

**FLUSHCOMBE
AND
FLUSHCOMBE TURRETS**

A BLACKTOWN TRAGEDY

LYN AND LES TOD

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The only known photograph of Flushcombe Turrets, circa 1905. Image courtesy Julie and John Tucker

INTRODUCTION

On a hill with pleasant vistas of the distant village of Blacktown and beyond, once stood a splendid and impressive mansion known as *Flushcombe Turrets*. The one surviving photo of this house has been reproduced in many publications, and is generally well-known to historians and librarians, but little is known about the house, or its fate. Yet behind this house to the south stood yet another earlier colonial residence, *Flushcombe*, that was equally a vital part of the early history of the Blacktown-Prospect area. Today both are virtually forgotten, and have vanished from human memory, but their importance to the early European settlement and development of the area cannot be overstated. This, then, is their story.

FLUSHCOMBE

The original estate, comprising 2,000 acres of Crown Land, was granted to Captain Robert Lethbridge by Governor Brisbane on 30 June 1823, and it was stated on the grant that the estate was to be called "*Flushcombe*".¹ The estate covered an area from the then Great Western Road (near today's Greater Union Drive-In Theatre and the Royal Cricketers Arms Hotel) down both sides of Flushcombe Road and then along the southern boundary of Richmond Road to the vicinity of Woodcroft, then south again to the Great Western Railway.²

Robert Lethbridge arrived in Australia as Captain of the *Grace* on December 1, 1821³ and then departed 18 February 1822. The *Grace* caught fire off South Africa and Lethbridge saved the Government despatches and led the survivors on a six day overland trek to Cape Town, before finally returning to England. The Hobart Town Gazette reported: "*Fourteen weeks elapsed before they beheld the African coast; and for the space of a month, the gales were most dreadful... After beating off the coast till the 1st of June, Simmons' Bay was joyfully [reached]... about 7 in the evening the vessel was discovered to be on fire ... The cool magnanimity of Captain Lethbridge, upon the trying occasion, was very conspicuous and the crew behaved like British sailors in the hour of danger. The boats were lowered and the passengers and crew took to them, Captain Lethbridge, with 5 others, remained on board the ship till life became endangered... the poor Grace was seen to burn to the water's edge – Captain Lethbridge, with his passengers and crew, found himself 180 miles distant from Cape Town, which space they had to travel overland and which was accomplished, with the aid of wagons, in six days and nights...*"⁴

Captain Lethbridge may have lost his ship but saved the passengers, crew, and the Government despatches. He returned to Australia, arriving on May 31, 1823 as a passenger on board the *Lusitania*, accompanied by his wife Mary Cunningham Lethbridge.⁵ It was reported that Governor Brisbane gave the 2,000 acre *Flushcombe* land grant in appreciation of Captain Lethbridge's actions in saving the despatches on the ill-fated *Grace*.⁶

A portion of a rare surviving land grant linen backed map in the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, [reproduced on the following page] is believed to date from the 1832 period [if not earlier] and shows the *Flushcombe* grant in its entirety, as well as adjoining land owners.⁷

The homestead on the *Flushcombe* grant was built between 1823 and 1828. The 1828 muster records that Robert, Mary, their four Australian born children, and ten servants were living on the estate. The muster states that Robert had cleared 225 acres, cultivated 70 acres and owned 12 horses, 200 horned cattle and 2,000 sheep. The census documented also that he owned another farm of 1,000 acres, *Bridgeman Farm* "on Fall Brook, Hunter River." ⁸ It appears that in the 5 years of living in the Colony, Robert and wife Mary had done quite well and had worked hard to build two substantial holdings. The Muster's listing of those living at *Flushcombe* itself in 1828 is quite interesting:

Robert Lethbridge, 38 years, arrival on Lusitania in 1822, no sentence, farming and grazing, Protestant.

Mary Cunningham Lethbridge, 31 years, Lusitania 1822, no sentence. Farming and grazing. Protestant.

Robert Luxmore Lethbridge, 5 years old, born in colony, Protestant.

John Lethbridge, 4 years old, born in colony, Protestant.

George Longworthy Lethbridge, 1 year old, born in colony, Protestant.

Jane Palmer, 15 years old, born in colony, Protestant.

Ann Wilson, 50 years old, Government Servant, arrived 1826, seven years sentence, servant, protestant.

Catherine Keo, 51 years, arrival on Frances ? in 1816, life sentence, servant, Roman Catholic.

George Martin, 20 years old, arrival on Morley in 1828, life sentence, labourer, Roman Catholic.

George Mullins, 19 years old, arrived Manlius 1827, life sentence. Plaisterer [sic], Protestant.

David Sharp, no age, arrival on Prince Regent, 14 year sentence, groom, Protestant.

John Rideout, 27 years old, arrival on Guildford, 14 year sentence, cook, Protestant.

John Whaley, 22 years old, arrival on Mariner 1827, seven year sentence, labourer, Roman Catholic.

John Elseney [or Clooney] 45 years, free servant, arrival on Hadlow in 1821, seven year sentence, labourer, Roman Catholic.

Thomas Smith, 52 years old, ticket of leave, arrival on Daphne 1818, life sentence, labourer, Roman Catholic.

