

Camden Residents' Action Group

Incorporated

Camden – Still a Country Town

Website: <http://www.crag.org.au/>

Social media: <https://www.facebook.com/CRAG-Camden-Residents-Action-Group-Inc-1805705173088888/>

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14 December 2016

Mr. Robert Wicks
The Secretary of the Standing Committee
Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney
PO Box Q190
QVB POST OFFICE NSW 1230

Dear Mr Wicks,

Re: Sale Ordinance St John's Camden

As a long established and respected local environmental group in Camden, Camden Residents' Action Group (CRAG) has become a conduit for parishioner and community concern over this proposed highly significant sale ordinance, which presents the intention of selling off the Rectory and slope paddock between it and the Church.

CRAG has been approached by a number of your parishioners with major concerns and community concern about a potential sale is being raised on social media and has led to numerous reports in the local press¹.

¹Daniel Zautsen (8 December, 2016) *St John's Anglican Church in Camden will look to sell off vacant land to fund a new church building* Macarthur Chronicle. Available at:

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/macarthur/st-johns-anglican-church-in-camden-will-look-to-sell-off-vacant-land-to-fund-a-new-church-building/news-story/e75d904c3afa184a2dc107730dc5bf35>

Jess Layt (8 December 2016) *Land sale could pave way for new church building* Camden Macarthur Advertiser Available at:

<http://www.macarthuradvertiser.com.au/story/4345194/land-sale-could-pave-way-for-new-church-building/>

Jess Layt (9 December 2016) *Unique' land a real estate dream* Camden Macarthur Advertiser. Available at:

<http://www.macarthuradvertiser.com.au/story/4346372/unique-land-a-real-estate-dream/?cs=1185>

Jess Layt (9 December 2016) *Parishioner 'dismayed' at potential sale* Camden Macarthur Advertiser . Available at: <http://www.macarthuradvertiser.com.au/story/4346126/parishioner-dismayed-at-potential-sale/?cs=1185>

The commonly held community view is that the Church land was gifted by the Macarthur family to the people of Camden, and that it is a loved and important element of Camden's renowned heritage. CRAG is not arguing in a strict legal sense that the Church does not "own" the land. In any case we do not have the resources to undertake research into the title within the timeframe for objections. It is known that the Rectory was built by James Macarthur (1798-1867)¹ and that later his daughter Elizabeth Macarthur-Onslow (1840-1911) donated £4,000 for its maintenance. The Office of Environment and Heritage² states that the Rectory, including stables and coach house, was constructed with a donation of £1,000 from James and William Macarthur and that the rectory and associated lands remained in the ownership of the Macarthur family up to November 1905, when 3 acres 2 roods and 3 perches were transferred from the Camden Park Estate to the Church of England Property Trust.

What is very clear is that the community, in the social sense of long understood history and usage, has rights over the land.

Annette Macarthur-Onslow, the currently recognised Macarthur family historian, and Phoebe Macarthur-Onslow are of this view and are researching the family archives for documentary evidence that the land and Rectory were intended for the people of Camden in perpetuity, as were Macarthur Park and Onslow Park.

We can relay to you that parishioners and other members of the community who have contacted us, consider that this sale ordinance is at the expense of the welfare of the community and an unconscionable breach of trust placed by the Macarthur family and the community in the Church.

Concerns of a more specific nature raised with CRAG to date may be summarised as follows:

1. Lack of consultation process and input.

CRAG has been and is still being approached by parishioners who are in a state of shock on finding out about the potential sale of this land. They feel that unless they happened to hear about it at a Church service or read the notice placed on the Church door the only means they had of knowing what was afoot was by word of mouth, and now through the media. They are astonished that the Parish Council did not ensure that they were informed and had opportunity for input before a decision was made and funds expended to draw up the ordinance.

The timing (several weeks before the Christmas break), time allowed and process required to raise an objection has also led to widespread criticism of St John's Church, the Reverend and the parish council. The Parishioners who have approached CRAG feel that the Church is trying to slip approval of this ordinance through 'under the radar' of the Church family and the local community.

² Office of Environment and Heritage (2010) *St John's Precinct* Available at: <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=1280070>

2. Heritage significance of the site

Camden is the last remaining country town on the Cumberland Plain with its heritage fabric still largely intact. The Greater Sydney Commission has explicitly planned for Camden Township and its landscapes to be preserved.³ The plan although in draft form for consultation purposes is, according to SW District Commissioner Sheridan Dudley, required to be followed from 21 November 2016, the date of its publication. Note that Camden and St John's takes pride of place on the Plan's cover.

