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Photograph of Gladesville Hospital Hill Branch and Zoo. Small picture file C 1885. Mitchell Library – State Library of NSW

## THE GLADESVILLE ASYLUM – THE FIRST 150 YEARS

When Governor Phillip left England for Australia in 1787 he was charged specifically with . . . "The Custody of idiots and their estates, and to take profits thereof to our own use finding them necessities and also to provide for the custody of lunatics and their estates without taking profits thereof to our own use . . ."

The first specific provision for their care was made with the establishment of an Asylum at Castle Hill in 1811. Later it became necessary to use the buildings for other purposes the Asylum was moved to Liverpool Court House in 1828.

Commissioner Bigge recommended the establishment of a permanent Asylum not greater than two miles from Parramatta. The construction of an Asylum was finally ordered by Governor Brisbane in 1837.

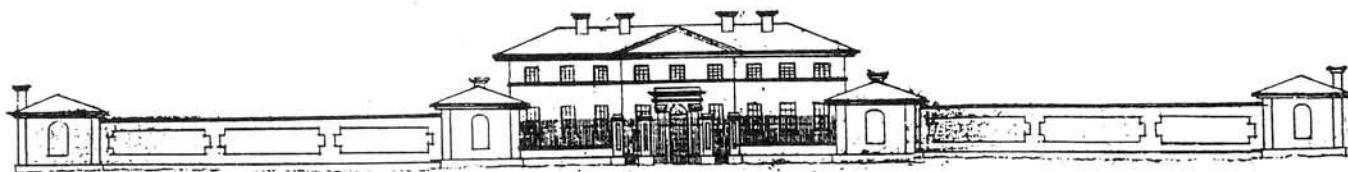
The Gladesville site was selected by Dr. Bowman and the Colonial Architect instructed to prepare plans. This was to become the Tarban Creek Asylum and later Gladesville Hospital.

*(Continued on page 2)*

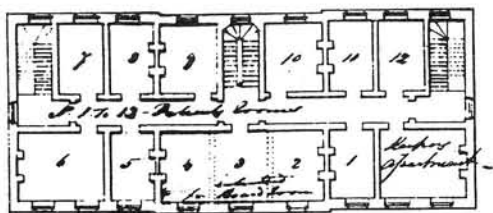
### *Stop Press*

**RIVERGLADE HOSPITAL (NORTHERN SIDE OF GLADESVILLE HOSPITAL) REDEVELOPMENT:  
PUBLIC MEETING – THURSDAY, 20th AUGUST, 1992 at 7.30 pm AT THE COUNCIL CHAMBERS.**

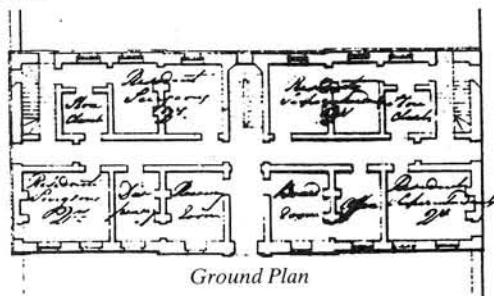
## THE GLADESVILLE ASYLUM – THE FIRST 150 YEARS (Continued from page 1)



Elevation of the Front Entrance



Upper Storey



Ground Plan

2.1.3 Designs for Public Buildings 1837. AO NSW, X693, Reel 2660

**1835-1849: WILLIAM MORTIMER LEWIS, Colonial Architect.** Lewis was known for the extravagance of his designs and his preference for the classic styles. The building was designed by Lewis in the Greek revival style with the elaborate Ionic front porch. Accommodation was provided for 60 inmates in 4 divisions in single cells, 10 in the inner area and 5 more noisy individuals in the outer area, enclosed in walled airing courts. A two storey main building accommodated staff on the ground floor and the upper classes in the second.

The buildings ended up being poorly constructed yet expensive. Bars to the windows were set far enough apart to allow patients to slip through and the arrangement of buildings was such as to allow patients to also climb out via the verandahs over the low roofs of cells.

From its inception the Asylum was overcrowded and by 1841 it held 135 inmates. This called for extensions which were rebuffed by the Governor.