This is a record of a wealthy colonial family, with servants and farm hands, both convict and free, some transported, others born in the colony, and of either Protestant/Roman Catholic religion. It is the type of listing one would find in many parts of the colony in that era for important colonial homes and families.

In 1828 Robert Lethbridge became a magistrate at Parramatta.⁹

Proposals of subdivision and newspaper advertisements showing the *Flushcombe* Estate for sale are reported as early as 1830.¹⁰ It is possible a small amount of the land had been sold prior to 1830 but no evidence has been found to substantiate this. The *Australian* newspaper in March 1830 reported that the estate was then 1500 acres, with 120 acres cleared and formed into paddocks. The farm is described as “*handsome, convenient and durable consisting of a house of twelve rooms, a cool dairy, three stall stables, two boxes for entire horses, coach house, harness room, milking shed, calf pen, and two stock yards. The garden contains above one hundred choice fruit trees, viz, oranges, lemons, almonds, mulberries, cherries, plums, nectarines, apricots, quinces, loquats, pears, apples and a variety of peaches. Also strawberries, raspberries and grapes ...*”¹¹

This is a rich description of a substantial colonial residence and evidence that the soils of the district were fertile enough to support an extremely wide variety of fruit.

In 1831 Robert Lethbridge was mentioned in a published *List of Special Jurors of the Colony of NSW*, along with his neighbour, William Lawson of Prospect, showing the high regard in which they were both held by the colonial authorities.¹²

In March 1832 the property was again advertised for sale by auction. This time there was an even more extensive description of the house and property in *The Sydney Gazette*:

“THE FLUSHCOMBE ESTATE

By Mr Bodenham.

On Thursday the 15th Instant, at Cumming’s Hotel, at 1 o’clock precisely.

“A compact and valuable family residence and homestead, within 20 miles of Sydney, admirably suited for the occupation of a family of respectability; the residence containing 12 rooms, and the estate five hundred acres of land, two hundred and twenty acres of which are cleared and all fenced. Also, at the same time, 3 Paddocks on the High Western Road of about 40 to 50 acres each, and 3 Paddocks on the new Richmond Road, varying from 70 to 80 acres each.

“Mr Bodenham has the honor [sic] to announce that he has received directions from the Proprietor (removing to another of his possessions) to sell that beautiful and highly cultivated estate, with its comfortable homestead, called “Flushcombe”, within three hours’ carriage drive of Sydney.

“This residence offers so many advantages for the occupation of a respectable family, that it would be unjust to the public not to point out some portions of its eligibilities. The property being situated within 20 miles of the capital and 6 from Parramatta, intersecting both the High Western and New Richmond Roads, will, at all times, render it of considerable attraction as a residence...

“The house, upon which a large expenditure has been made, contains an entrance hall of 34 feet in length, with dining and drawing-rooms of 20 x 15, five bedrooms of ample

dimensions, kitchen and four skilling-rooms; the out-offices, coach house, stable, with two boxes for entire horses, a sunken dairy of stone, barn, stock and milking yards, the garden now in the highest state of horticultural beauty, containing a collection of the most valuable and well selected trees, comprising a variety of orange, lemon, mulberry, green gage, nectarine, pear, apple, apricot, peach, plum, almond, fig damson, loquat, quince, cherries and other fruits in full bearing..."¹³

This description of the house itself is quite rare, confirming that it was a substantial dwelling to have an entrance hall of 34 feet, dining and drawing rooms and five bedrooms, and that a considerable sum had been expended on it. Unfortunately no plans or sketches survive of *Flushcombe* and we are reliant on the above contemporary descriptions of the house. As far as can be ascertained from subdivision plans, the house was located somewhere to the south of the later *Flushcombe Turrets*, ie, between Lancelot Street and Blacktown Drive-in Theatre, on the eastern side of Flushcombe Road and possibly in the vicinity of Myrtle Street.

The Sydney Herald reported in March 1832 that "*The Flushcombe estate, consisting of the house and five hundred acres of land, were sold by auction on Thursday for £900. The purchaser was Captain Clements.*"¹⁴

Research indicates that the estate was sold in three lots: Thomas Shadforth (200 acres), George Bowman (324 acres) and John Connor (the largest tract of 1,560 acres, which included the residence.)¹⁵

John Connor bought the 1,560 acres as two purchases, being 500 acres for nine hundred pounds on 6 April 1832 and 1,060 acres for eight hundred and fifty pounds on 1st October the same year. The 500 acres included "*the capital house, messuages, tenaments and buildings thereon erected...*" This may have been the portion where Lethbridge's homestead, *Flushcombe* stood. These two purchases were part of Lethbridge's original grant, and included land on Richmond Road.¹⁶

This contradicts the notice in *The Sydney Herald* that the farm itself had been sold to a Captain Clements.

