

Area 14 Birchgrove and Ballast Point Road

Landform

Birchgrove Point is a rugged narrow neck of sandstone called Yurulbin (swift running waters) by the Aboriginals because of the change in water movement around the point where the bays of the river to the west are protected from the open waters of the harbour to the east. Very deep water frontage along both sides of the point.

There are swamps and mudflats within the still waters of Snails Bay with another high, rocky headland on the southern side, and Ballast Point at its most easterly end. Views either northeast to the harbour, and/or south over Morts Dock can be achieved from most allotments along the Ballast Point headland.



Figure 14.1 Birchgrove and Ballast Point Road Conservation Area Map.

History

The Birchgrove and Ballast Point Conservation Area covers the area of the George Whitfield's 30-acre grant of 1796 (Birchgrove) and sections of John Gilchrist's Balmain Estate (Ballast Point).

Birch acquired Whitfield's grant in 1810 and built Birch Grove house (at 67 Louisa Road, demolished 1967). In 1860 the estate was purchased by Didier Joubert of Hunters Hill and the Parramatta Ferry Service. He commissioned Surveyor Brownrigg to subdivide the land into villa allotments, and despite later small resubdivisions, Brownrigg's layout provides the backbone for Birchgrove today. The streets were named for Joubert's wife (Louisa), children (Numa and Rose) and nephew (Ferdinand) with (Iron) Cove Road, and (Birch) Grove Road defining the grant boundaries. Louisa Road followed the ridge, except for the sharp bend to avoid Birch Grove House, giving access to a single row of steep allotments, all with deepwater frontage. The land around the bay was divided to provide the greatest number of allotments at 50-70ft x 150ft approximately, above high water mark, with The Terrace forming the drive to Birch Grove House.

The 1860 sale was premature. Within six years Joubert had only sold seven allotments. Stonemasons and quarrymen were among the first purchasers. The estate was eventually mortgaged to the Bank of New South Wales. By 1878, only twenty-three lots had been sold. These early residents were Sydney professionals, who travelled to town by ferry, and small speculators or builders, who quarried the land for buildings elsewhere. In 1886 twenty-four houses, eighteen built of weatherboard, remained from those first eighteen years. Today only fifteen remain.

A new consortium of McLean, McGregor and Threlkeld commissioned Surveyor Reuss Junior to re-examine the Brownrigg plan, and make some amendments around the head of the bay and along the steepest part of Louisa Road to create more allotments or more useable allotments. The estate was again put up for sale in 1878. Sydney's boom period of the 1880s saw many more allotments taken up and villas in stone or rendered brick were built. This dramatic tongue of sandstone at the western end of the harbour also attracted industries dependent on water (shipbuilding and repair) or on water for the transport of its raw materials (timber yards, a cooperage, a coalyard, an oil refinery). Birchgrove was also the site of a power cable tunnel to the north side of the harbour 1913-1926.

The mud flats, by then the repository of garbage and effluent from an increasingly industrialised and urbanised harbour, were designated in the plan as 'proposed park'. A trust was established to fill the area in 1887 for shrubberies and a cricket pitch. The present configuration was completed in 1897.

The garden of Birch Grove House was subdivided twice, in 1900 fourteen brick houses were built between 1902 and 1922 (twelve remain), and again in 1911 when four brick houses built between 1912 and 1926 (all remain). A thick plantation of trees in Birchgrove Park marks the eastern edge of the Birch Grove House garden, and shields the 1967 flats which replaced it, from view. By 1941 when Storey and Keers shipwrights were established on an apron below a narrow cliff edge in Louisa Road, all land in Birchgrove had been taken up. In the 1970s change in industrial operations and the nature of maritime industry in particular left the former small industrial sites of Birchgrove available for new residential development.

Along Ballast Point to the east of Birchgrove Park, land was released for subdivision and sale in 1852. It was part of John Gilchrist's 550-acre Balmain Estate, and subdivisional activities across the whole estate had been suspended in 1841 because of disputes about his will. Once resolved, Surveyor Charles Langley was responsible for subdividing the remaining acres into 46/47 sections, using existing contour-aligned routes such as Darling Street, Birchgrove Road and Ballast Point Road to delineate the parcels. The sections were purchased over the next thirty years by wealthy investors, local speculators and builders.

Speculators Joshua Josephson, Didier Joubert, Charles Smith, William Cover and George Thorne bought up the land on both sides of Ballast Point Road in 1853. This marine location, with most allotments possessing water frontages, attracted some keen bidding.

By 1891 the whole process of building up Ballast Point Road, Wharf Road, Yeend, Ronald and Lemm Streets was largely complete. There were marine villas on generous parcels of land along Wharf Road. They were sited well up from the waterfront for a stylish setting and for views, with their backs to the road. Large terraces and villas occupied the high ground along Ballast Point Road.

Cooper, who had already received twenty-three acres in Morts Bay (later part of Mort's Town of Waterview) also owned Ballast Point itself. The Point was purchased and used by Caltex Oil Co for oil storage purposes until the 1980s.

