
THE HISTORIAN

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Gortgowan

23 Nelson Street, Gordon

by Terry Batten

The land

Acting under the instructions of Miss Hannah McIntosh, Richardson and Wrench conducted an important auction sale of the Gordon Park Subdivision on 29 February 1896.¹

Lot 6 was purchased by Miss Bessie Love, the fifth daughter of a prominent Sydney businessman, Harry Clifford Love, who resided nearby at *Stonyhurst*, a substantial estate and local landmark.²

It is not known whether Mr Love provided any financial assistance to his daughter, but it appears that Bessie probably took advantage of the attractive five year terms (on a 15% deposit) offered by the vendor as she gained title to her land in 1901.³

She had married William Fitzsimons in 1898 and the young couple moved quickly to build their new home. It was common at the time for a husband to provide some degree of security for his wife (and to minimise punitive death duties should he pre-decease her) by ensuring the family home was in his spouse's name.

The family

William Robert Fitzsimons was born at Greencastle in County Donegal in 1870.⁴ His father Samuel was an officer in the local constabulary and, on his retirement, he and his wife Isabella seriously contemplated emigration to escape the harsh conditions prevailing in Ireland at the time. Unfortunately Samuel died in 1886 before he could implement his plans.

Nonetheless, the family decided that two of his sons, Samuel Jr and William, should journey to Sydney to see at firsthand whether this distant but burgeoning colonial outpost would meet their expectations.

That they set sail in 1886, the year of their father's death is indicative of their determination to find a new

and more rewarding life as far as possible from Ireland.⁵

The boys' report was very positive and in 1889 Isabella set sail for NSW with her five remaining children (one had died in the interim and another two remained in Ireland).

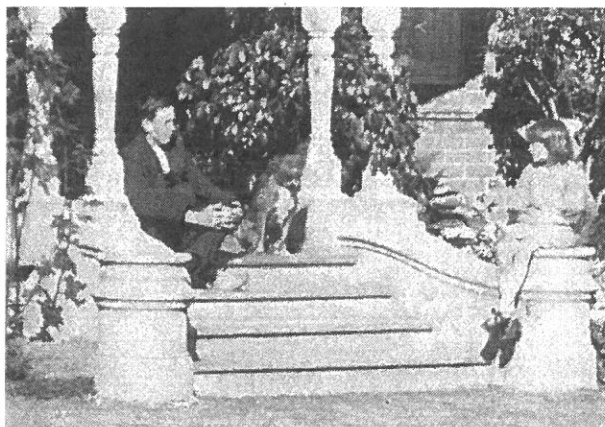
Both Samuel and William quickly found positions in the colony, Samuel as a customs officer and William with The National Bank of Australasia where he worked as a clerk for some four years.⁶

Ambitious and comfortably established in the colony, William enjoyed its lifestyle and now sought to improve his prospects.

He quickly realised that a profession would provide substantially greater long-term rewards than a career in banking. Dentistry offered considerable potential ... there were less than a thousand dentists serving the entire state of NSW.

Studying dentistry in 19th century Sydney was somewhat different from today. There were no university faculties or professional bodies to teach and to maintain standards.

Instead, aspiring dental practitioners were formally apprenticed to a master dentist who, for a period of not less than three years, undertook to teach them all aspects of the profession.⁷



Herbert and Muriel Fitzsimons - Photo: Elizabeth Hartnell

William had established his practice when he married Bessie Love on 21 January 1898 at Chatswood.⁸

His new father-in-law, Harry Clifford Love, was a tea importer, who was fast becoming a major force in the Australian food and grocery industry.⁹

In the first half of the 20th century Love's organisation was a marketer and manufacturer of major brands such as Uncle Toby's Oats, Wade's Cornflour and Laundrena Starch, all of which were destined to become household names.