John Connor came to own that part of the property containing the *Flushcombe* homestead.. The 1841 census stated that besides Connor, eight others resided at *Flushcombe*, including three assigned male convicts. One stone brick house is recorded.¹⁷ Connor occupied the residence until his death in 1842¹⁸ after which it was held in trust for his children and eventually sold. A large portion of 800 acres at the northern end (Richmond Road) of the original grant was sold to Thomas Fitzsimmons, but the sale had not been completed when John Connor died. The completion of the sale of the property to Thomas Fitzsimmons was made by Connor's son, Michael, in 1842.¹⁹

Around 1846 Reverend George Napoleon Woodd [sic] came to Prospect and served at St Bartholomew's Church until early 1855. He is recorded as living at *Flushcombe* with his wife Caroline. A number of their children were born there and several were baptised at St Bartholomew's. One child is buried in the church cemetery.²⁰

The ownership of the property over the following years is very difficult to follow due to subdivisions of parts of it, mortgages, leases, memorials and mortgage discharges.

By 1875 the property containing the residence, *Flushcombe* had been sold to William Branch Campbell. William Branch Campbell was a furniture manufacturer, retailer and wholesaler between 1875 and 1883. He had also been Mayor of Hunter's Hill in the 1860s.²¹ Campbell had migrated from Scotland and set up business at Grafton on the Clarence River, as Campbell's Furnishing Depot, where he sold everything from mattresses to sofas and tables. He even owned Campbell's Clarence River Dispensary. He probably purchased *Flushcombe* as his country residence, possibly in 1874/1875, for he later made a declaration in 1886 that he had known his neighbour, James Manning for 12 years.²² His company was then based in Sydney as W B Campbell and Co, situated in the Royal Furnishing Arcade, 426 George Street, Sydney, adjacent to the Royal Hotel. One of his sons, William Webb Campbell, learned the trade from his father and operated a company named W W Campbell and Co at 249 Clarence Street. This company continued trading under the Campbell name until the early 1970s even though it was taken over in 1967.²³

ADVERTISEMENTS.

TO COUNTRY STOREKEEPERS, HOTEL AND
HOUSEKEEPERS.

W. B. CAMPBELL

Having established a

GENERAL WHOLESALE WAREHOUSE,

Is now prepared to supply cash buyers with suitable quantities
from an extensive miscellaneous stock, consisting of articles in

DRAPERY, GROCERY,

IRONMONGERY, CUTLERY, BOOTS,

FANCYWARE, STATIONERY,

KEROSENE LAMPS, BEST KEROSENE OIL

and a variety of

GENERAL MERCHANDISE.

The leading and extra cheap articles will be advertised in the
Daily Papers. Large consumers and those who buy to sell again
will do well to purchase those goods which can be supplied from
this warehouse. On account of having large stores on the Clarence,
River and other Stores to supply, goods are bought as well as
imported, in large quantities, and will be sold by the single
dozen, package, or parcel, at the

LOWEST WHOLESALE PRICE, FOR CASH.

BY

W. B. CAMPBELL,

IMPORTER AND GENERAL WAREHOUSEMAN,

588, GEORGE STREET,

Two Doors South of Bathurst Street

SYDNEY.

Advertisement from W B Campbell's Almanac for 1863 [Mitchell Library]

William Branch Campbell was very prominent in early colonial life, and through his repute, *Flushcombe* also became well-known.

In the 1860s he is known to have published an annual almanac, *Campbell's Australian Almanac and Hand Book*. The 1866 issue bore the little jingle "Mr Campbell thinks with pleasure / This will occupy much leisure / And many will then make comments / Upon the use of its contents." These almanacs listed everything from weights, when to plant crops, vineyards, the human complexion, government buildings, schools, municipalities and where to get coal.²⁴

William himself was not the only one gaining plaudits. In 1875 the *Australian Town and Country Journal* reported:

*"Among the awards made at the Exhibition was one given to Mrs W B Campbell of Flushcombe, Prospect, for colonial made jam. The exhibit included cucumber, prickly pear and rockmelon jams. A prize was also awarded to Mrs Campbell for fresh butter."*²⁵

This is further evidence of the ability of the homestead to be self sufficient and also indicates that the Campbells were residing on the site in 1875, if not earlier.

In 1878 William Campbell further acquired an additional 33 acres and 3 roods from "J. Manning", being lots 48 to 53 for £350.²⁶ Manning is probably James Manning, owner of the Cricketer's Arms Inn.

It was reported in March 1880, regarding the International Agricultural Show at the Crystal Palace, Sydney, "Mr W B Campbell of Flushcombe, Blacktown, shows an excellent collection of garden products among which are 40 varieties of gourds and 14 varieties of maize, a monster sunflower 14 inches in diameter, peas and many seeds. With these are grape jelly and mixed pickles which have been most carefully preserved."²⁷

It would seem that both *Flushcombe* and William Branch Campbell had earned quite a reputation in the colony for their fruit and vegetables. But Campbell had bigger ideas in store.

