

A Short Walk Through Ashfield's Past



Liverpool Road looking towards the city from Holden Street in the 1950s

Mayoral Message



Ashfield is a Municipality justly proud of its past, as anyone who reads the following pages will surely agree.

Recognising that fact, Ashfield has already protected Haberfield, the Garden Suburb, with planning controls that will

preserve its unique character into the next Century. During the past seven years the Council has also moved to actively protect individual properties of architectural and historical significance as well as designated conservation zones within the Municipality.

These moves will help preserve the architectural heritage of the area. Within the pages of this booklet however you will catch a glimpse of the human story of Ashfield.

Ashfield's history is a microcosm of the nation's. Many of our early founders, like Mayor Mark Hammond, made their fortunes in the gold rush. Thousands of Ashfield residents gave their lives in both World Wars, while the Municipality suffered the ravages of economic boom and bust in the late 19th Century, and the inter war years.

I would like to thank Chris Pratten and the Ashfield and District Historical Society for documenting our 125th anniversary for this keepsake. As well as the Administration staff especially Debra Byrnes and Tony Sillavan.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Bonanno'.

Councillor Mark Bonanno
Mayor of Ashfield



A Short Walk Through Ashfield's Past

Compiled by Chris Pratten from the records of the Ashfield & District Historical Society.

The eighteenth century

Prior to the arrival of the First Fleet in Port Jackson in 1788, the area of land we now know as the Municipality of Ashfield was the home of the Wangal people. Governor Phillip estimated that there couldn't be "less than fifteen hundred (natives) in Botany Bay, Port Jackson, and Broken Bay, including the intermediate coast". It is likely that the Ashfield district was a relatively attractive one for aborigines. Long Cove (now called Iron Cove) and the mangrove-lined estuaries of the Long Cove and Iron Cove Creeks, would have provided a good source of fish and molluscs, the most common food of the coastal tribes.

In the early days of the colony, the stretch of land between Iron Cove and the Cook's River was known as the Kangaroo Ground. The use of this name suggests that kangaroos were then common in this area, and a few descendants of the original trees of the eucalypt woodland and forest which once covered present-day Ashfield survive today in Ashfield, Robson and Yeo Parks, and in the reserves in Victoria Square and Albert Parade. The natural woodland would have also provided a suitable habitat for possums, fern rhizomes and tubers of various kinds, all of which have been identified as being important food for the aborigines. Cooks River itself would have supplied another source of fish, while the sedges and reeds in the swamps that lined the riverbanks have also been recorded as a food source for the original inhabitants.

No record is known to exist relating to the demise of the aboriginal population from the Ashfield district. It seems likely that the well-documented outbreak of smallpox among local aborigines in early 1789 had a major impact. Phillip not only recorded that half the local population was estimated to have died from the disease, but he also noted that the natives always "retired from where the diseases appeared" as well. One document that does survive records that a house belonging to the colony's Surveyor-General, Augustus Alt, located on his *Hermitage Farm*, was burnt down by aborigines in August, 1798. This was Ashfield's earliest recorded building.

By 1791 a track to Rose Hill (now Parramatta) had been formed more or less along the alignment of present-day Parramatta Road, and in 1793 the first local land was 'granted' to a European settler – the Chaplain of the Colony, the Reverend Richard Johnson. Johnson's grant ran from what we now know as Yeo Park down to Canterbury Racecourse, and he named it *Canterbury Park*. Johnson was one of the colony's most successful early farmers, and some of his letters survive telling of the wheat and other produce that he grew on his property.

1820-1855

By 1810, all the land in the Ashfield municipal area had been granted to Europeans, many of them officers and men of the Rum Corps. The name 'Ashfield' is first recorded in a newspaper advertisement in early 1816, and was most probably adopted by Robert Campbell junior, who in 1814 built a substantial two-storey house on land he owned in what we now call North Croydon. A wonderful c.1860 watercolour by the colonial artist S T Gill showing this house survives, and a copy of the painting is hung in Ashfield Council's offices.

By the 1820s, all the original land grants had been amalgamated into four big estates – *Ashfield Park* (most of the land between the Great South [now Liverpool] and Parramatta Roads), *Dobroyde Farm* (Haberfield and Dobroyd Point), *Kable's Farm* (north Summer Hill and south across the line to present day Smith Street), and *Canterbury Estate* (south Summer Hill and south Ashfield).

