As custodians of State Heritage we have tried to avoid unsympathetic modernisation of the house instead, trying to present it with an appropriate and sympathetic interior collection so that the visitor detects a hint of a more genteel, former age. Every unsympathetic 'restoration' elsewhere, makes Varroville increasingly rare and significant.

Further, the views from the house reveal what is arguably the finest Humphry Repton inspired, early 19th C landscape park remaining in NSW. It is time to likewise freeze this increasingly rare landscape with the curtilage protection it deserves.