

Varro Ville Homestead

Varro Ville is located on a spur of land of outstanding natural beauty known as the Scenic Hills. These hills run from the north west of Campbelltown towards Camden via the old Cowpasture Road along which many well-known figures of Sydney's early colonial society set up their country estates. The original grant of 1000 acres was made by Governor Macquarie to Dr. Robert Townson in 1810. Townson was a Doctor of Civil Laws and the most educated man in the colony when he arrived in 1807. He spoke five languages, had studied at several universities in Europe, and as a gentleman natural scientist was a published author and the first to bring a large private library and chemical laboratory equipment to the colony. His portrait by Augustus Earle resides in the Mitchell library. He named his estate after the Roman agricultural scholar Marcus Terentius Varro (116-37 BC) and used the Roman model of 'trenching' advocated by Varro to configure his vines over a vast area, the only known example in Australia and still visible today. After his death in 1827, Varro Ville was owned by a number of colonial luminaries including the explorer Captain Charles Sturt who proclaimed Varro Ville the model for water conservation essential for agricultural expansion in Australia. Varro Ville was also owned by the first Postmaster General of NSW James Raymond, and NSW Supreme Court Judge Alfred Cheeke.

It was Cheeke who built the current house (*aka* Varro Ville Homestead) in 1858-1859 within a few yards of the earlier home built by Townson and enlarged by Sturt. The earlier house was last noted in an advertisement of 1876 but no longer exists. The architectural firm of Weaver and Kemp were engaged to design the new house. Weaver was the former Colonial Architect, replacing Blakely when the latter left the post to design the Sydney University buildings. Weaver had been trained in England by the distinguished engineer I.K. Brunel, and as such was an engineer-architect and late colonial classicist in popular demand. Varro Ville is Weaver's most substantial single-storey house. Like Weaver's other houses, the form of Varro Ville is a 'U' shape with large service wings enclosing a courtyard and underground water tank at the rear. Internally, Weaver was fond of the cruciform device. A transverse hall links the wings and its central intersection with the front hall is articulated by an apse. The landscape legacy left by the erudite Townson and Sturt presented Weaver with a dream commission. Large windows and multiple French doors allowed Weaver to incorporate a pre-existing landscape park into his plan with stunning pastoral views from the reception rooms. Huge figs and hoop pines complete the naturalistic garden which has evolved, largely unhindered, for two hundred years, creating arguably the finest example remaining in NSW of a house sited in a colonial version of a Humphry Repton landscape park.

In 1973 Varro Ville Homestead was controversially subdivided from its outbuildings and agricultural lands onto eight acres. It is now the home of Jacqui Kirkby and Peter Gibbs, who have sought to retain there the sense of a more genteel former age. After decades of lobbying, in 2019 the Homestead's state heritage listing was extended over a further 200 acres in recognition of Varro Ville's significance to the people of NSW. Sadly it is now under threat from a massive Crown cemetery following a controversial spot-rezoning and development approval of the newly listed land.