A big boost to closer settlement came in 1838, when the owner of *Ashfield Park*, Elizabeth Underwood, subdivided lots along the north side of Liverpool Road, which

became known as the Village of Ashfield. Mrs Underwood gave the land on which St John's Church was erected. Work on the church, now Ashfield's oldest authenticated building, was commenced in 1841. Elizabeth's village was matched on the south side of the Liverpool Road by a subdivision created in 1841 from the Canterbury estate by Robert Campbell. But it was the opening of the railway from Redfern to Granville in 1855 that really gave the impetus for the development of Ashfield, with the local station being only one of four intermediate stops along the line.

A few major homes still survive from the late 1850s-60s – *Yasmar* in Parramatta Road, *Gorton* in Henry Street, *Gads Hill Villa* in Highbury Street, *Milton House* in Blackwood Avenue, and *Thirning Villa* in Pratten Park.

The boom of the late nineteenth century

The growth in population following the opening of the railway resulted in the district establishing its own local government authority, the first Council being elected at the end of 1871. John Pope, a draper who ultimately became head of the firm of Farmer & Co, was the first Mayor.

The Infants Home, Ashfield's oldest social institution apart from the churches, was established at *Gorton* in Henry Street in 1875, and still flourishes today. Ashfield Park, today the municipality's finest area of open space, dates from 1879, when the colonial government acquired the land from the estate of James Underwood and vested it under the care of the fledgling council.

Ashfield's first school was a small Wesleyan day school established in Liverpool Road in 1844; the Dobroyde School opened in 1862 in a purpose-built schoolhouse which still survives as part of the hall of St David's Church; a National School was operating in Ashfield from at least 1862, being replaced by the opening of the first Public School in 1876; and in 1877, John Kinloch established a private school in Prospect Road in a building designed by the eccentric architect John Horbury Hunt. This site later became a lady teachers' training college, then the Hurlstone

Agricultural College, and finally, in 1928, Trinity Grammar School moved here from Dulwich Hill. John Kinloch's old schoolhouse and residence survives today as the headmaster's house at Trinity.

The oldest surviving building in Summer Hill, however, is St Patrick's Catholic Church in Drynan Street. This was once the substantial villa known as *Kelvin Grove*, built during 1874 for a widow, Jane Drynan. Richard Stanton, the Haberfield developer, lived here at the turn of the century. The Catholic Church acquired the building in 1948.

Further subdivision and urban development was facilitated with the opening of new railway stations at Croydon in 1875 and Summer Hill in 1879. Many of the fine buildings that we can still see in Ashfield today date from the boom years which followed: *Carleton* (Grosvenor Hospital) in Liverpool Road, Summer Hill (1884); St Andrew's Church, Summer Hill (1885-1905); *Glentworth*, the centre-piece of Cardinal Freeman Village (1886); *Ambleside* (Ashfield Castle) in Queen Street (1886); Ashfield Presbyterian Church (1885); *Amesbury*, in Alt street (1887); and St Vincent's Church and Presbytery in Bland Street (1893-1907). But equally important to our heritage today are the rows of smaller Victorian single and two-storey villas which still line many of our older streets.

Federation and after

Many of the district's local residents suffered financial hardship in the great depression of the 1890s, and a major campsite for unemployed was located around old brick pits on the site we now know as Algie Park. Following the recovery from the depression, the major local historical event of the early twentieth century was the subdivision of much of the former Ramsay lands at Dobroyde for housing estates by real estate entrepreneur, Richard Stanton. Within Haberfield may be found today a fine range of cottages built in the Queen Anne, Arts and Crafts and Californian Bungalow styles of architecture, many of the earlier buildings being designed by the architect for the Haberfield Estate, John Spencer Stansfield.

The Haberfield development was facilitated by the proximity of the tramway from Leichhardt which ran along Ramsay Road, but the first tramway to be established in Ashfield was the old steam tram line which ran from Ashfield to Enfield and later Burwood, Mortlake and Cabarita. This line was electrified in 1911, and in its peak year (1928), the "Enfield Lines", as they were known, carried no fewer than 8,500,000 passengers. Electric trams from the city to Canterbury Station served the southern part of the municipality, and for a brief period (1915-33) a tram also ran from Hurlstone Park down Prospect Road and Smith Street to Summer Hill Station.

