

Area 2

Excelsior Subdivision Conservation Area

Landform

This conservation area covers all land between Parramatta Road and Marion, Norton and Elswick Streets. It comprises an almost square parcel of land falling west and southwest from the highest point of the Norton Street ridge, at its crossing with Marion Street, and includes the low-lying land east of Flood Street.

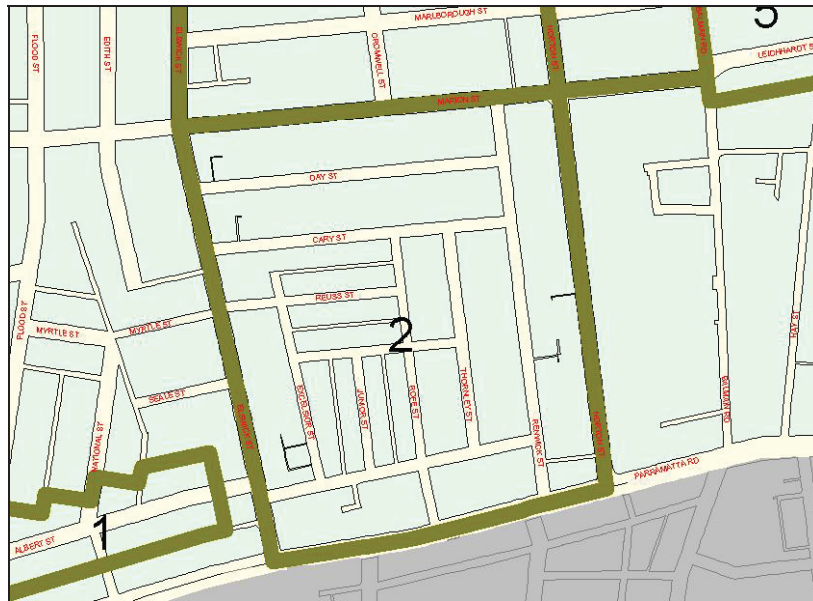


Figure 2.1 Excelsior Subdivision Conservation Area Map.

History

This area was once part of James Norton's Elswick Estate, which stretched from Parramatta Road to William Street, and from Flood Street (part) to part of Balmain/Derbyshire Road. Its subdivision by Norton's family in 1867 into four large sections accessed by surveyor-standard one chain (66ft) wide roads at Elswick, Norton and Allen Streets, and at Short Street for access to Balmain Road, established the layout of modern Leichhardt.

This conservation area comprises Section 1 of this subdivision and contained Norton's Elswick House. It was purchased for small lot subdivision by the Excelsior Company in 1880. Like Annandale, its layout reflected social status and provided a range of housing for different markets. It was probably planned by the surveyor, FH Reuss, Junior or by the company's architect, Ambrose Thornley Junior. The streets were named for the directors of the Excelsior Company, and designed to provide an inward looking development which still discourages cross traffic and maintains a high level of amenity within its quiet residential streets. The subdivision occurred just before the 1881 Act about Widths of Streets and Lanes which required all roads to be one chain wide. On the higher land, streets were 40ft-wide and lots 30ft-wide, or 20ft-wide near the commercial area along Parramatta Road. Lower-lying land had either 16ft allotment frontages for single houses, or 40ft-wide allotments which allowed three terrace houses on each one.

The subdivision fortuitously occurred at the beginning of the great 1880s boom period. The Excelsior Company was one of the first to offer a complete package – land, building, a graded road, gas and water services and finance. The demand for inexpensive land and modest housing for workers and tradesmen was high, and the subdivision had the added attraction of good public transport, with Parramatta Road and its steam tramway which was extended to Short Street in 1884, and Petersham Railway not far to the south.

As an important transport route Parramatta Road attracted commercial activity, and land along its frontage was taken up from the outset for commercial or small scale industrial purposes. Many two-storey business premises with dwellings attached were constructed in the 1880s. Although most of their shop fronts have been replaced, the original facades above the suspended awnings remain largely intact today. The vacant allotments shown in the Public Works Department's detail survey of inner Sydney in 1888 (LHJ No. 18) were largely taken up for commercial premises in the 1910s and the postwar boom of the 1920s, with isolated infill throughout the 1930s.

Commercial uses along Norton Street, on the other hand, have largely occurred in the twentieth century, often taking over, and sometimes demolishing, residential buildings.