FLUSHCOMBE TURRETS –

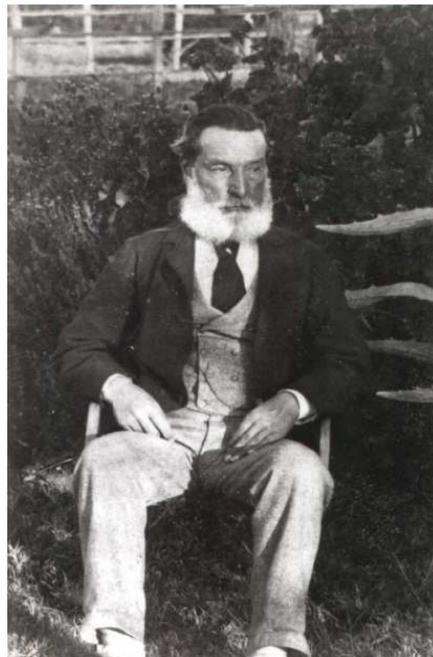
THE MANSION

In September 1883, well known architects Thornley and Smedley called tenders for “*the erection and completion of a turreted villa residence at Flushcombe, near Blacktown. The works may be tendered for as follows*” 1st – excavation, drainage, masonry and brickwork. 2nd – Carpentry, joinery and finishing trades. 3rd – the whole in one sum. Plans and specifications can be seen on application at the office of the architects...”²⁸

John Smedley was a Sydney born painter and architect whose work was greatly influenced by East Asian modes of painting and drawing. He designed Waterloo Town Hall in 1881, Sydney Trades Hall in 1888, the Catholic Church in Tokyo, Japan, as well as being known for his paintings.²⁹ Smedley was also a landscape architect and draughtsman, and he may have been responsible for the gardens and landscaping around the house.

Ambrose Thornley Jnr was also born in Sydney and began work as a carpenter. He became a prolific architect for houses and villas in the Glebe area. His output included *Florence Villa* in 1873-6, Glebe Town Hall in 1879-80, and the Gresham Hotel in Sydney in 1890-94.³⁰

That architects of such background and calibre were responsible for the design of *Flushcombe Turrets* indicates that it was indeed a mansion of significance and not simply a gentleman’s country residence. And with William Branch Campbell owning a furniture and furnishing company, one can only imagine how well he must have furnished the house.



Above: William Branch Campbell in later years.



Elizabeth Ann Campbell [nee Jackson] Images courtesy Julie and John Tucker.

In 1884 wily William was promoting his fruit by putting on a display in the window of his company, some thirty different kinds of oranges and lemons. These were said to have been *“grown by Mr W B Campbell at the Flushcombe Orangery near Blacktown. One guinea prize to anyone who can give their true names and the names of other varieties grown in the colony or elsewhere. Campbell Brothers Royal Furnishing Arcade, 426 George Street, Sydney.”*³¹

In 1886 Campbell had the estate up for sale. A lengthy description of it in the Sydney Morning Herald gives us some idea of what Flushcombe Turrets comprised:

“One of the finest residential and income producing estates in NSW. Three hundred and ten acres of land... The Great Prospect Reservoir, now in course of construction ... The Mansion is elevated and cannot be surpassed for salubrity... Sheltered from the biting westerly winds in winter and hot winds in summer by a natural wall of Eucalypti which extends the full length of the western boundary ... It is a well-known fact that where the orange thrives the human frame will also thrive... The mansion commands a view of nearly the whole orchard, comprising 150 acres of orange and lemon grove and vineyard, the remainder of the 310 acres is composed of agricultural and pasture land... The distant view is a Perfect Panorama, embracing the main Cumberland fruit country ... miles of beautiful scenery, combining orchards, vineyards, agricultural, pastoral and bush lands ...

“Flushcombe Turrets: a Turreted Mansion, built of brick and cement upon solid concrete foundations, contains a wide hall, painted and decorated: drawing room and dining room

each 22 x 18, recreation room 24 x 14, two bedrooms each 22 x 18, library, three bedrooms, boudoir, observatory and access to top of tower, two bathrooms, kitchen, laundry, two pantries, two servants bedrooms, man's room, underground tank, force pump gas house ...

"There is one of the finest aquariums in the colony, 26 feet in diameter, with fountains, gold fish, plants etc. Also a fine tennis lawn, 180 feet long, and a gold fish pond at the foot of the park ... four iron entrance gates with massive turreted pillars, to match the style of the house. Pretty flower garden, fine clumps of trees... The main orangery and lemon grove, with vineyard comprises about 85 acres in one block... about 4000 grape vines...

"Manager's House, packing sheds, workmens houses, barn, stable, chaffcutter, corncracker, blacksmiths shop ..." ³²

A few days later, another advertisement added that the former homestead was also part of the sale, an indication that the original Lethbridge *Flushcombe* house was still standing as late as 1886. ³³

How much of the property sold at this time is unknown. Other subdivisions of the original grant were also taking place, such as the Neeve subdivision immediately south of *Flushcombe Turrets* in the 1880s. ³⁴

In January 1893 the *Cumberland Argus* advertised a new sale, this time comprising 310 acres encompassing the mansion itself. The newspaper description was similar to that of before, although it added that the mansion's decorations, furnishing and fittings were "chaste and modern" and that the subdivision was for twenty lots. ³⁵

The 1893 subdivision plan is invaluable as it shows the proximity of the mansion to Lancelot Street, and the fact that there was a driveway to it and also *Flushcombe Road*, which explains an earlier comment that there were four turreted gate pillars. The circular driveway, necessary for the turning of coaches and horses in those days, is shown and also three cottages and a "house", which may be the original *Flushcombe*. With some artistic licence the railway station, public school, hotel and shops are shown close nearby, as is the Royal Cricketer's Arms, and the estate is said to be "ten minutes' walk of the railway station". ³⁶

