

A Gentleman's Park

BY CAROL MANSFIELD



It was Captain James Stirling, Western Australia's founding governor who, in 1829, first selected the estate of 400 acres (1620 hectares) on the banks of the Swan River, about 5 miles (13km) upstream from Perth. Having led a survey party upriver in 1827, Stirling may well have remembered this well-watered land between the Swan and Helena Rivers.

Both Woodbridge and Guildford were named by Stirling for his wife Ellen's family property, 'Woodbridge', whose garden also stretched down to the river at Guildford in the English county of Surrey.

Nearly 150 years later it is still possible to visualise the

gentleman's park at a turn of the river commanding a view along two extensive reaches [with] the land in front of it being all meadow land, very beautifully studded with forest trees.¹

Some of the ancient forest trees remain in the form of flooded gums (*Eucalyptus rudis*), still 'studding' the river flats below the grand Victorian mansion and still a very peaceful picture.

By 1831 Stirling had a 'little cottage ornée' on the property which he and his family used as

a country retreat.² When Stirling left the infant colony in 1839 Woodbridge was leased until 273 acres (110 hectares) of the estate was purchased by Charles Harper in 1883.

A man of talent

Harper was born in Toodyay, Western Australia, in 1842, his father being a barrister who emigrated and later trained as an Anglican minister. It is said that the young Charles left home at the age of 16 to make his way in the world. This he accomplished in no small measure becoming 'explorer, pastoralist, pearler, agriculturalist, inventor, educationist, newspaper proprietor and member of parliament'.³ Harper showed an early interest in natural history, supplying botanical specimens to Baron von Mueller, as well as providing hospitality to Ellis Rowan when she was painting Western Australian wildflowers.

Charles Harper was elected to the Legislative Council in 1879, marrying and settling in Guildford in the same year. He also purchased the daily newspaper *The West Australian* that year and founded the weekly *Western Mail* six years later, intending it to serve the rural community. At the same time, and even before the Woodbridge house was completed in 1885, he was developing orchards and vineyards on both sides of the river.

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Thomas Price, nurseryman and partner in Woodbridge Nurseries, aged 80 years, c. 1945. Photo: Courtesy Carol Mansfield

Thomas Price

The Woodbridge orchards were rapidly acquiring a reputation for excellence when, shortly after the turn of the century, experienced nurseryman Thomas Price arrived in the colony seeking work. At 21 years of age, Price had spent ten years in the horticultural industry, having been employed by both James Veitch, and James Laing, nurserymen of London.

Price was originally employed as gardener at Woodbridge but by the mid 1890s, when the economic future of the colony appeared more assured, Harper invited him to become a partner in the business, trading as C. Harper and T. Price at 'Woodbridge Nurseries'.

As an active parliamentarian holding a number of public positions Harper was held in high esteem in the colony. Price, too, quickly established a reputation for fair and conscientious dealing, travelling several hundred miles on horseback each year in order to visit clients in the developing orchards of the cooler south-west. In 1896, during a visit to the estate, members of the Agricultural Bureau were impressed by

a large and well-appointed orchard . . . in full bearing . . . From the broad verandahs of Woodbridge the visitors had a view of the verdant fruit trees, the Swan River and the sparkling cascade of the artesian bore.⁵

A nursery catalogue of this time shows the main emphasis on fruit trees and vines, with an interesting collection of roses. As many as 62 varieties of apples are listed, as well as numerous vines, citrus and stone fruit. This was an era of agricultural experimentation in Western Australia, on which Charles Harper thrived and which gave him the opportunity, through his newspapers, to discuss aspects of the fruit growing industry. When, in 1899, Price left Woodbridge to run the now well-known Illawarra orchard in the hills at Karragullen, Harper went into partnership with his eldest son, Walter, as the 'Woodbridge Nursery Co. Ltd'.

Ferndale

In 1906, ever on the alert to spot a business opportunity which would further the agricultural industry, Harper opened what might be described as a satellite orchard nursery on a large, farming property called Ferndale at the tiny hamlet of Balingup, in the

south-west of the state. His intention, with two partners, was to develop an experimental orchard of mixed fruit trees, with a view to subdividing the land at a later date.

The nursery at Ferndale was established by Albert Haines, a young man who was already employed by Harper at Woodbridge. He was sent down to prepare the land for 20,000 apple and pear stocks from Victoria, which were budded preparatory to being sold as two-year old trees. Walter Harper closed the Ferndale nursery in 1914, Haines having left the previous year to develop his own property. The 'Woodbridge Nursery Co. Ltd' closed in 1915 and Ferndale was subdivided and sold in 1920.

Neglect & redemption

After Charles Harper's death in 1912 his wife and daughters continued to live at Woodbridge until, in 1921, the house was leased for use as the Woodbridge House Preparatory School. Although the gardens suffered little change then, and the farm continued to operate, this signalled a long period of decline and neglect. From 1942 until 1964 the house became the Guildford Women's Home; it was then used as a high school annexe until 1968, with the demolition of the house even being contemplated. Eventually the property was vested in the National Trust and after very extensive repairs and restoration was opened to the public in 1970.

Woodbridge House was intended as a family home (Harper and his wife had 10 children) and is as impressive today as when it was described in 1884 as 'the handsomest private residence in the Colony'⁶ although one could wish for more expansive grounds than the 1.25 acres (0.54 hectare) now remaining.

The garden today

The main entry, terminating in a carriage circle, has been in continual use since the house was built, and one tall palm tree marking the original entrance also survives. An ancient olive can be found near the jetty, but this has evidently been severely 'controlled' recently. The avenue of spotted gums (*Eucalyptus maculata*) probably dates from the 1960s where it seems to have replaced an earlier line of trees. The replanted gardens are modest, as was always the intention, with the original area of ornamentals, and the artesian bore to the west of the house having been lost to the property by the new boundary fence.

Although suburbia has overtaken most of James Stirling's 'gentleman's park' the vistas across the river today still provide glimpses of the vineyards which his far-sighted successor, Charles Harper, envisaged over 100 years ago.

Carol Mansfield is a local historian with a passion for plants and gardens. She lives in the Darling Range outside Perth.

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Woodbridge House.
Photo: Courtesy Carol Mansfield

Endnotes

¹ An opinion expressed in 1822 by a visitor to the Colony, quoted in D.C. Cowan 'The Building of Woodbridge', in *Early Days, The Journal and Proceedings of the Western Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 1, pt 8 (1930)

² *ibid.*

³ F.R. Mercer, *The Life of Charles Harper of Woodbridge*, Perth 1958, p. iii.

⁴ Western Australia. Bureau of Agriculture, *The West Australian Settler's Guide and Farmer's Handbook*, Part I, Perth, 1897, p. 160 (Harper had put down one of the first artesian bores in the colony.)

⁵ Charles Harper had previously opened a small school at Woodbridge in 1896, which was later transferred to a separate building, eventually becoming Guildford Grammar School.

⁶ Caption to a painting of Woodbridge by F.W. Sears, reproduced in *The Inquirer*, 29 October 1884, in Conservation Plan.

1908 catalogue cover and letterhead Woodbridge Nurseries.
Courtesy: John Viska