At about the time of the First World War, Ashfield's ranking as a desirable place to live commenced to decline, and many well-known families moved to the suburbs on the northern side of the harbour. With this migration, the days of glory of the large fashionable estates were numbered, and many fell into decay or were sold for re-development.

The Municipality of Ashfield has always been more of a residential than an industrial area, but two of the district's largest industries date from the era of the First World War. Mungo Scott commenced building their Summer Hill flour mill on the new Metropolitan Goods Railway in 1916, and the plant, now owned by Goodman Fielder, continues to operate today, in a complex whose tall silos dominate the local skyline. On the south side of Parramatta Road near Frederick Street, Australian Motors Ltd built a factory in 1920 and commenced the manufacture of the Australian Six motor car. 200 men were employed, and nearly 1000 units assembled. But the motors were unreliable, and the company was unable to compete with cheaper imports. The original Australian Six factory buildings later became part of the great AWA complex, which survived until the 1990s when it was demolished for a new residential development.

Sporting life

For the earliest known recorded sporting event in Ashfield's history, we must turn back to the middle of the nineteenth century and the pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where we learn that Mr Brown's *Name's Blue Bonnet* won the Norwood and Ashfield Cup, despite having to contend with a hill beyond the

judge's stand! The event was held on Boxing Day, 1856, with three thousand people recorded as being present at the Ashfield Racecourse, which was located between Liverpool Road and the railway line on land that is now more or less part of Grosvenor Hospital.

An Ashfield Cricket Club was in existence at least by the summer of 1865-66, and in 1885 Shaw's English touring team played a team of eighteen Sydney juniors at the privately owned Ashfield Recreation Ground (now Hammond Park). Skating was another popular sport at the Recreation Ground, and the huge timber Skating Rink was re-located in 1891 to the Bathurst Showground, where it still stands as the Beau Brown Pavilion. The owners of the Recreation Ground also intended to construct a bowling green on land off John Street in the mid-1880s, but it is not known if their plans ever came to fruition. The land intended for the green now makes up the small enclosed Broughton Street cul-de-sac. Ashfield Bowling Club in Ashfield Park dates from 1889, making it one of the oldest in the state.

Only one golf course has ever been located in the Ashfield Municipality. In 1899, the nine holes of the Dobroyde Golf Club were established on the Ramsay Estate just north of Parramatta Road west of Dalhousie Street. The club was re-located to Canterbury when the Ramsays sold the land to Richard Stanton in 1906. While documentary evidence survives relating to the playing of football in Ashfield in the 1880s, the Western Suburbs Rugby League Football Club was not formed until 1908. Three years later the Burwood District Cricket Club obtained a lease of the newly-opened Pratten Park, and in 1913, that club's name was changed to the Western District Cricket Club.

The first parachute descent from a balloon in Australia was planned for Ashfield, once again the setting being the Ashfield Recreation Ground. Watchmaker J T Williams cast off from the ground in his balloon in December, 1888 before an expectant crowd of 4,000 people. Despite the "indomitable aeronaut endeavouring to guide or work his life preserver in order to make it drop as close as possible to the place whence it had started", Williams finally landed in Homebush, while his balloon came down at Greenwich! Other popular local sports at the turn-of-the-century were rifle shooting, cycling and tennis.

The inter-war years

While some of the old homes on the larger estates survived the sub-division of the inter-war years, many were demolished and replaced by the ubiquitous 1930s two-storey flats which are such a prominent feature of Ashfield today. Some of these were built in times of financial stringency, but the best of them, many depicting simple yet interesting art deco decoration, have considerable historic, architectural and aesthetic interest. A number of particularly fine non-residential buildings were erected in this period, but unfortunately two of them, the Summer Hill Theatre and the Ashfield Kings cinema, have succumbed to the demolisher's hammer. In 1937, the flamboyant 1891 Ashfield Town Hall was remodelled in the more austere but then-fashionable Art Deco style, but sadly, it too was demolished in the 1980s to make way for the current Ashfield shopping mall and council building.

The inter-war years saw another batch of Ashfield's mansions demolished for further subdivision. *Holwood* in Victoria Street once stood on the site of Holwood Avenue; *Taloumbi* in Smith Street fell to make way for Allman Avenue; *Oaklands* on Liverpool Road was demolished for the Oaklands Avenue precinct; and Sir Henry Parkes's old home *Milton House* had its once spacious grounds subdivided. *Milton House* survives today in Blackwood Avenue, much mutilated but still full of historic associations.