William Branch Campbell was still living in *Flushcombe Turrets* in September 1893, for an anonymous letter to a newspaper states "... at *Flushcombe Turrets*, on the road between *Blacktown* and *Prospect*, Mr W B Campbell has gold fish, hundreds of them, which come from their hiding places beneath the water lilies in his aquarium when he merely taps its sides with his knuckles". ³⁷

FLUSHCOMBE TURRETS ESTATE

BLACKTOWN

10 Minutes walk of the RAILWAY STATION

MANSION & COTTAGES WITH 310 ACRES OF IMPROVED ORCHARD LAND Subdivided into convenient sized blocks

For Sale by Auction on **SATURDAY 21st JANY** at 3 p.m on the Ground by

BATT, RODD & PURVES

Auctioneers

TERMS. 25% Deposit, Balance in 4 equal yearly instalments at 1, 2, 3 & 4 years with interest at the rate of 6% per annum payable Quarterly.

Dawson
Dawson
Licensed Surveyors
88 Pitt Street

BLACKTOWN RAILWAY STATION

G.T. WEST OF SYDNEY RAILWAY
WINDSOR & RICHMOND LINE

Public School
Hotel
Orchard

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA nla.map-1fsp315-v

The circa 1893 subdivision plan of *Flushcombe Turrets Estate*. [Mitchell Library Aperture Collection. Also available from National Library of Australia, Canberra]

In 1895 Campbell purchased land in Winbourne Street, Ermington, in his daughter Elizabeth's name. He named this block *Auldie*³⁸ and it was here in 1899 that his wife, Elizabeth Ann Campbell died. She passed away peacefully at *Auldie* after a residence of 50 years in the colony, leaving behind six children and 15 grandchildren. It is likely that William was also living there at the time.³⁹

There is evidence to suggest that, by 1897, the allotment containing the *Flushcombe Turrets* mansion, ie, Lot 3 of the 1893 Batt, Rodd and Purves subdivision, had been sold to Mr E C Batt. It is likely that Batt had purchased it prior to 1897. The Electoral Rolls up to 1897/98 show that William Campbell was still living there; however by the 1899/1900 issue, he is not recorded.⁴⁰ In August 1896 he had written a letter to *The Sydney Morning Herald* concerning destructive birds, stating "I kept them at bay when residing at *Flushcombe* for 17 years.... During the latter part of my residence there ..." ⁴¹ This is written in the past tense, so perhaps by 1896 he had sold the property and moved to *Auldie*? A report in *The Cumberland Argus* regarding the death of Mrs Annie Rebecca Cook in September 1897 states that she lived with her husband, Mr Charles Cook, manager of *Flushcombe* "for Mr Batt". Mrs Cook, 38, was well known in the district and the mother of eight children. She was buried in St Bartholomew's Cemetery at Prospect.⁴² Mr E C Batt was well known in the Parramatta district, not only for his surveying/auctioneer company, but also as a supporter

of charities and community work. This would imply that Mr Batt had purchased Lot 3, containing the mansion, possibly around 1896. The purchase record could not be found at Land Titles nor is Mr Batt listed as residing there in the Electoral Rolls for 1893/4, 1897/98, and 1899/1900.⁴³

In September 1900, Batt Rodd and Purves advertised the contents of *Flushcombe Turrets* for sale, “under instructions from Mr Batt, who is leaving the district to reside in Sydney”.⁴⁴ Included in the sale was livestock: pedigree pigs, pure-bred cows, poultry, horses and calves. The advertised contents of the mansion show that it was indeed opulent and a building of important colonial significance, containing high class furniture which probably dated from William Branch Campbell’s era. The listing included elegant drawing room furniture: Brussels and Axminster carpets, 11 piece walnut suite, Liebnitz piano, card tables, chairs, pictures, window hangings; Massive Dining Room Furniture: oak suite in leather [11 pieces] sideboard, buffet, dumb waiter, overmantel, bronzes, ornaments, dinner set, cutlery, glassware, window drapery; Breakfast Room: oak suite upholstered in green morocco, telescope table, sideboard, overmantel, window hangings; Library: writing table, rosewood davenport, easy chairs, book cases, lady’s work table, native weapons, pictures, ornaments etc; Bedroom Furniture: of 5 superior rooms – maid’s and man’s rooms, superb suites in mahogany, walnut, ash, handsome bedsteads in brass, rugs, bed hangings; Boudoir: ottoman, easy chairs, blinds; Hall: walnut and marble stand, pictures, bronze gong, models, jardinières, floorcloth etc; Verandahs and Balconies: cane lounges, deck chairs, fish globes, ferns; Kitchen, Laundry, Pantries: dressers, presses, tables, chairs, mangle, ironing stove, ice chest. Sundries: bath heater, gas making machine, lamps, breakfast and dessert sets; Farming Implements: harrows, rollers, lawn mowers, sprayer, tools, tip carts, fruit van, spring cart, dog cart, sulky, and saddlery.

One can only feel a sense of sadness that something so significant to the history of Blacktown no longer exists.