On 25 November 1898 their first child, Herbert Paton, was born and in 1904 a daughter, Muriel Isabel (Molly), completed the young family. At that time they were living in rented homes, first in Albert Avenue, Chatswood, and then in Lane Cove Road (now the Pacific Highway) opposite Ravenswood School in Gordon.¹⁰ Plans were well in hand for their new home and they finally occupied *Gortgowan* in 1902.

William's surgery was initially in the old Thompson Brothers store, a single storey, stone faced building on the northwest corner of St John's Avenue and Lane Cove Road.¹¹

As his practice prospered he was able to move to a more prestigious city address, No 181 Macquarie Street, almost opposite Parliament House. It was to be a prescient move, professionally and politically.

Despite his busy practice (and, perhaps, foreshadowing his future career in community service and politics) he soon became very active in his profession. With a few like-minded colleagues he was a driving force in the Dental Association of NSW, established in 1892.¹²

The Association's principal objectives were to create a recognised educational facility and

formalise the registration and regulation of practitioners. Due in no small measure to the Association's efforts, Sydney University set up a dental school within its Faculty of Medicine in 1901.¹³ At that time there were only 842 practising dentists in NSW.¹⁴

After a decade of work within the challenging but somewhat narrow ambit of the Dental Association (Fitzsimons was its president in 1908) it was inevitable that his organisational skills and political acumen would be recognised and channelled into a wider and more influential sphere.

Local government was always of special interest to William and he was elected to serve on Ku-ring-gai Council in 1911. He remained on the Council until 1922 and was president of the shire from 1916 to 1921¹⁵

He also became actively involved in state politics at this time, acting as honorary secretary to two prominent Nationalist politicians, Sir Charles Wade and Sir Joseph Cook.¹⁶ This association may have kindled his interest in further expanding

his horizons and embarking on his own career in the state legislature.

His lifetime involvement in community service and practical experience in local government did not go unnoticed and he was invited by the Nationalist Party to contest the seat of Cumberland in the 1922 election.

The state seat of Cumberland was quite unusual by today's standards. It covered a vast area extending in an arc from the western fringe of the then (1922) metropolitan area to Bilpin and Maroota in the north, Mulgoa in the west and the National Park in the south.¹⁷

Under the electoral system of the day the seat returned three members representing some 42,000 voters.¹⁸

William won his seat and served in the Coalition Government of Premier George Fuller until the 1925 election, which was won by Labor under Mr JT Lang.¹⁹

He retained his seat and served in the opposition in the Legislative Assembly. Some nine months into the new parliament, in March 1926, William was

alighting from a tram near the corner of George and Hunter Streets in Sydney when he was struck and killed by a car.²⁰ He was 55 years of age.

Bessie re-married in 1930. Her second husband was Arthur H Way, a widower, who died suddenly on a train while travelling home to Gordon from his city business in 1934.

Having remained in her large marital home until 1940, Bessie moved to a smaller, more manageable flat in Roseville. *Gortgowan* was then rented to an interesting tenant, the newly appointed Headmaster of Sydney Grammar School, Frederick G Phillips.

Phillips was born in 1879 in Tamworth and educated at Newington College and the University of Sydney where he took first class honours in English and Literature.²¹

Fresh out of university, he embarked on what was to become a lifetime career in education when he joined the teaching staff at Sydney Grammar School in 1902.

In 1939 he was on leave touring Europe when war became imminent and he quickly



'Gortgowan' - Photo: courtesy of Elizabeth Hartnell

returned home to Australia. The following year he was appointed Headmaster, a challenging position in wartime with ongoing staff and material shortages.²²

Always involved in the school's extra-curricular activities Phillips had a special interest in the debating team. He arranged regular debates at *Gortgowan*, outside school hours, where selected students honed their skills competing against masters and old boys. With Mrs Phillips providing supper, invitations were greatly prized.²³

Bessie Fitzsimons died in 1949 and the house was left to her children, Herbert and Molly, who sold it soon after.