1940 to the present

Despite the magnificence of the Chapel at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, general building activities were brought to a virtual standstill by the shortages of manpower and materials during World War II. The war had other dramatic impacts on the Home Front: people became accustomed to food, clothing and petrol rationing; women entered the workforce in greater numbers than ever before; air raid shelters were built in school yards and local parks; a local civil defence organisation was established; a number of factories, especially AWA, were involved in important war production; and public transport entered its last great

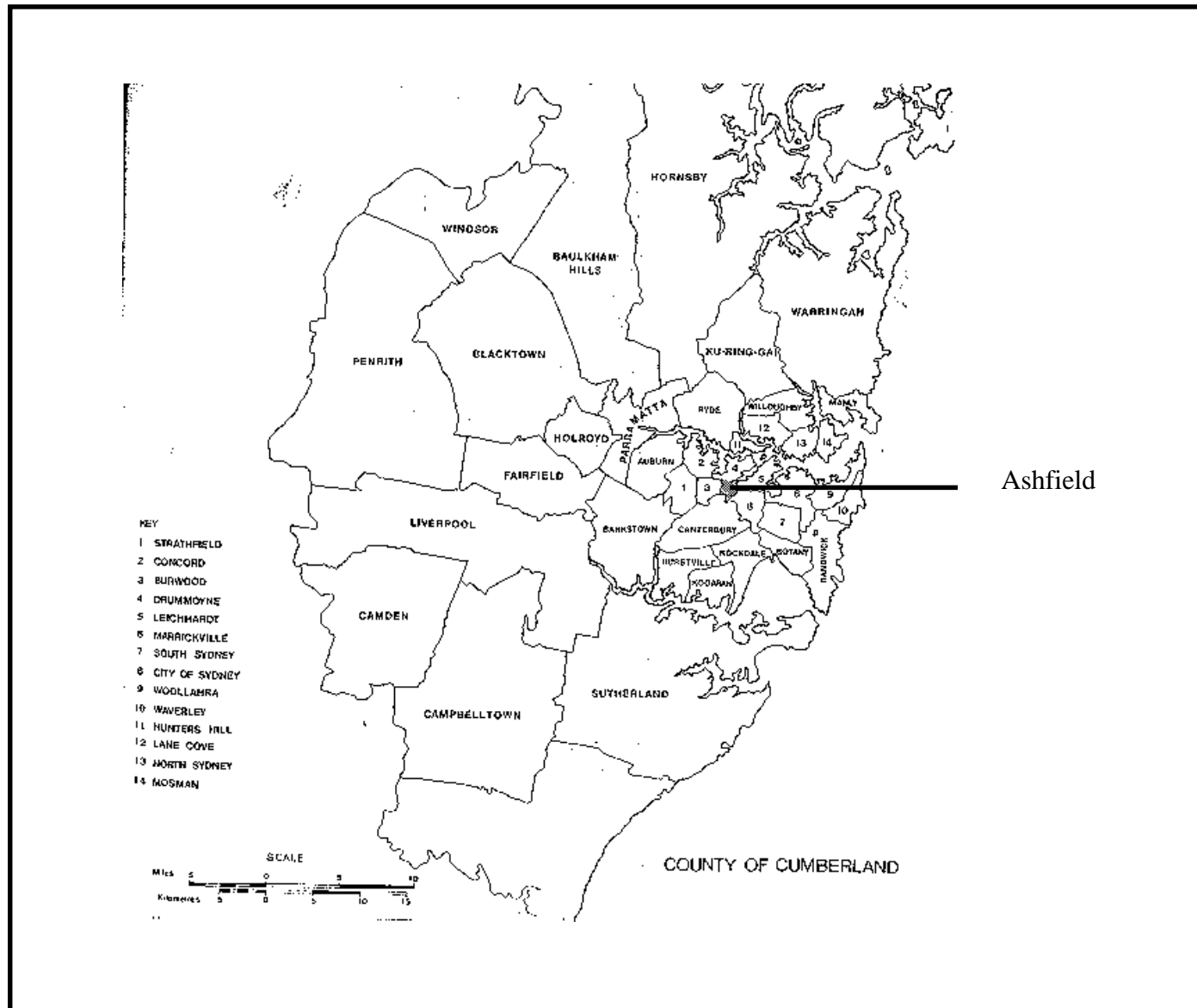
phase of acceptance and use. The Enfield Lines, which had been earmarked for conversion to buses before the war, were given a reprieve and lasted until 1948.