Sources

Jeffery, P 1986, Birchgrove 1796-1985 – the Suburbanisation of the 'Birch Grove' Estate, *Leichhardt Historical Journal*, No. 15.

History of the Ballast Point area provided by Max Solling.

Significant Characteristics

- Close relationship between landform and the road pattern, park, siting of buildings (particularly the nineteenth-century marine villas).
- Wide main access roads.
- Narrow minor streets.
- Sandstone a major element – in retaining walls and sea walls, cut stone fences and walls, as outcrops in streetscape, in steps for pedestrian access, kerbs and gutters, piers to palisade fences, in buildings – terraces and villas.
- Generally a sense of elevation.
- Buildings sited close to street alignment.
- Setbacks can vary, particularly on waterfront sites.
- Views between buildings to harbour from public roads and footpaths.
- Villas often sited with backs to street and front elevation to water.
- Villas sometimes single-storey to street, with two to three stories to waterfront.
- Variety of building types:
 - some early cottages of timber/stone/brick remain;
 - Victorian boom villas of stone or rendered brick;
 - dark brown or blue face brick buildings of early twentieth century; and
 - last subdivisions of the Birch Grove House garden occupied by dark brown face brick houses (some unfortunately painted recently).
- Slate roofs particularly noticeable. Also terracotta tiles and iron roof claddings.
- Some original fences remain – iron palisade fences with sandstone piers and bases from 1880s; brick fences from 1920s/1930s.

- Prominence of large trees, particularly fig trees, around site of Birch Grove House, in Birchgrove Park and along Ballast Point; some notable palm trees.
- Tree planting schemes of jacaranda and melaleuca along Dock Road and Ballast Point Road.
- Grassed verges in wide streets – Grove Street and Ballast Point Road.
- Loss of many original face brick surfaces to plaster and painting.

Note: The location of former waterfront industries indicated by new dwellings/town houses.

Statement of Significance or Why the Area is Important

- One of a number of conservation areas which collectively illustrate the nature of Sydney's early suburbs and Leichhardt's suburban growth particularly between 1871 and 1891, with pockets of infill up to the end of the 1930s (ie prior to World War II). This area retains evidence (though somewhat diminished in the last twenty years) of the growth of Birchgrove and Ballast Point as marine suburbs and as a maritime industrial area from the 1870s-1920s, and other industry developed prior to 1941.
- Demonstrates the close relationship between landform, the layout of the roads and the siting of the early villas and industries to take advantage of the marine position.
- Demonstrates the close physical relationship between industry and housing (both middle class and workers housing) in nineteenth century cities.
- Demonstrates the development of brick making in Sydney through its building materials with the use of plastered brick walls and dry-pressed face bricks (unplastered, unpainted) walls.
- Demonstrates one of a number of late nineteenth century bay reclamation projects which characterise Sydney Harbour.

Management of Heritage Values

Generally

This is a conservation area. Little change can be expected other than modest additions and discrete alterations. Buildings which do not contribute to the heritage significance of the area may be replaced with sympathetically designed infill.

Retain

- All residential or commercial industrial structures developed up to 1941 belonging to the period of the growth of the Birchgrove and Ballast Point area.
- All weatherboard buildings – rare and typical of early development.
- All sandstone structures – cottages, villas, wharves/slipways, uninterrupted kerbs and gutters, walls, bases to fences.

- All plaster finishes to external walls – reconstruct where necessary.
- All original external architectural detail where evidence is available.
- Views between buildings from public places, especially views to the harbour.
- Open undeveloped setting between waterfront and marine villas.

Avoid

- Demolition of any pre-1940s building unless the building has been so compromised that it can no longer explain its history or its role in the history of the area.
- Alteration to the form (scale and massing) of these buildings, especially the roof, including additional stories above the roofline.
- Removal of any plaster or decorative mouldings to external walls.
- Painting or plastering of any sandstone or face brick walls.
- Loss of any trees.
- Widening of Louisa Road or Wharf Road.

Notes

Because this area comprises high headlands and tall tree canopies prominent within the harbour, and visible also from the land behind, special care is needed in dealing with changes which might alter the skyline of those headlands in any way – new buildings, additions at the rear of existing buildings. Further, the apron to these headlands – the trees and remaining open land, usually private garden, between building and waterfront – is vital to the protection of the harbour and its foreshores as the most important visible open space asset in Sydney. These foreshore gardens/open areas need to be protected from encroachment of buildings or large moorings.

Care is needed for applications for change to any building or the tree canopy in these areas. There are a number of very early buildings that remain here, overlaid with later works, and restoration to reveal the original building could be possible in many cases.

Industrial archaeology is an important issue – remnants of wharves, slipways, remains of former buildings (especially small cottages later taken over for industry), tunnel entrance, and the proper process for their assessment is essential before any new works can be considered. For any remaining redundant industrial structures careful archaeological work would be needed prior to consideration of demolition or recycling.