An interesting footnote:

Herbert Fitzsimons followed his father into state politics and became the MLA for Lane Cove in 1930. It was he, as Minister of Health in the Stevens Government, who unveiled the foundation plaque for the Sydney Dental Hospital in 1938, thus fulfilling one of his visionary father's many dreams.²⁴

The house

By 1902 *Gortgowan* a substantial brick Federation bungalow was occupied by William and Bessie Fitzsimons and their young son Herbert. *Gortgowan* is believed to have been named after an estate in Ireland. The name was changed to *Aberdour* after the house left the Fitzsimons family in the early 1950s.

The architect is unknown but he may have been GM Pitt Jnr who is recorded as having accepted tenders for the construction of two cottages in Gordon on 5 June 1901.²⁵ The second cottage may have been *Tasserton* the home of Bessie's elder sister, Theresa.

The principal entrance, with its four-step approach to the porch, was flanked on the left by an open verandah with turned wooden columns and a timber frieze. On the right there is a large bay window strategically located under an oversize gable replete with ornate timber detailing.

This eye-catching feature dominates the front façade of the house. Marseilles terra cotta tiles were used on the roof, which also displayed decorative ridge cresting and finials. An interesting architectural design feature was the use of gablets incorporating ventilators for the roof cavity. These small gables also had an aesthetic role: they very effectively broke up a vast and unsightly expanse of terra cotta roofing.

Federation houses were designed specifically for Australian conditions and there was always an aversion to harsh, direct sunlight which could quickly fade delicate furnishings. As a result windows were never particularly large and *Gortgowan's* front verandah was replete with a shady canvas blind.



'Gortgowan' gates - Photo: J Harvey

Apart from minor modifications to accommodate changing family circumstances, the fabric of the house remained largely unchanged during the Fitzsimons family's tenure. However, in common with many houses of the 1920's, as the motorcar became increasingly popular some old sheds were demolished and a fibro garage was erected in 1929 at a cost of £45. In 1933 an extension incorporating an additional bathroom and internal laundry was added at a cost of £352 pounds.²⁶

The front entrance gates have an interesting history. Both the imposing carriageway gates and the adjoining pair of pedestrian gates were originally part of a fence erected in 1876 to enclose Sydney's Hyde Park. This fence was removed in 1908 to allow for the widening of Elizabeth and Liverpool Streets.²⁷

William would probably have secured his set of gates at this time. It is thought that the original timber gateposts were hewn and shaped by Mr Artie Lusty, a well-known axeman who lived in a hut on the adjacent block of land.²⁸

Aberdour was substantially, but sympathetically, renovated in the 21st

century to provide additional accommodation in the ceiling area and a garage wing. A new terra cotta tiled roof similar to the original has been designed to incorporate dormer windows in the gablets.

Although *Aberdour* has been modified to meet the needs of a modern family it still retains its distinctive Edwardian style and character.

Acknowledgement

Much of the information for this paper was provided by William Fitzsimons' granddaughter, Mrs Elizabeth Hartnell, who has clear memories of happy family life at *Gortgowan*.

Terry Batten, 2007.

¹ Richardson and Wrench promotional poster.

² LPI V.1357 F240 8 June 1901.

³ Richardson and Wrench promotional poster.

⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)* Vol. 8 p.517.

⁵ My thanks to Mrs E Hartnell for this information.

⁶ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, op.cit.

⁷ RW Halliday, *A History of Dentistry in NSW—1788-1945* p. 55.

⁸ BDM 1835/1898 reg St Leonards.

⁹ *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol.10 p.152 in the entry for his son J. C. Love.

¹⁰ State Electoral Roll 1898-99 and Census 1901.

¹¹ WS Donaldson, *Reminiscences of Early Gordon*, KHS vertical files.

¹² *A History of Dentistry in NSW -1788-1945*, p.59.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.20.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.219.

¹⁵ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.8 p.517.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ NSW Dept of Lands (Mapping Division).

¹⁸ *Electoral Atlas of NSW 1856-2006*, p.53.