In 1900 it was reported that Blacktown Sawmill was busy cutting timber from *Flushcombe*.⁴⁵

The 1903 Electoral Rolls⁴⁶ do not record whether anyone is living in *Flushcombe Turrets*. There are a number of people listed as living in “Flushcombe”, as distinct from “Flushcombe Road”. Five of these have their occupation given as “fruit grower” or “orchardist”. Perhaps there were some remnants of the original orchard still bearing fruit by that time.

In December 1905 hope was raised that the unoccupied mansion would be restored. The *Argus* reported:

“THE TURRETS

Old residents of the district will be interested to know that Flushcombe Turrets, that splendid mansion built by Mr W Campbell some 21 years ago, but which has been unoccupied for the last four or five years, is being entirely renovated and placed in first class condition... Several of the largest ceilings are being taken down and replaced with Bagasse, the latest invention in fibrous plaster work, which was also used in the construction of the various arches which were such prominent features in the Commonwealth decorations in Sydney. In addition, the largest rooms are being papered in fine art designs, this portion of the work being entrusted to Mr W Freame (of “Nepean Times” fame) who is considered an expert in this kind of work.

Altogether the repairs and renovations at Flushcombe represent a large amount of money..."

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William Freame was a noted writer, recorder of local history, and later Mayor of Prospect and Sherwood Municipality and also a past President of Parramatta Historical Society. While his writing prowess is well known to most historians, probably his expertise in fine art design is lesser known. This article implies that the work on *Flushcombe Turrets* was actually underway.

In an article in the same issue of the *Argus*, Freame laments the fact that large estates did not remain in the hands of the same family through the generations, as was the norm in England, thus preserving them. He mentions *Flushcombe Turrets* as "*the showplace of the district ... the original Flushcombe was a fine roomy old cottage that stood within an estate of about 300 acres. It was purchased by Mr Campbell who, for many years kept a large furniture arcade in George Street ... He was a very benevolent gentleman for he had always something going for the benefit of some at Flushcombe, he turned to and in 1881 built the present Flushcombe Turrets... He spent a mint of money laying the grounds out in drives, tennis courts etc and turned his attention to fruit growing on a large scale... He used to pay away as much as £50 a week in wages, but then he received as much as £300 a month for his fruit... But alas! Those days belong to Christmases past, for the Campbells left years ago. After them, Mr Batt of Batt Rodd and Purves had possession, but for four or 5 years Flushcombe Turrets has been unoccupied. The beautiful castellated towers have remained half hidden from the road by the surrounding timber. The tennis court is ankle deep in long grass, the turreted gateways are closed to traffic, the urns and other ornaments that flank the several rows of steps remain silent memorials of a past glory, but there are signs of an awakening, for the voice of the house renovator is heard within its walls and there are hopes that its past glories may be revived again.*"⁴⁸

Yet by April 1906, *Flushcombe Turrets* was still deserted. Whether the restoration work had been undertaken, or even completed, is not known. The contents of the house had been sold by Batt in 1900.

Army training, under the command of two generals, was being held in the Prospect area in 1906. The "enemy" had taken the Great Western Railway and Prospect Reservoir, and the defenders had fallen back to Liverpool. It was reported that the infantry were situated on either side of Flushcombe Road, and the divisional and brigadier staffs were located "*...in the grounds of an unoccupied mansion called Flushcombe Turrets*".⁴⁹ Major Walters of Bungarabee wrote of his family having picnics at the abandoned mansion around the same period.⁵⁰

In August 1906 William Branch Campbell's death was announced in both *The Windsor and Richmond Gazette* and *The Nepean Times*. His obituary described him as "*a splendid old pioneer, a man of broad and liberal sympathies*". He was a generous benefactor and parishioner at St Bartholomew's Church at Prospect.⁵¹ William Campbell was buried at Field of Mars, Ryde.⁵² It has also been recorded that he was the first and largest subscriber towards the cost of erecting Christ Church in Blacktown.⁵³

The *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* obituary stated that he had been a resident of Grafton in its early days, proprietor of the Clarence River Stores and was an enterprising

business man. He ran lotteries in conjunction with his stores, took part in public movements and even stood for Parliament. He took an interest in wine production and laid out the circular Vineyard at South Grafton, had mining pursuits and after disposal of Clarence River Stores, conducted an extensive furnishing business in Sydney. *"The gentleman took a deep interest in all matters appertaining to the welfare of his adopted country"*, raised money for charities and won many prizes for his exhibits at various agricultural shows. *"For many years he resided at the Flushcombe Turrets, near Blacktown, where he had an extensive orangery..."* ⁵⁴

The reason why the mansion was unoccupied for so many years may lie in the 1893 subdivision by Batt, Rodd and Purves. Mr Batt himself probably purchased Lot 3 on which the mansion stood around 1896, and he sold off the contents in 1900 and moved to Sydney. The livestock was also sold. At some time after that the mansion was purchased by Daniel Garrard, for in April 1908 Garrard had it up for sale yet again, as *"Flushcombe Turrets Estate, the estate contains 810 acres, splendid grazing lands, abundant grass and water. Buildings include Flushcombe Turrets, a mansion of 16 rooms and offices ... men's houses, sheds etc."* ⁵⁵ The continuing subdivision of the land as farms and farmlets, their proximity to the growing Blacktown and the main western railway, were probably factors that resulted in the decline of the mansion itself, to the point it became an unwanted intrusion on the landscape.