The Public Works Department's detail survey of 1888 (showing road alignment, water supply and sewerage and buildings) together with the Water Board check survey of the 1890s indicate all the buildings then standing and their building materials. Seventy per cent of the 596 allotments were sold before 1890, providing eventually for 602 buildings, 86 per cent of which were bought for residential use. Corner stores were also provided for within the subdivision, evenly distributed to serve the residents. Just over half the buildings in 1890 were owner-occupied, a high proportion for the period. Of those buildings 508 (84 per cent) were still standing in 1990.

Brick was the predominant building material. As the Hoffman steam brick kilns which gave rise to good quality face bricks had only just started production in Sydney, it can be assumed that most of Excelsior's bricks came from small local brick makers in the Leichhardt and Petersham area. These bricks were less durable, and were generally plastered: William Cary, a director of Excelsior, was also an ornamental plasterer, selling exterior pressed cement mouldings and general building supplies from his George Street west works.

Sources

Solling, M and Reynolds, P 1997, 'Leichhardt: on the margins of the city', *Leichhardt Historical Journal*, Vol. 22, Allen and Unwin.

Reynolds, P et al 1989-97 'The Excelsior Estate subdivisions', *Leichhardt Historical Journal*, Nos. 16-21.

Significant Characteristics

- Well planned subdivision with hierarchy of streets and allotment sizes.
- Relatively narrow streets.

- Well-defined lineal space between building alignment and street, created by unified building line, closely-spaced buildings.
- Densely developed late nineteenth-century suburban housing, corner shops, and, along Parramatta Road and later along Norton Street, commercial premises with attached dwellings.
- Scale of one and two storeys; mostly single storey in narrower streets and on smaller lots.
- Building type comprises terraces or semis, detached houses and business premises with attached dwelling.
- A few fine examples of Victorian houses designed by architects Thornley and Smedley remain in Norton, Marion and Renwick Streets.
- Unity of building materials – buildings of plastered (ie stucco) brickwork with iron roofs predominate.
- Ornamental pressed plaster mouldings and the use of decorative tiles are both very notable.
- Small gardens in the residential zone.
- Corner shops punctuate the residential street space by standing forward of the residential building line.
- Parapets to commercial buildings along Parramatta Road.
- Reinstated suspended verandahs/balconies and awnings to commercial facades along Parramatta Road.
- Sandstone kerbs and gutters.
- Some iron palisade fences.

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 and commercial 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 is significant as a very intact example of boom period development in the 1890s, with subsequent infill up the beginning of World War II.
- Through its hierarchy of roads and buildings it demonstrates the social hierarchy of a Victorian suburb and its interdependence.
- With the adjoining Elswick Estate subdivision to the north and west, it has defined the structure and layout of Leichhardt today.
- It provides an intact example of a late Victorian boom period suburb and commercial strip with rich architectural details enhanced by some appropriate verandah/balcony/awning reinstatement.

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 buildings identified on the DPW detail survey of 1888 and the Water Board re-survey of the 1890s. Reinstatement of external form and materials of any of those buildings that have suffered unsympathetic change should be encouraged where evidence of original/early form or materials can be verified.
- All other pre-1939 buildings and structures.
- All plaster finishes to external walls – reconstruct where necessary.
- Existing back lanes.
- All original external architectural detail, glazed decorative tiles, plaster mouldings, chimneys, roof ridges and finials, commercial signs, parapets to commercial buildings, verandahs/awnings to shops, shopfront windows, and encourage replacement of lost elements, but only where evidence is available.
- All remaining sandstone kerbs and gutters.
- All six corner stores, and encourage their restoration. Consider small scale commercial/ professional uses for these buildings as a reference to their original uses. Commercial uses of residential buildings, except those in the Commercial zone, should not be encouraged.

Avoid

- Re-subdivision or amalgamation which might lead to a change in the densely developed streetscape.
- Demolition of any building shown on the 1888 and 1890s survey.
- Demolition of any other pre-1939 building until careful analysis of the role of that building in the history of the area has been assessed.
- Second-storey addition to an original single-storey building.
- Alteration to the original roof form over the main part of any building.
- Posted-verandahs and suspended balconies over footpaths to commercial premises where there is no evidence that they previously existed on the building.
- Removal of any plaster or decorative mouldings to external walls.
- Additional architectural detail for which there is no evidence in the photographic record or on the building itself.

- Inappropriate fences such as high brick walls, new iron palisades on high brick bases.
- Interruption of the kerb and gutter line for vehicular access.

Further Work

- Need to identify which buildings in the area are not identified on the detail survey of 1888 and 1890s and which do not contribute to the story of this subdivision. Recommend ways in which their sites could be re-used.
- Compile photographic record of the conservation area from photos available from the late nineteenth century to the 1990s as a means of ensuring appropriate reconstruction/ 'restoration'.