

# Berkshire Park

*Clarrie Neal*

## Jericho and Berkshire Park houses

Berkshire Park is situated at the junction of South Creek and the Blacktown - Richmond Road and is believed to have been named by the Rouse family. Richard Rouse arrived in Sydney in 1801 as a free settler. Several years later he built Rouse Hill House, eventually moving there to live permanently in 1825. In 1819 he bought a 320 acre property on the western side of South Creek and named it Berkshire Park after the English county where he grew up.

On this property he built a 10 roomed house and later a brick cottage for his eldest daughter, Mary, who had married Jonathan Hassall in 1819. Further land acquisitions increased the size of the property to 1,000 acres, it being eventually left in trust for his widowed daughter Mary Hassall and her five sons. The house was destroyed by fire in 1944.

Later he bought 347 acres of land on the opposite side of the Richmond Road overlooking South Creek and named it Jericho, after the name of a place in Oxford. 'Jericho House' was built on this property for his son George in c1839. In the book 'Rouse Hill House' the Rouse family recall 'Jericho House on its magnificent site overlooking South Creek'.

Thomas Musgrave's maps of c1842 show a bush track leading from Rouse Hill estate through the site of today's Riverstone, over Eastern and South Creeks, and on to Berkshire Park. Richard Rouse lived the last three years of his life with his son in this house; his will showing the property at that time comprised 1,200 acres. It too, was destroyed by fire.

## Berkshire Park Post Office

Berkshire Park first requested a Post Office in 1932 when the local store keeper, Mr H. Armitage, sent a letter on the behalf of 40 residents. The M.P. for the area, Mr Stewart, also sent a letter in 1932. On the 29th May 1933 Mr Stewart sent another letter along with a petition signed by the residents.

On the 9th December 1932, Mr H. Armitage indicated he was prepared to accept delivery of a 'free' mail bag from the Windsor Post Office and deliver all correspondence free from his store, once a day, at no cost to the PMG department.

This offer was initially refused, but on the 3rd January 1933 Mr H. Armitage was licensed to sell stamps and was approved to accept delivery of the mail bag from the Riverstone Post Office.

This Riverstone - Berkshire Park agreement became a contentious issue as Eleanor Coles, the Post Mistress/store keeper at Marsden Park claimed a loss of income as it restricted her business, a business she had bought some years earlier for 800 pounds.

However, the arrangement between the PMG and Mr Armitage continued until the 19th February 1934, when Mr Armitage advised the PMG he would not continue to accept the mail bag. He later indicated he was prepared to accept the mail if he was paid 39 pounds per annum.

In the meantime, Charlie Fisher, the baker from Riverstone offered to deliver the mail free of charge to the residents, along with his bread deliveries, each Monday, Wednesday and Friday. It appears this was the practice for the next two years.

It was not until the 9th April 1936 that the PMG finally approved a Post Office Agency in the local store operated by Mr Armitage.

The telephone service to the area commenced on the 9th May 1936, and payment of the aged pensions commenced on the 4th April 1938.

Mr H. Armitage continued with the Post Office/store until the 8th November 1945, when he sold the business to Mr N. Wheeler who continued on until 31st March 1961. During this period Kathleen George was approved to act as the Asst. Post Mistress. In 1956 the P.O. hours of business were; Monday - Friday 9.00 am - 1.00 pm and 2.00 pm - 6.00 pm. Saturday 9.00 am - 1.00 pm Sunday Closed. Public Holidays 9.00 am - 10.00 am.

In 1942 the Department of Public Works was engaged to build an airstrip at Berkshire Park with a work force of 70 men. It was expected the men were to be located on the site and the job would be completed in three months.

To pay the men it was decided to open a Money Order Office in the Berkshire Park/P.O. store on the afternoon of pay day, once a fortnight. This Office was to be staffed with the Assistant Postal officer from Riverstone who would carry the necessary cash with him.

## Berkshire Park Airfield

During World War 2 the RAAF had several airstrips known as 'Relief Landing Grounds' built in western Sydney. These airstrips were located at Berkshire Park, Mt. Druitt, Penrith, Pitt Town, Richmond, Schofields, and Yarramundi.

The Dept. of Public Works commenced construction of the Berkshire Park airstrip in August 1942; it first being necessary to acquire the area from the local land owners. The RAAF referred to these acquisitions as "Hirings" and paid the owners an annual rent, sometimes as little 2 shillings and 6 pence a year. The strip, 5,000 feet long and 150 feet wide ran from the Richmond Road through to Fourth Road, the site can still be seen today, opposite the entrance to Windsor Downs. Often the strip was referred to as the Marsden Park airfield.

The following owners who had their land acquired in 1942 were:- E. A. Hudson, W. T. Lisson, A. H. Nicholls, H. Armitage, J. & H. D. Marshall, Est. M. J. Ussher, H. J. Ussher. Cultivation Lands Ltd owned Lots 161 and 162 located on Fourth Road and these lots were hired by the RAAF under Order 1426 on the 20th August 1942. On the 8th September 1944, much of this land was returned, but the RAAF retained the sections on Fourth Road.

On the 6th December 1945, the new owner W. Greig, again requested the return of the land. After an initial refusal, the RAAF on the 22nd Dec. issued a memo - "Lots 161 and 162, previously required for Aircraft Hideout, can now be released to the owner on the 7th March 1946." (Colin Cubitt recalled W. Greig later building a house on one of the bitumen areas that had been used for the storage of the planes.) A. H. Winn also had land acquired.