In December 1908, Garrard was advertising a "Clearance Sale", and selling off cows, bulls, mares etc, "owing to Mr Garrard having leased the farm." ⁵⁶

A statutory declaration signed by Daniel Garrard on June 15, 1914, states that he purchased various lots of "Flushcombe Village" on April 2, 1907, from William Branch Campbell. Garrard stated that *"he knew the said land prior to 1890, from which year to 2nd April 1907 was in possession and occupied by W B Campbell."* ⁵⁷ It is believed that this statement is in error, as Campbell died in 1906. Either Garrard purchased the land from Batt or from Campbell's estate. It is uncertain if Daniel Garrard ever lived in the house as it seems to have been unoccupied during the early years of the twentieth century. The Electoral Rolls do not record Garrard or anyone else occupying *Flushcombe Turrets*, although there are many people listed under *Flushcombe* [being the farmlets]. At least five of these are shown as fruit growers or orchardists, so perhaps the remnants of the famous *Flushcombe* orchards were still being cultivated. ⁵⁸

On the night of Thursday 28 January, 1909, *Flushcombe Turrets* was tragically destroyed by fire. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported:

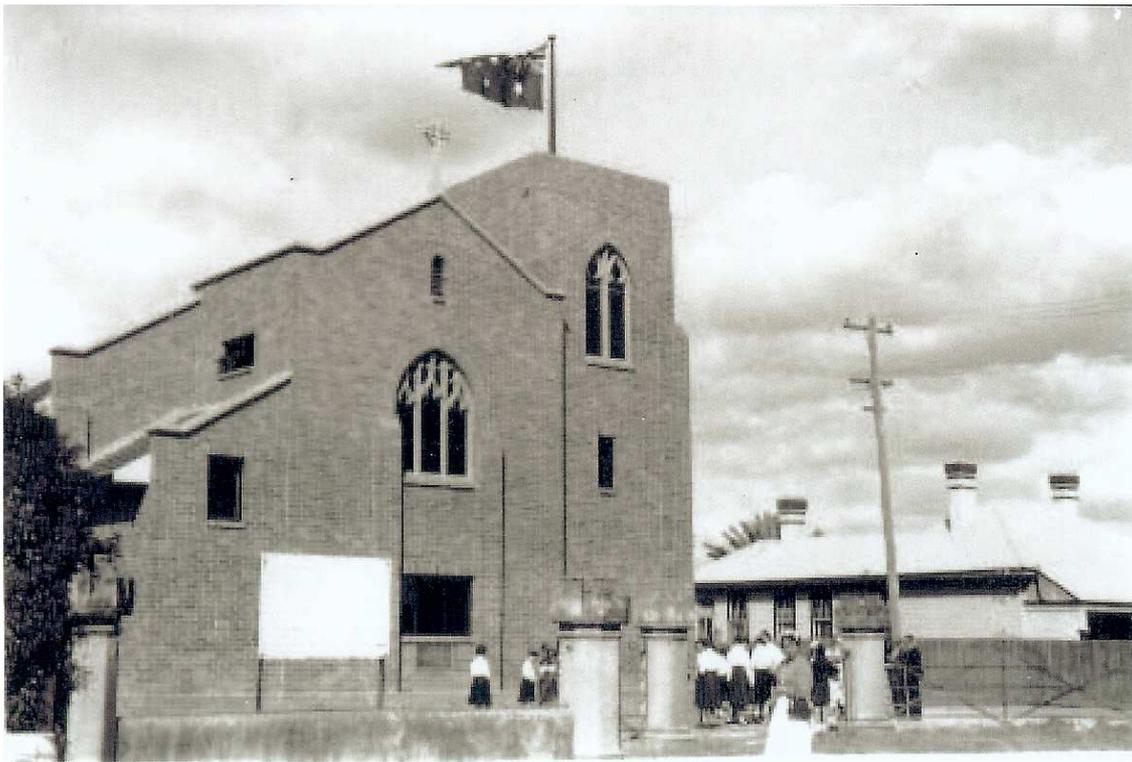
"FIRE AT BLACKTOWN"

The Flushcombe Turrets was totally destroyed by fire about midnight on Thursday last. The building, which was of stone and brick, with slate and iron roof, was a very handsome and conspicuous structure, having been erected some considerable time ago by the late Mr W B Campbell. The property subsequently passing into the present owner's (Mr Daniel Garrard) possession. It was situated between Prospect and Blacktown and was unoccupied at the time of the fire. Mr Oliver Garrard, son of the owner, who resides in a cottage near the

*property, was informed of the disaster by Constable Battie, officer in charge of the Prospect Police Station, he being the first to notice the flames, which speedily increased, and soon gutted the building, which was covered by insurance.”*⁵⁹

So a magnificent Blacktown icon was lost forever. The elegant interior fittings, farm implements and animals had been auctioned some years prior, the orchard and eucalypts disappeared and finally the mansion itself was destroyed. It is not known what happened to its predecessor, Lethbridge’s *Flushcombe*, but it did not survive the years of subdivision and re-subdivision either. Not only one historic house was lost, but two. And as the history of both faded from human memory, so did that of their historical association with Captain Robert Lethbridge and William Branch Campbell.