¹⁹ *Voting for the NSW Legislative Assembly 1890-1964*, ANU 1975 p.189.

²⁰ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.8 p.517.

²¹ *Who's Who 1944*, p.665.

²² Clifford Turney, *Grammar- A History of Sydney Grammar School 1819-1988*, 1989, p.203- 204.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.210.

²⁴ George Franks, *A History of Dentistry in NSW 1945-95*, p.20.

²⁵ NSW Contract Reporter. *Harvey Index*

²⁶ Ku-ring-gai Council BA 1929/379, BA 1933/172.

²⁷ Helen Proudfoot, City of Sydney Archives: Hyde Park- Statement of Significance and Historical Analysis, 1987.

²⁸ Les Thorne, *A History of North Shore Sydney, 1788-Today*, 1968, p.78.

HERITAGE STUDY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF KU-RING-GAI

Item Number

Map: 23 No: 28

Address: 23 NELSON ST, GORDON

Land Title K.M.C.

Name: ABERDOUR

Lot 6, sec. 5,
PP 3267

Owner: Mr. A.T. Elmistie

K.M.C.

C.A. No. 6-19897

Description, History

K.M.C.

Note fence + gates

Period

- Pre -1900
- 1901-1920
- 1921-1940
- 1941-1960
- 1961-1986

Context

- Primary Industry
- Key Residences
- Suburban Consolidation
- Utilities Infrastructure
- Commercial Development
- Community Services
- Education

References

Significance

- State
- Municipal

Reasons for listing in this Study

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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> cultural | <input type="checkbox"/> natural | <input type="checkbox"/> landmark value |
| <input type="checkbox"/> social | <input type="checkbox"/> aesthetic | |

Integrity

- Substantially Intact
- Altered or extended sympathetically
- Altered or extended unsympathetically

Photograph Film No. 6 Neg. No. 34



Other Listings

- National Estate NSW Heritage Act
- PCO
- ICO
- Section 130
- National Trust Lists
- Local History Sources
- LEP/DCP
- RAIA
- Other

Prepared for KU-RING-GAI MUNICIPAL COUNCIL by
ROBERT MOORE, PENELOPE PIKE, HELEN PROUDFOOT and
LESTER TROPMAN & ASSOCIATES,

Date of Survey:

Conservation Consultants in Association

By: SB Checked: RM 287



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GORDON STATION

ROBERT

GORDON RECREATION GROUND

GORDON SEC.

RD.

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ST. ROSEDALE

ST. EDWARD

ST. NELSON

ST. CARTER

ST. ARTHUR

ST. ILLEROY

ST. MCINTOSH

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HERITAGE STUDY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF KU-RING-GAI

Item Number

Map: 23 No: 22

Address: 38 NELSON ST, GORDON

Land Title K.M.C.

Name: MILLTHORN

Lot 1, DP 584186

Owner: Mr. J.R. & Mrs. M.J. Goatcher K.M.C.

CA No. 5-19934-3000

Description, History K.M.C.

Period

- Pre -1900
- 1901-1920
- 1921-1940
- 1941-1960
- 1961-1986

Context

- Primary Industry
- Key Residences
- Suburban Consolidation
- Utilities Infrastructure
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| <input type="checkbox"/> cultural | <input type="checkbox"/> natural | <input type="checkbox"/> landmark value |
| <input type="checkbox"/> social | <input type="checkbox"/> aesthetic | |

Integrity

- Substantially Intact
- Altered or extended sympathetically
- Altered or extended unsympathetically

Photograph Film No. 25 Neg. No. 4



Other Listings

- National Estate NSW Heritage Act
- PCO
- ICO
- Section 130
- National Trust Lists
- Local History Sources
- LEP/DCP
- RAIA
- Other

Prepared for KU-RING-GAI MUNICIPAL COUNCIL by ROBERT MOORE, PENELOPE PIKE, HELEN PROUDFOOT and LESTER TROPAN & ASSOCIATES,

Date of Survey:

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