Specifically planned by the Macarthur family, St John's Church, Rectory and surrounding lands are an iconic central focus of this rare intact heritage landscape, which has been recognised as significant at both a state⁴ and national level.ⁱⁱ

The exceptional significance of the St John's Church complex and surrounding landscape has been well documented in many works which were most recently researched and included in our group's 2016 Camden Heritage Study⁵. This Study also includes recent testimonials of renowned eminent historians who fully endorse Camden's uniqueness and heritage value.

It is understood that the St John's precinct is also subject to a conservation management plan.⁶

Advice from the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage is that State heritage significance of the precinct is fully documented.

3. Development impacts in surrounding neighbourhood

The proposed sale ordinance includes the adjoining property 43 Alpha Rd, which will be presumably be used as an entrance to a residential development on the main hill site between the rectory and the Church. Any development and access into Alpha Rd will generate increased traffic movements along Alpha Rd, Forrest Crescent and View Street. This precinct already experiences high traffic/town bypass movements and any increase will have significant and detrimental impact on existing residents. The adjoining View Street heritage conservation area is the narrowest street in the municipality, and currently operates as a frustrating one way only street often requiring traffic to reverse for considerable lengths to enable oncoming traffic to pass. Any increase in traffic flow into this street is not acceptable and will be met with strong community resistance.

³ Greater Sydney Commission (21 November 2016) *Draft South West District Plan* p. 113; p. 115. Available at: http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/draft_south_west_district_plan.pdf

⁴ Office of Environment and Heritage *St John's Church Precinct*. Available at: <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=1280070>

⁵ Camden Residents' Action Group Inc (April 2016) *Heritage Study Camden New South Wales*. Available at: <http://www.crag.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Camden-Heritage-Study-April-2016.pdf>

⁶ Clive Lucas Stapleton and Partners, Architects and Heritage Consultants (2012) *St. John's Anglican Church Precinct*. Available at: <http://www.clsparchitects.com/archives/?works=st-johns-anglican-church-precinct>

Storm events during June 2016 provided residents adjoining the steeply sloping St John's hill site with a clear example of the drainage issues and rapid runoff from the site. Damaging storm runoff from the currently vegetated hill site flows directly into adjoining properties. Any future residential development would only increase hard surfaces and storm runoff into adjoining properties, and even with a drainage easement would pose a major engineering and environmental problem for surrounding properties.

4. Impediments to development

Strong community opposition to the sale of the Rectory and sale and development of the slope paddock is clearly apparent, and this would follow through to any developer insensitive enough to attempt to take on a project in this heritage precinct. This would also be the case if Camden Council attempted to ease the restrictions on development. The reputation of the Church would continue to be besmirched throughout the long period of any sale and development process.

As mentioned above, the Greater Sydney Commission has designated Camden Township, most definitely including St John's Church precinct to be preserved. In any case any development must observe the 7 metre height limit and heritage provisions of the legislated Local Environmental Plan for the Camden Township Heritage Conservation Area and companion Development Control Plan. As well as the many statutory and non-statutory heritage considerations strongly against any slope paddock development, its current B2 Local Centre zoning precludes residential development. Further an attempt to build retirement housing in the glebe area of the Church in 1996 was thrown out in the Land and Environment Court, an important precedent⁷. The Honourable Chief Justice M L Pearlman AM, stated:

"It is abundantly clear that the Camden Township represents a particularly significant and sensitive heritage site in which conservation, involving reuse of buildings or land, must necessarily be approached with considerable care."

The community, a major stakeholder, believes that preservation is the future for Camden; a town close to Sydney with major tourist potential⁸, recognised for its aesthetics and heritage, particularly including the St John's Precinct.

Indeed the original intention of the Macarthur family when dedicating the Church land was for the future benefit of the community and future development of the Church. The difficulty and expense of developing Church buildings on this sloping site is not a justifiable reason to sell the site as prime real estate.

