

Canvas Town from the *Gazette*

Clarrie Neal

The seasonal nature of slaughtering at the meatworks meant at times of increased kills there was a demand for temporary accommodation in Riverstone. When the works were slack the butchers would seek work at Glebe Island, Aberdeen, Bourke, Rockhampton, Townsville or other country towns, often to return when Riverstone increased their kills again.

Many of these meatworkers resorted to living in tents and the area of town where the tents were situated became known as Canvas Town. Throughout the 1890's the name Canvas Town appeared regularly in the Riverstone column of the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette (Gazette)* and below is a chronological history of the articles:

2nd March 1891: *A slaughterman sought refuge in the slaughterhouse when a wild bull destroyed his tent.*

7th November 1891: *Alick Fyall collapsed when returning to his tent.*

18th November 1893: The first time the term 'Canvas Town' is noted. *That Cockroach Alley and Canvas Town are a trifle jealous of 'The Dog's Home,' a rather queer name given to a house in town occupied by a number of butchers.*

9th December 1893: *When the employees at the meatworks have finished their night's work they proceed to Dan Wiggins tent, where coffee and other refreshments can be obtained. In the same column it was reportedthe tent owned by Joseph Jones was destroyed by fire.*

3rd March 1894: *A robbery was perpetrated at one of the tents located near the meatworks.*

11th May 1895: *H. Ireland and H. Tebbutt have decided to live in Canvas Town, near the meatworks, in a domicile erected some time ago by H. Ireland and E. Hodge. It was occupied for some time by Mr. Connolly until his family came down from Orange.*

1st June 1895: *Canvas Town is growing in size, if not in importance. Quite a number of the unmarried workers at the meatworks reside in this salubrious and aristocratic locality, which by the bye, must be a trifle draughty in a season like the present. It is predicted that some of them will strike camp and go into lodgings before the winter is over.*

13th July 1895: *A resident of Canvas Town is to marry a local lass shortly.*

17th August 1895: *Canvas Town is growing and increasing in importance. There is even talk of creating a municipality there. Good old Canvas Town.*

31st August 1895: *Canvas Town stood the test of the wind remarkably well on Sunday. In only one instance was the canvas removed and that was from a portion of Harry Ireland's domicile. Sam Hear has gone down there to lodge. He is evidently keeping in view the day the town is to become a Borough and hopes to have a seat as an alderman. Stacy should have a good show of being elected first Mayor.*

7th September 1895: *By the way, if ever a spark gets in amongst the residences at Canvas Town, there will be a big blaze. A half hour conflagration would render the aristocratic locality, - it is now the Potts Point of Riverstone, absolutely a thing of the past. Truth to tell, if such a fire only produces some new style of architecture, it would not be without its advantages.*

14th September 1895: *Canvas Town residents believe that Fred Sargeant will have a big bid for the Mayorship of that locality.*

30th November 1895: *Canvas Town.....the brush is being cleared, and admirers who travel by train often draw the attention of other passengers in the compartment to the neat cabooses which have been erected around there. One of the residents, it is said, is going in for a two storeyed tent.*

22nd February 1896: *The bushes in the vicinity of Canvas Town are being cleared away. A well known figure of that locality is about to leave for fresh fields and pastures new. This personage, however, does not carry away the champions belt for pugilism, as this was lost a week or so ago, a light weight secured it in very few rounds, which were warm while they lasted.*

18th April 1896: *Things are very quiet in Canvas Town at present. One must naturally come to the conclusion that it will be some time before the place will become a Borough Council. Many different opinions exist as to whom should be the first presiding Mayor. A couple who had good claims have left the locality.*

5th September 1896: *The bush in the vicinity of Canvas Town is becoming clear; another young gentleman has taken up residence there, having made a canvas addition.*

3rd April 1897: *A new building has gone up in Canvas Town and it will improve the appearance of that locality. Steps will probably be taken to have it formed into a Borough Council. The gentleman who had the prior claim to the position of Mayor has taken up his abode elsewhere.*

15th May 1897: *Of late the residents of Canvas Town have been dwindling away. The Mayor leaving has caused others to seek fresh fields and pastures new.*

28th August 1897: *Canvas Town appears to retain a fair number of its inhabitants, and another one has added to its list of residents down there. The contest for the position of Mayor of the Council, will it is expected, be a close one. Several have notified of their intention of seeking the suffrages of the ratepayers.*

This is the last time that Canvas Town was reported on by the Gazette, though on the 26th February 1898 it noted that fire destroyed Perry's tent on Crown Road.

Up until the present day, members of the Riverstone Historical Society have been unable to identify the exact location of Canvas Town. References from the *Gazette* such as 'near the meatworks', 'visible from the train carriages,' 'the bushes being cleared away', and 'Crown Road' clearly indicate the area between the junction of Crown Road and Bourke Street with Riverstone Parade as the probable site. The area was directly opposite the old boiler house.

Other factors which could indicate it as the probable site are:

- The area was level and not subjected to any flooding.
- Their water supply could be obtained from the meatworks.
- The site was opposite their workplace and with the works unfenced, all they had to do to gain access was walk across the railway line.

The area was never fenced, photos taken in the 1930's still show it as cleared open space; it was never fenced until it was subdivided in c1959. The only trees in the nearby area were to be found along the George Street boundary, with a few on the Crown Road corner.

The area continued to be used by others for temporary housing until the late 1950's.(see items on George Arnold and Perce Shepherd)

George Arnold was a long time Yard employee. When he retired in 1927 he was presented with a gold watch and a pair of spectacles, a rather unusual retirement gift in today's world.

George came from Granville and for much of the time he worked at the meatworks he lived in a single room brick shack on the corner of Crown Road and Riverstone Parade. His grandson Tommy Arnold, who worked as a meat inspector at Riverstone from 1956 to 1986, provided the following information.

George reared a family of 9 children, 6 boys and 3 girls and lived in a two storied house near Granville station. He used a horse and sulky to travel between Granville and Riverstone, living in the shack through the week and returning home each weekend.

Nancy Anderson who lived in Bourke Street remembers the shack being occupied by George Arnold, and in later years when it was occupied by Perce Shepherd. Perce worked for many years in the freezers and lived at Freeman's Reach. He travelled down by horse and sulky on Sunday evening and returned home on Friday afternoon. Perce also lived for a time in a shed at the rear of a house in Bourke Street.

Clarrie Neal recalls the shack on the Crown Road corner with its iron roof strapped down by fencing wire attached to two suspended railway sleepers. Maybe this brick shack was the 'new building that will improve the appearance of the locality' the one reported in the Gazette on the 3rd April 1897.

On the other side of Crown Road was a shop owned by Mr. Sutch & Mrs. Coleman who ran a boarding house for the slaughtermen in the 1930's and '40's.