It appears Gabrielle and Eleanor Sewell did not have land taken over, but correspondence indicates they did experience drainage problems at times.

In 1942 a number of Spitfire aircraft were brought back from Europe to Australia by sea to fight the war in the Pacific, the airstrip at Berkshire Park being used for training the pilots.

Derek Roylance in his book "Air Base Richmond" noted – *The Spitfire pilots who had come down from the European War were not used to flying out of strips hacked out of the jungle, so one squadron was sent to train at Yarramundi, and another to Marsden Park.*

Paddy Heffernan, the CO at the time, said *there was plenty of room on these strips; 50 feet wide with another 50 feet of cleared land on each side. Despite this, within a couple of weeks, at least half a dozen Spitfires had run into trees.*

Derek Roylance also noted that –

- The No.2 Medical Receiving Station formed in 1942 used the nearby Clydesdale residence as a RAAF Convalescent Hospital.

- A searchlight battery was located near the airstrip, on the Sydney side of the plane storage area on Richmond Road. (Colin Cubitt recalled it was located in a paddock on Ted Jones's dairy.)

A RAAF Internet site shows several local Radar Stations in WW2: -Stations No. 169 and 170 - Pitt Town and Marsden Park; Station 309 - Marsden Park; Station 312 - Marsden Park.

A familiar site until the 1980s was the Remote Receiving Station masts and aerials located on the eastern side of the Richmond Road. It was operated by the RAAF and was capable of receiving messages from all over the world. The rooms used for its operation were located in underground bunkers and the messages received were relayed to the RAAF H/Q base at Lapstone to be processed.

When the War finished, the airstrip was no longer needed and it was left unaltered for many years. A Thematic Study by the NSW Heritage Office in 2001 on World War 2 aerodromes and associated structures noted that in a 1946 RAAF report, Marsden Park airstrip was listed to be retained but not maintained.

During this period the site was used for a variety of unofficial purposes for many years. An Internet site shows that in 1946 and 1947 the strip was used for two motor races, held on a three kilometre circuit based on a World War 2 airfield located at Berkshire Park. The race meetings were held on the 10th June 1946 and the 27th January 1947.

Ron Clarke recalls going to car rallies at the site in the 1950s: *as we lived at Maraylya we also often went to the Pitt Town airstrip. When we felt like going for a ride on our motorbikes we'd sometimes go over to Berkshire Park. Nearly every weekend there would be something on there, people held car rallies, picnics, barbecues out there; nothing official, just a chance to get together.*

*I remember one time Bill McLachlan, who started the Pioneer Village at Wilberforce, turned up in a 1950 or '51 Zephyr convertible. It was a real talking point as it was unlike any car we'd seen.*

*I know that many people learnt to drive at Berkshire Park, just as others did out at Pitt Town. In those days you could have a bit of a race there, take your car out and see how fast it could go down*

*the straight. There was a tarmac surface, but it seemed to be thinner than Pitt Town and broke up more quickly into gravel.*

*I can also recall the wires in the trees across the road which used to hold up camouflage netting that they parked the planes under. They had the same set up at Pitt Town, except that the planes were parked at the side of the airstrip in the bush. Another air strip that we went to a lot was the one at Mt Druitt. It was turned into a proper race track and I saw Jack Brabham win his first race there.*

*Up to the 1970s many Riverstone residents learnt to drive at Berkshire Park, there was sufficient tarmac left to provide a reasonable surface, and as the potholes of red clay developed, it was a good opportunity for turning and swerving practice.*

Ruby Waldron lived most of her life at Berkshire Park. Her father Fred was a timber cutter. He supplied the local residents and also those of Riverstone with their firewood from the 30s to the 50s. He initially used a 4 wheel horse drawn wagon to cart the wood and in the 40s he bought an International truck. Even though forced to use a crutch for a World War 1 injury to his leg he still continued with his wood cutting business, often with the assistance of his wife and daughter Ruby.

Ruby recalled:

- the construction workers building the Berkshire Park airstrip during the 2nd World War.
- the workers sharing their sandwiches with the Waldron family.
- the drainage work done to make the strip suitable for all weathers.
- the surface was sealed and tarred.
- there were no sheds or hangars built.
- dummy planes were stored nearby under large camouflage nets.
- dummy planes were also stored under nets along the Llandilo Road.
- the Post Office and store on the corner of the strip and Richmond Road, owned by Mr Wheeler.
- Charlie Ingerson owned the nearby poultry farm.
- the local residents using the strip as their 'learn to drive' school.
- the Forester's living in First Street. Their daughter was killed when thrown from a horse as it plunged into a drain alongside the strip.

A 1974 topographical map still clearly showed the airstrip. Gradually houses were built on part of the strip and other land uses were introduced. Today, if you look carefully you can still see the airstrip clearing from several of the streets that now traverse the former site.

Remnants of the wires used to hold up the camouflage nets in the trees can still be seen at the front of the Windsor Downs area. Local residents, including Ernie Byrnes can remember planes taking off along the Richmond Road, before the airstrip was completed.

Colin Cubitt recalled boys from Riverstone riding their motor bikes out to the airstrip for 'a burn'. He also recalled the gravel used for the construction of the Schofields airstrip being quarried from the Vineyard hill in the meatworks paddocks; the site now occupied by the Sewerage treatment plant.

Compiled by Clarrie Neal, 2003 from information provided by Rosemary Phillis, Ruby Waldron, Merv Davis, Ron Clarke, Kevin Lewis, Ernie Byrnes, Colin Cubitt, Caroline R. Thornton's book "Rouse Hill House", and National Archive files.