In November 1910 the land was advertised again, this time as a dairy farm, known as *Flushcombe Estate*, and subdivided into “twelve paddocks”.⁶⁰ Yet again, in July 1913, it was reported that “*Flushcombe Turrets, a property of 310 acres, with three cottages, has recently been sold. It is now used as a dairy farm by Mr Garrard but we understand it will shortly be subdivided and sold in small areas for mixed farming.*”⁶¹ The mansion had gone, but the name remained and is perpetuated today in Flushcombe Road.



Christ Church, Blacktown, in the 1950s, showing the four turreted gate posts from *Flushcombe Turrets*. This is the second Christ Church building, the first having been demolished. (Image courtesy Alan Filmer.)



The two surviving Turret gate posts in Flushcombe Turrets Reserve, Lancelot Street, Blacktown. The provenance of the gate itself is not known, but it does appear in the photograph of the turrets at Christ Church, above. Images by Les Tod, January 2008.

As late as 1913, in a subdivision report by Hardy and Busby, Licensed Surveyors, it was reported that “*the ruins of Flushcombe Turret*” were still in evidence.⁶² A descendant of the Campbell family recalls visiting some years after the fire and the property was being run as a chicken farm but the old fish pond was still there.⁶³

Today the site of the mansion is part of Pat Zikan Reserve and is owned by Blacktown City Council.⁶⁴ No trace of the house remains, but its location would have been in the vicinity of the present tennis courts. Two of the turreted gate pillars did survive, however, and these are in the nearby Flushcombe Turrets Reserve in Lancelot Street but are not in their original positions.

Mrs Lurline Simpson, a long time Blacktown resident, told Les Tod in an interview in January 2008 that it was her husband, Gordon, who saved and re-located the last two surviving turrets. Gordon worked for Prospect Electricity and had access to heavy equipment. The four turrets had been previously moved from Flushcombe Road and Lancelot Street to the grounds of Christ Church, Blacktown some years earlier. A new minister had ordered their removal from the church grounds and two had already been dumped when Gordon found out. Only two turrets remained and so with the help of other volunteers he took them to the reserve in Lancelot Street which was close to their original location. There are other variations to this story but this version has the most credence, being from Lurline Simpson herself, especially seeing that her husband was known to be very civic minded and had contacts in Council, and both had resided in Blacktown for many years.⁶⁵

EPILOGUE

The tragedy of the loss of *Flushcombe* and *Flushcombe Turrets* is little-known to today’s residents of Blacktown City. Today, over one hundred years later, there is a sense of feeling deprived of the rich history of these houses, their lands and their peoples.

Hopefully this study will help to rectify this, and to fill in the many gaps in the story of these two important colonial houses, one of major architectural significance and both of irreplaceable social, cultural, agricultural and historical significance. Their combined history is one that Blacktown should be very proud of, and which deserves greater recognition for the contribution they and their occupants have made to the area’s colonial history.

Lyn and Les Tod

July 2012

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64. Pat Zikan Reserve is named in memory of a tireless and well-known Blacktown SES worker. The naming of the reserve after him had no relevance to the history of *Flushcombe Turrets*.
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Authors' Notes

Extensive research was undertaken to try and recreate the story of *Flushcombe* and *Flushcombe Turrets*. Very little information has been collated on these important houses, and much of that has simply been copied and re-copied, particularly on various websites.

In addition to the formal references listed, the authors consulted many other sources, including the Mitchell Library, the Dixon Library and the General Reference Library of the State Library of NSW. This included the old card system of the Mitchell, and the Small Photo File, which is yet to be digitised; Picture Australia; The Royal Australian Historical Society; National Library of Australia; The old titles system of Land Titles; the William Freame books and collections in the Mitchell and Dixon Libraries; Blacktown City Library Local Studies Collection; Holroyd Library photographic collection; various historical societies, newspaper articles, family descendants, etc. Some material is held in Blacktown and District Historical Society but this was researched and donated by one of the authors, Lyn Tod some years ago.

The digitisation of newspapers via Trove has been an important source, although many of the newspapers quoted were researched pre-Trove. The on-going release of *The Cumberland Argus and Fruit Grower's Advocate* may bring forth further important information.

The one surviving photograph of the house is claimed by many sources. The copy used in this research, which is clearer than most, is courtesy of the Tucker family, descendants of William Branch Campbell. The images of William and Elizabeth Campbell are also courtesy of Julie Tucker.

It is likely that the remaining gaps in the history of the two houses may never be completely filled. Despite extensive searching through Land Titles, there are some key dates regarding sales and purchases missing; indeed in the Land Titles Office several important pages of certain volumes could not be located. Research is complicated further by the many subdivisions and re-subdivisions, and the possibility that some of these exchanges may not have been registered with the Land Titles Office – a not uncommon practice at that time.

The authors hope that this research provides some record of the history and importance of *Flushcombe* and *Flushcombe Turrets*, which up to this time has been fairly neglected.

Anyone with further information on *Flushcombe* or *Flushcombe Turrets* is welcome to contact the authors at thetods@bigpond.com