A decade or so after the end of the war, another great wave of demolition of Ashfield's old homes commenced, this time to make way for row after row of blocks of home units. This change was supported by the local council, as well as by the introduction of strata title legislation.

The ethnic background of Ashfield people was also changing. In 1870, when the Sands Directory listed 114 families under Ashfield, 111 had Anglo/Scottish/Irish names, the other three being German. By the time of the 1971 census, 34% of the municipal population was recorded as being born overseas; by 1986, this had risen to 45%, with 8.2% of the total population having been born in Italy. In more recent years, the change in the ethnic make-up has resulted in the Ashfield shopping centre, in particular, taking on a strong Asian flavour.

While the change in Ashfield's ethnic make-up creates an exciting and vibrant environment in which to live, work and shop, it also presents challenges to those who value the suburb's history, and the architecture and character of development that has flowed from that history. How many of our Chinese citizens today, for example, would know that 100 years ago Ashfield had its very own Mandarin! When Quong Tart, one of Sydney's best-known, influential and well-respected citizens, died in 1903, 1500 mourners attended his funeral at Rookwood Necropolis, following a procession from his Arthur Street home to Ashfield Railway Station. Though much mutilated, *Gallop House*, the home which Quong Tart built in 1890, survives today as part of the Benelong Nursing Home. It is an important item of Ashfield's heritage, giving us the opportunity of interpreting to many new residents the role played by one of their fellow countrymen in our district's history.

In recent years, Ashfield Council has taken planning steps to protect much of the municipality's architectural and historic heritage. In this way, we can move forward to the future confident in the significance of our past, yet knowing that new development must inevitably take place. Our local council carries the responsibility of ensuring that new development respects Ashfield's older heritage, especially in terms of such architectural elements as scale and massing, roof form and pitch, and the type of materials used.



Ashfield in relation to other Municipalities in the Sydney region (from Planning Scheme Report, Ashfield Municipal Council, 1974)

The eighteenth century



Only descendants of the trees that covered the Ashfield area before settlement can be seen today. Trees in Victoria Square in the 1960s.

The eighteenth century



Cadigal Reserve, named after the Cadigal people, was established in 1994 to commemorate the Year of Indigenous People. Prior to European settlement, the Sydney region was occupied by Aborigines of different linguistic groups. The people of the Eora language group appear to have occupied an area that included what is now Ashfield. The Cadigal and Wangal people were two of several smaller groups of the Eora that are considered to have shared resources in the Ashfield area.

1820 - 1855



St John's Church, commenced in 1841, is now Ashfield's oldest authenticated building.

The boom of the late nineteenth century



The Beau Brown Pavilion, Bathurst Showground (left). This magnificent timber building, formerly the Ashfield Skating Rink, was moved from its original position in Hammond Park when the privately owned Ashfield Recreation Ground Company got into financial difficulties in 1891.

Croydon Station late 1800s (right). The development of the railway from Redfern to Granville after the mid 1850s was instrumental in the establishment of local government in Ashfield in 1871.

The boom of the late nineteenth century



Looking across one of the dams at the Hurlstone Agricultural College towards the junction of Prospect and Old Canterbury Roads in 1913. This section of the College grounds is now Yeo Park, while Trinity Grammar occupies the balance. The land was originally part of Chaplain Richard Johnson's 1793 *Canterbury Farm*.

The boom of the late nineteenth century



Looking west down Liverpool Road in the 1890s. The imposing façade of the Ashfield School of Arts may be seen at left on the corner of Holden Street. This building, erected in 1881, was used as a Baptist Tabernacle from 1906 to 1937, when it was demolished to make way for a picture theatre, the fashionable Ashfield Kings. Kings too has long since gone.

The boom of the late nineteenth century



The mansion *Carleton* (left) was erected in Liverpool Road, Summer Hill in 1884 on part of the old Ashfield Racecourse for Charles Carleton Skarratt. This photograph dates from the 1920s when the house was owned by the Benevolent Society of NSW, who used it as the Renwick Hospital for Infants. Shorn of its majestic iron lace decorative verandahs, the bulk of the house survives, being used as government offices.

Glentworth (right), one of Ashfield's largest mansions, was built in 1886 for Frederick Clissold, a member of the first Ashfield Council. Sold to the Convent of the Good Shepherd in 1913, the building is now the centre-piece of the Cardinal Freeman Retirement Village.

