

tanner Architects

RETTFORD PARK: WESTERN SUBDIVISION HERITAGE IMPACTS

Historical Background

Retford Park, Bowral, is one of the most historic properties in the Southern Highlands. Its current owner, James Fairfax, is seeking to resolve its future through a responsible pattern of development and management. A Landscape Conservation Management Plan is currently being submitted to the NSW Heritage Office for consideration – it provides a framework for current and future decision making, and has informed this text.

Much of the town of Bowral sits on land granted to explorer John Oxley in 1823. His grant was defined by the Great South Road (later to become the Hume Highway) to the west and Old South Road to the east and these were the main transport arteries until the coming of the railway to Bowral in 1867. The land east of Old South Road, comprising some 3,000 acres, was granted to Edward Riley, whose son George Riley settled there in 1829. Retford Park now occupies a portion of the Riley land.

In 1858 the Oxley family, anticipating the arrival of the railway, subdivided the land comprising the township of Bowral and the town became established in the ensuing decades.

By the 1880s the descendants of Sydney retailer Anthony Hordern had become well-established and wealthy. The Hordern's keen interest in country pursuits was pursued in a number of ways, including the breeding of high quality livestock, leading roles in the Royal Agricultural Society and the acquisition of quality rural holdings; prestige accrued from having large rural landholdings and substantial agricultural ventures. Samuel Hordern purchased extensive land holdings east of Old South Road, Bowral in 1884, and in 1887 had the well-known Sydney architect Albert Bond design an imposing house as a focus to the property, which he named Retford Park, providing a link with the family's Retford Hall on Darling Point in Sydney.

The house at Retford Park is set on a low rise, a grand rendered brick Italianate style residence, not dissimilar to numerous large houses being constructed at that time in Sydney, especially along the western railway line. Retford Park House is distinctive because of its symmetry, the very fine quality of its cast iron detailing and the fine porte cochere at the entry. In many ways the planning of the house and the character of its interiors are typical of the period.

The outbuildings at Retford Park form a line along a low ridge, with a "village street" linking them together. The majority of the outbuildings are in common brick with Victorian style barge-boards and are attributed to Albert Bond, as they are remarkably similar to his work at Wilton Park near Picton, also for the Hordern family. The later large agricultural building (circa 1912) was commissioned by Samuel Hordern's son Sir Samuel Hordern (1876-1956), and is attributed to

tanner Architects

Morrow & de Putron, who were the Hordern family's architects during the Edwardian period. All the outbuildings demonstrate a commitment to the best agricultural practices of the period. In essence, the property was designed and funded to be a rural show-piece - a place of best practice in all that they undertook, as well as a source of supply to the family's Emporium and at stock sales.

Prior to the introduction of personal income tax by the Commonwealth Government in 1915 (in response to the cost of the war effort) business success in Australia was reflected in real personal wealth, and the Hordern business and property assets in the period 1870-1930 were huge. The Horderns sought to move beyond their retailing origins and to realise their assets and made Anthony Hordern and Sons a public company in 1926. The business was hugely successful in the period 1924-1929, but declined after World War II and closed in 1969.

Sir Samuel Hordern died in 1956 (having sold Retford Park in 1953) and his son (also Samuel) died in a car accident in 1960. It would appear that the Hordern family at that time did not foresee or could not sustain an on-going role in their Bowral properties, and by 1961 Retford Park and Milton Park had been acquired by the American organisation King Ranch. It chose to use these properties as its headquarters in Australia, while taking up extensive land holdings in northern Australia linked to a policy of introducing hardy Santa Gertrudis cattle. By 1984 King Ranch had decided to sell its Bowral holdings.

King Ranch subdivided Retford Park into two allotments. Lot 1 contained 653.6 hectares while Lot 2 contained 4 hectares) and included Retford Park House. James Fairfax acquired Lot 2 in 1964. Over time James Fairfax acquired additional land, which included all of the significant Retford Park outbuildings. As part of this process the real property boundaries of his land changed and the extent of his land holding was in a state of flux. James Fairfax acquired further land in 1968. Various sections of land were subdivided between 1982 and 1984 and between 1989 and 1999 Retford Park was consolidated by the acquisition and sale of land.

As far as the land associated with the proposed western subdivision is concerned, it includes a small amount of land acquired in the early 1980s and the rest of the land was acquired in 1996. Its association with the significant heritage areas of the Retford Park Estate under the ownership of James Fairfax is tenuous.

tanner Architects

Heritage Significance

There are several entries for Retford Park in the State Heritage Inventory, which relate to buildings and the park-like setting in which they are located. In particular the Retford Park Garden and Surrounds are historically and aesthetically significant at a state level. They have statewide aesthetically representative and rare status. The open paddocks on the eastern side of the estate are not included in this listing.

The Wingecarribee Shire LEP includes three separate listings for Retford Park which relate to Retford Park House, the group of buildings at Retford Park and Retford Park Gardens and Surrounds. This last item is assessed as historically significant statewide, aesthetically rare statewide and aesthetically representative statewide. The listing for Retford Park in Schedule 5 of the Wingecarribee Local Environmental Plan 2010 relates to Lot 1 DP 860647 and Lot 20 DP 1001806. The proposed western subdivision lies within this description.

However, it should be noted that the site boundaries have been recently redefined. Retford Park now consists of Lots 22 and 23 DP 1163429. Lot 23 DP 1163429 has been created to include the significant heritage components of the site and provide an appropriate heritage curtilage for them.

Conclusion

While the open paddocks constituting the land that is the subject of the subdivision application provide continuity of open space to the Retford Park Estate, it is less important in terms of its contribution to an understanding of the heritage significance of the place. The proposed western subdivision will have no impact on the heritage significance of Retford Park for several reasons:

- The historical association of this land with the Retford Park Estate during the occupation of James Fairfax is negligible. The land contains only two items of low heritage significance (two early twentieth century brick dwellings). It is associated with an ongoing process of land sales and accretions that took place during the 1980s and 1990s. The bulk of this land was acquired in the second half of the 1990s.
- The proposed subdivision is to take place outside immediate areas of the site that contain significant components of the Retford Park Estate, including buildings, trees and landscaping, and contribute to the historical setting of the place;
- The two early twentieth century dwellings that are in the southern section of the land are to be retained and conserved;

tanner Architects

- The protective controls that have been developed for the subdivision will minimise impacts of the subdivision and the future development that will take place on Retford Park by means of buffer planting, management of existing trees, specific setbacks for all new dwellings to fix the locations of houses;
- The subdivision will allow interpretation of the service road that links Retford Park Estate to Old South Road and will retain a portion of it.

Roy Lumby
Senior Heritage Specialist
Tanner Architects

5 October 2011