⁷Land and Environment Court (1996) *Gledhill Constructions Pty Limited V. The Council of Camden NSWLEC 120 (19 April 1996)* Available at: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/nsw/NSWLEC/1996/120.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=1996%20gledhill%20camden>

⁸Willis I (2014) *Camden - the best preserved country town on the Cumberland Plain*. NSW Heritage Tourism. Available at: <http://www.heritagetourism.com.au/camden-the-best-preserved-country-town-on-the-cumberland-plain-nsw/>

5. Statements in the press

Concerns have been raised about the factual correctness of some statements by the Rector and Warden reported in the press. For instance these statements in the Camden Macarthur Advertiser article of 8 December 2016 have been questioned :

- *Some funds from the proposed land sale would also be used to carry out essential maintenance on the historic church.*

Response: The proposed ordinance excludes such uses. Government heritage grants have been and can be accessed for funding of St John's restoration works

- *Repair works needed on the church building – listed on both the state and national heritage registers – have been estimated at more than \$250,000.*

Response: This figure is not evidenced and seems unrealistic. The total cost of repair to the Church roof for example was \$10,000 and Church, government grants and donations need to be deducted.

- *Reverend Tony Galea and church warden Steve Lardner told the Advertiser their congregation needed a new “contemporary worship centre” on the grounds to ease overcrowding at their most popular services.*

Response: The number of services is contracting – from 4 to 3 and none challenge the capacity of the building. The Church can be used in other configurations and a number of available pews are not in the Church.

- *Our plan is to supplement the congregation’s donations with the money raised from selling church property which, incidentally, is no longer used by the church ministry and hasn’t been used for 170 years”*

Response: The Rectory property is rented and should yield a minimum of \$25,000 dollars per year to St John’s ministry.

The slope paddock is regularly (at least weekly) used by the Church for car parking. The decision not to use the land for other purpose is by choice, for example Carols were held on the slope c.10 years ago. The slope/paddock is used for parking for weddings, funerals, large baptism services, overlapping services and activities in Macarthur Park, also donated by the Macarthur family to the people of Camden. The community often observes cars parked all the way across the paddock to the Rectory.

- ...church leaders had investigated the possibility of building on the vacant land and discovered it would cost “two to three times” more than building on land behind the church.

Response: The proposed building was 3 to 4 times the size. However the slope paddock site does have physical development constraints which would add to its development cost. Any developer would be aware of its steepness and drainage issues, and these as well as regulatory and legal constraints would need to be factored into any price offer made for the land.

6. Sustainability of Church finances.

We note that in the in the 1970’s St John's Church sold off a significant tract of land leading down to the Nepean River, which created the existing Forrest Crescent residential area. This sale would have resulted in significant return to the Church, however would not have had the same potential impact of selling off land immediately between the Rectory and Church building.

With fund raising for the new building/auditorium unsuccessful, the Parishioners and local community have every right to question a financial management strategy which seems to rely on a non-sustainable process of ‘selling the farm’.

There has already been substantial reputational damage to St John's and the wider Anglican Church administration over this issue. The destruction of priceless heritage for questionable expansion of the St John's parish when the growth is happening in surrounding new urban areas is also an obvious reason why Parishioners and the community have become doubtful of the integrity and openness of what has been understood to be an institution that supports communities and their welfare.

Representations to CRAG and the anxiety of St John's parishioners are a very clear indication how poorly this whole process has been handled by the Church. Ultimately, a Church is first and foremost part of the local community; should this proposed sale ordinance proceed and the land sold for development, the reputational loss for the Church will be irretrievable in the eyes of the local community and an iconic heritage landscape will be forever lost to future generations.

Yours sincerely,

Glenda Davis

President
Camden Residents' Action Group Inc.

Endnotes

i

From: Macarthur papers – PMK collection. Letter Book 1892-93

Elizabeth Macarthur-Onslow to A.J. Onslow Thompson [1892]

“In reply to yours of 29 October ”
Baileys Hotel

“I will reply to your inquiry re – the conveyance of land to the church. **No Glebe land was ever conveyed.**

My father had a dispute with the Bishop as to arrangements and he changed his intentions then built the parsonage instead of conveying any land.”

P. Macarthur-Onslow
Elizabeth M Onslow

ii

John the Evangelist Anglican Church Menangle Rd	Camden, NSW, Australia	(Registered) Register of the National Estate (Non-statutory archive)
St Johns Anglican Church Group Menangle Rd	Camden, NSW, Australia	(Registered) Register of the National Estate (Non-statutory archive)

St Johns Hill and John Street Conservation Area	Camden, NSW, Australia	(Registered) Register of the National Estate (Non-statutory archive)
St Johns Rectory and Stables	Menangle Rd Camden, NSW, Australia	(Registered) Register of the National Estate (Non-statutory archive)

Available at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl>
 Details of items can be accessed by clicking on Item name.