The boom of the late nineteenth century



Quong Tart with members of his family pictured in the garden of *Gallop House*, Ashfield (left) and in the living rooms (right) in about 1900. Built in 1890, *Gallop House* still stands, incorporated into the Benelong Nursing Home in Arthur Street. Quong Tart arrived in Australia as a boy in 1859 and was one of Sydney's most famous residents at the turn-of-the century. He died in 1903, having never fully recovered from an assault in his Queen Victoria Building tearoom the previous year.

Federation and after



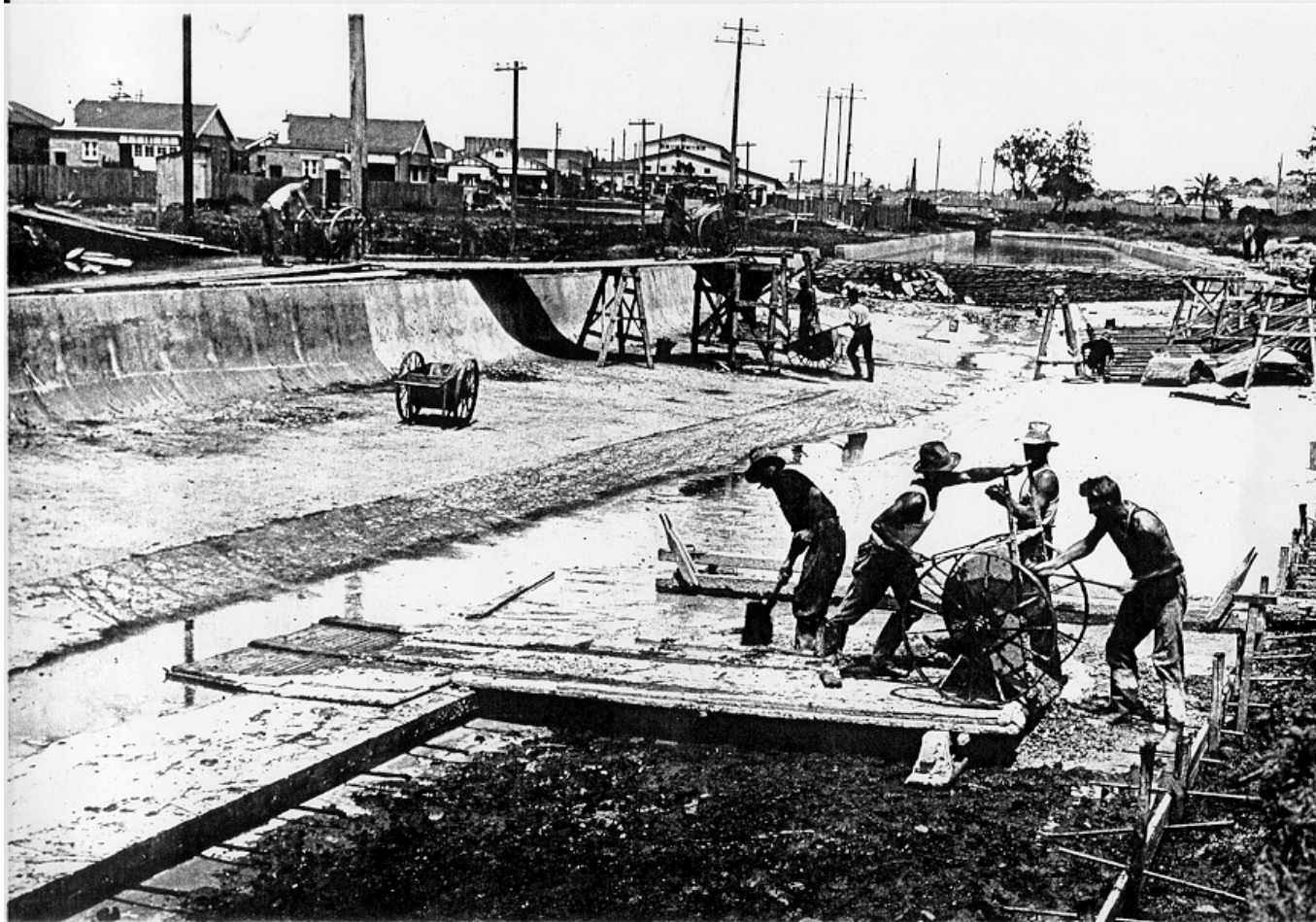
On 7 December 1923, Frank Leung married Elsie Chong. This photograph shows the guests assembled in front of the Chong family home, *Milton House*, which still survives today in Blackwood Avenue, though much mutilated and without its once spacious grounds. Sir Henry Parkes owned and lived in this house from 1876 to 1880.