Digby, the first superintendent appears to have been a well meaning fellow who was faced with the daunting task of putting the Asylum on a firm footing in the face of government indifference. Keepers were convicts and fresh water had to be brought from a water hole some half a mile distant. During droughts water had to be brought by boat from Sydney. He instituted humane regulations for the time but one requisition included:

*"... 12 leather pairs of hobbles ... 12 iron cuffs to them with straps ... 12 cuffs and belts for hands ... to fasten with locks ... etc."*

Digby became a controversial figure and following a number of inquiries was dismissed from his post and later returned to England. He was replaced with his accuser who had published a series of articles in the Sydney Morning Herald, R. Campbell.

**1849-1854: EDMOND THOMAS BLACKET, Colonial Architect.** Campbell, like his predecessor, continually called for improvements to the Asylum and some additions were effected. However the

period is notable for the animosity which built up between Blacket and Campbell.

**1854-1856: WILLIAM WEAVER, Colonial Architect.** A further inquiry was set up in this period following which major additions were commenced.

**1862-1890: JAMES BARNET, Colonial Architect.** The period is notable for the amount of building work and a visit by the Bishop of Hobart who described the Asylum as a poorly constructed, miserable place . . . "secured by high walls in which the patients for the most part pass their days. No change of scenery, no green trees, no flowers, no human beings seen, even by the most gentle and tranquil, but the daily attendants and their fellow patients . . ." A further inquiry was held recommending the closure of Tarban Creek and the establishment of new asylums.

Campbell was incensed by what he considered to be criticism of his management and, harking back to his dislike for Blacket (considering the selection of a site for a large Asylum on the European models of the day) said . . . "If the Government was determined to erect a large Asylum, then he would recommend that premature birth of vanity, the Sydney University be converted for the purpose . . ."

In 1868 Campbell was replaced by Manning as the next superintendent, who became a notable reformer in psychiatric care.

During 1888 the Priory was purchased to provide additional farm land for the Asylum and by 1890 the Asylum contained some 1020 patients.

**1891-1912: W.L. VERNON, Government Architect.** Until this period most of the extensions to the Hospital were effected in the classic mode, in stone with slate roofs. This period marked a change in style. New buildings were constructed in Queen Anne style in brick with stone trim.

**1912-1929:** Very little building work was effected during this period. However Dr. Edwards, who worked in the Asylum, wrote of the place as follows:

(Continued on page 3)

## THE GLADESVILLE ASYLUM – THE FIRST 150 YEARS (Continued from page 2)

*“... The Admission wards were the most modern in NSW at the time. Each of these four wards had a country end, with trees and gardens and looked across sloping lawns to the river with busy traffic. They were tastefully furnished and every endeavour was made to exclude the asylum atmosphere. Patients were encouraged to wear their own clothing and to have as much freedom as was considered compatible with safety. Patients were fortunate if they recovered quickly before the pressure of new admissions made their transfer to the older wards necessary.*

*Apart from the female convalescent ward, the remainder of the wards were antiquated and hideous, unpainted for years, with stonework crumbling and iron work rusted”.*

**1929-1935: EDWIN SMITH, Government Architect.** This period marked a major period of expansion, generally in architecturally uninteresting construction and with the addition of the second storeys to the old stone wards.

**1936-1958: COBDEN PARKES, Government Architect.** Further extension continued and a

modernisation programme was started. During the war, many wards were reinforced to provide bomb shelters and an interesting shelter still exists near the Priory. At this time the Hospital had some 1500 patients.

This period saw the advent of drug therapy and a lessening of the need to hospitalise patients with psychiatric disorders and a subsequent decline in the need for huge complexes.

**1959-PRESENT:** Only minor works were constructed during this period. A new approach to psychiatric care was instituted with half way houses and the over-crowding which plagued the Hospital for all of its history ceased.

Recent proposals include closure of the Hospital, as recommended almost 100 years ago. Concern now focusses on the preservation and appropriate use of the architecturally and historically significant buildings

*Reference: Madden J, Master's Thesis (Arch) "Tarban Creek Asylum, The first 150 years" held at the University of Sydney.*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Jeff Madden is an Architect, practising in Balmain, 555 9077. He was the Trust's guest speaker at the AGM in May. He completed his thesis along the lines of a conservation survey of the Gladesville Hospital site, for his M.Sc (Arch) (Cons) in 1989. His main interests are in heritage buildings and restoration.