Federation and after



Sloane Street, Summer Hill looking up towards Summer Hill Railway Station from Parramatta Road. By the time this photograph was taken (about 1918) Summer Hill was well established as a residential area. A horse and buggy and early, motor vehicle can be seen in the middle distance.

Federation and after



In other parts of the Municipality, continuing expansion of residential areas required more infrastructure. Construction of the Hawthorne stormwater channel in the Haberfield area during the 1920s.

The inter-war years



The Summer Hill Theatre, built in 1930 in Sloane Street next to the railway station, was designed by the eminent architect Emil Sodersten. One of the finest and largest in Sydney – it could seat 2043 patrons - the theatre was demolished in 1970.

The inter-war years



Liverpool Road looking west from Murrell Street in the 1950s. The Kings cinema building, another example of inter-war architecture, can be seen in the background. The cinema was demolished in the early 1980s.

The inter-war years



The Town Hall at the corner of Liverpool Road and Central Road, remodelled in 1937 and demolished in the 1980s. The photograph dates from the 1930s or 1940s. Central Road was later built over.

1940 to the present



Biscuits being packaged in Peek Frean's Parramatta Road factory in the early years of World War II. The building dates from 1936 and is now occupied by Hardware House. The building's tower was completed after the war.

1940 to the present



Liverpool Road looking west from the corner of Holden Street. Ashfield's commercial centre provided a vibrant focal point for the local community in the 1950s. . .

1940 to the present



... and beyond. Liverpool Road looking west (near the Hercules Street intersection), 1980.

1940 to the present



Aerial photograph of Ashfield in the 1950s looking towards the shopping centre from north of Parramatta Road. In the foreground, (at the corner of Parramatta Road and Frederick Street), is what used to be Peek Frean's biscuit factory (now occupied by Hardware House). The photograph also shows the Parramatta Road and Wattle Street intersection (centre foreground) before reconstruction. Amongst other landmarks shown in the image are the old Town Hall building (upper left) and St John's Church (mid left).

Citations for photographs

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Further reading

For more detailed information on Ashfield's history, it is recommended that you consult the Society's Journals Nos 1-12 (indexed), and occasional publications, such as *A Triangle of Land* (a history of the Ashfield Park estate to 1900); *Working the Clays : the brickmakers of the Ashfield district*; and various monographs and scrapbooks on different parts of the municipality, including Haberfield.

The 1993 *Ashfield Heritage Study* prepared for Ashfield Council gives a thematic history of the municipality and provides a mass of detailed history and architectural information about Ashfield's many conservation areas and approximately 300 individual heritage items.

Speed the Plough, produced by Ashfield Council for the 1988 bi-centenary, provides a good general history, although some inaccuracies have been noted in its text.

All the above publications may be found in the Society's Library, open three times a month and they should also be available in the Mitchell Library, and in the Ashfield Council Library.

The Ashfield & District Historical Society Inc

The Society, established in 1973 and now having over 200 members, is an organisation dedicated to understanding Ashfield's past and protecting its heritage. The Society regularly publishes the results of original research relating to Ashfield's history, and holds a large collection of historic documents: maps and plans, books and reports, photos, old newspapers, and a considerable amount of primary source material not held elsewhere. Members of the public are invited to inspect the Society's Rooms at 10 Norton Street (upstairs), which are open each month on the first and third Wednesdays from 11am – 3pm, and on the last Saturday from 1pm – 4pm.

Mail, activity and membership enquiries should be directed to PO Box 20, Ashfield 2131.

Acknowledgements

This publication is a collaboration between Ashfield Municipal Council and the Ashfield and District Historical Society. The history was written by Chris Pratten, Secretary to the Society. The photographs were selected from Council's Archives and the Society's Collection. Council's thanks, go to the Society for loan of the material. Captions to the photographs were written by C Pratten and A Sillavan. Council Officers who provided assistance with the publication include D Byrnes, S Robshaw, L Treasure and B Tully.