### RIVERGLADE HOSPITAL (Northern side of Gladesville Hospital) REDEVELOPMENT:

The Hunter's Hill Trust is actively involved with the planning of this development through membership of the Municipality of Hunter's Hill Council's Gladesville Hospital Redevelopment Consultative Committee, by Jenny Thompson. Our aim is to keep the re-development in keeping with development throughout the Municipality, and to maintain the ambience of this suburb.

Trust members were involved in a Council organised site inspection early in August, and have formed a committee to consult and write a submission about the project.

Plans are presently on display at Council. Please take a little time to inspect these, and if you have any comments, contact Ian Kelley on 879 6640, or come to the public meeting at 7.30 pm on 20th August at the Town Hall.

### HUNTER'S HILL TRUST GLADESVILLE HOSPITAL WALK Saturday, 12th September, 1992 10.00 am – 1.00 pm

Join Jeff Madden and John Kennedy-Gould on Saturday, 12th September for a leisurely walk around the historic buildings of Gladesville Hospital. Many of these buildings are of historic interest and are listed by the National Trust.

Jeff has completed his Master's thesis in Architecture on these buildings, and John, Senior Social Worker at the Hospital has been the guide for tours on Open Days at the Hospital.

Bring your lunch for a picnic on the oval after the tour.

**MEETING PLACE:**  
at the Victoria Road Entrance  
100m west of Henley Cottage.

**PARKING:**  
In the car park just inside the entrance.

Please register your interest:  
ring Jenny Thompson on 817 4440.  
Numbers limited to 40, so register  
**EARLY!**





The first Villa Maria Building – at Hunter's Hill – 1857 William Weaver.

## ***THE PRIORY AND ITS ARCHITECT***

*Roslyn Maguire*

There is no other building in Hunters Hill more likely to inspire interest in colonial architect William Weaver than **The Priory**. With a striking Georgian form facing east to Tarban Creek, in a space hardly reduced since construction in 1857, it is also an important reminder of the early period of pre-subdivision development.

The classical, symmetrical design was Weaver's favourite and is still to be found in the Cox family property *Burrundulla* at Mudgee and at *Jervisfield*, Picton, built for Major Antill. Plans of both these country houses have been preserved, and in the case of *The Priory* a complete set of accounts and receipts still exist, identifying the different contractors, type and quantity of materials used, and dates of completion of each stage of construction. Weaver's signature on all accounts and receipts assumes his close supervision of each stage of the process.

These plans and documents provide useful reference material about a colonial architect, less researched and less understood than almost any other of the mid-19th century.

At the local level, with much of *The Priory's* fabric intact, comparisons with other contemporary Hunters Hill buildings become easier so that many others could, and indeed should, be attributed to Weaver; especially in light of other local evidence of social and commercial associations between him and those for whom houses were being built.

Of equal importance, with such attributions, are the architectural detail and fabric of Weaver's own Hunters Hill house, on the corner of Alexandra and Stanley Streets, built soon after completion of *The Priory*. The contract for the Church of England schoolhouse, now St. Marks, was awarded by Didier Joubert to Weaver and his

new young partner William Kemp. In 1861 Weaver was appointed as the local Council's first assessor of rates, a further indication of his local familiarity. The close professional association of Weaver and Didier Joubert lasted until Weaver's departure for New Zealand in 1864.

One of the major gaps in our understanding of the beginning of development in Hunters Hill has arisen from the assumption that Didier and Jules Joubert designed their own houses, with the result that the surviving sandstone houses of that crucial early period have never attracted the heritage enquiry or investigation they deserve. The discovery of the identity of William Weaver, successor to the great Edmund Blacket as Colonial Architect from 1854-56, as *The Priory's* architect goes a long way towards erasing that assumption. Weaver spent some years working and living here.

Careful comparisons of most pre-1862 buildings in Hunters Hill lead to the conclusion of possible Weaver involvement, particularly in the style he referred to as "the marine villa".

A complete set of itemised accounts and receipts of the construction of any building is rare for the early period of development in Hunters Hill. When considered with plans which survive of two of Weaver's other major domestic dwellings, and a list of possible local attributions, the basis for ongoing research into his work seems more solid than ever before.

*– Based on a talk given to Trust members at The Priory last December and on a report, compiled with assistance from Diana Drake, regarding The Priory's position within the Riverglade development proposal now before Council.*