



Jacqui Kirkby and Peter Gibbs
Varro Ville
St Andrews Road
VARROVILLE NSW 2566

14 April 2016

Dear Jacqui and Peter,

(5 pages)

RE RECONCILIATION OF THE CATHOLIC METROPOLITAN CEMETERIES TRUST (CMCT) MASTER PLAN PROPOSAL WITH THE ASSESSED CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF VARRO VILLE'S CONTEXTUAL LANDSCAPE

As the principal author of a current study (with architectural colleague Peter Phillips) that is reviewing the curtilage of Varro Ville homestead and its integral outbuilding group, I write to you to explain the essence of the findings of the study (which is currently nearing completion) along with a brief reconciliation with the CMCT landscape master plan proposal for the lands comprising part of the former Varro Ville estate.

As you are aware, the current situation with regard to Varro Ville is that there is a listing for the immediate homestead area (Lot 21) on the State Heritage Register (SHR), yet surrounding areas of the former estate that are historically, visually and physically integral to the homestead area are excluded from the listing. This obvious disparity is widely acknowledged, in the light of the clear evidence, to be both illogical and inconsistent. The National Trust of Australia (NSW) recognised this in 1976 as did Campbelltown Council's recent Heritage Study review (Paul Davies P/L, Campbelltown Heritage Study, 2011, Recommendation 7). The CMCT master plan proposal provides a Staging Plan that also acknowledges the inadequacy of the current curtilage status by proposing an expanded area shown as a 'heritage curtilage' beyond Lot 21. Unfortunately the expanded curtilage offered in the CMCT proposal bears no demonstrable relationship to the actual site evidence. That is, in the face of the evidence, the CMCT's offered 'heritage curtilage' is no more logical or consistent than the present SHR area.

So what is this evidence that testifies to the site's history and suggests a more appropriate expanded curtilage? These important site attributes are listed below:-

- * The substantially intact 1850s homestead and its integral outbuilding group (including early and mid-19th century structures) can still be appreciated within an **embracing open pastoral landscape** that maintains a contextual consistency of over 200 years. This is now very rare within the Campbelltown LGA (only Mount Gilead has similar qualities with an extensive rural land holding) and is now rare within the Cumberland Plain. The current Curtilage Study makes it clear that the Varro Ville landscape is of exceptional significance at a State level.
- * Through its deliberate siting, orientation and architectural design, the 1850s homestead of colonial architect William Weaver, as well as numerous places within the immediate grounds, engages with picturesque views across the western valley with a focal point on the existing dams (though, previously, a chain of ponds noted by James Meehan in 1809)(**Figure 1**). The reverse views are also important in an appreciation of the Varro Ville estate core within its traditional open rural landscape (**Figure 2**). The CMCT's proposed 'heritage curtilage' does not take these critical views into account.
- * Additionally, important scenic views remain to and from the eastern valley that interpret how the pre-1850s estate core engaged with its immediate landscape setting (**Figure 3**). The CMCT's proposed 'heritage curtilage' does not take these critical views into account.
- * There remain within the traditional Varro Ville landscape numerous attributes that testify to the earliest decades of the former estate prior to the building of the 1850s homestead. These are expanded in what follows.
- * An extensive area (at least 20 hectares) of colonial vineyard trenching remains across this landscape – actually three times the area shown and acknowledged in the Urbis CMP - and is readily demonstrated as such (c/- the 1956 aerial photography). This highly significant feature is shown to be earlier than the 1840s - in fact most likely 1810s to 1820s – by a simple analysis of the 1850 William Shone survey and a reconciliation of the earlier carriage drive (which is **not** c. 1809 as stated in the CMCT master plan) and an existing fence alignment that are both

GEOFFREY BRITTON ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN & HERITAGE CONSULTANT

ABN 75 869 266 782

indicated by Shone. Further research in the current Curtilage Study shows that this trenching is likely to be that of the original grantee Dr Robert Townson using assigned convict labour. The extant early vineyard is not comprised of terracing as such (although some undulations on steeper slopes give this appearance), rather, it is contoured trenching. This means that, for those areas where the trenching is not immediately visible, unless an extensive area has been excavated to a depth of 1m or more (unlikely), evidence of the trenching is likely to still remain sub-surficially. In other words the full extent of vineyard shown in the 1956 aerial photography probably remains intact across the site and therefore constitutes an important colonial archaeological resource. This is ignored in the Urbis CMP. While the CMP acknowledges the vineyard remnants to the north of the homestead as highly significant, it fails to acknowledge the true extent of this feature. The unusual extent and early dating of this feature make it a resource with potentially exceptional research significance. This has also been ignored in the Urbis CMP. The CMCT's proposed 'heritage curtilage' does not take the full extent (if any) of the vineyard into account.

* There remains a remarkably intact and extensive network of colonial-era water conservation systems. James Meehan's 1809 survey of the original grant described a chain of ponds along the western valley and this drainage system essentially remains. Former owners of Varro Ville from the 1830s (Thomas Wills and Charles Sturt) are known to have expanded on this natural system by installing many dams within both western and eastern valleys around the homestead core (as well as in the northern half of the original grant). Sturt specifically cited the Varro Ville dam network when writing about the vital necessity of water conservation in South Australia. Some of these probably remain. Some have been subsumed as part of larger dams from the mid-20th century. Others may also remain but need to be investigated archaeologically. The survival of this evidence is of considerable significance. Additionally, the nature of the contoured trenching around the homestead core also testifies to a very early attempt to conserve water by capturing rainfall and surface runoff into the trenches of the vineyard. The full significance of this agricultural achievement is yet to be explored in depth. What is clear though, is that it is also of considerable significance. The CMCT's proposed 'heritage curtilage' does not take the full extent of these colonial water-conservation features into account.

* There remains layout in the form of roads and fences that can be dated to the 1840s at the latest but may be earlier. These are documented on William Shone's 1850 survey and include the surviving section of the carriage drive. The former access off St Andrews Road is known to have been in use before 1950 and may also be a 19th century line of access to the estate core (St Andrews Road was used to access the Cow Pasture Road before 1850). The CMCT's proposed 'heritage curtilage' does not take the early fence line from the outbuilding group or the St Andrews Road access drive into account.

* Also connected with the remaining carriage drive is evidence of deliberate landscape planning that testifies to an 18th century British aesthetic in the manipulation of the Antipodean landscape into a rural park. (This aesthetic is championed in the work of Capability Brown and espoused in the widely influential writings of Humphry Repton and John Claudius Loudon.) The retained clumps of old woodland trees along the arrival route, along with the early dams to enrich the scenery, convey clear conformity to established principles of estate landscape planning with an emphasis on the picturesque view sequence from the main carriage drive. This is further reinforced by the note on Shone's 1850 plan that at least part of the drive had an avenue. The survival of this evidence requires further research but is flagged as being of potential exceptional cultural significance because of its rarity. None of this rare feature, as an essential component of the estate core's setting, is taken into account in the CMCT's proposed 'heritage curtilage'.

* Behind the homestead, a major landscape feature is shown on the 1947 aerial photography running down the western slope towards the creek. It is characterised by a number of orthogonal compartments. This form of layout is very similar to typical colonial kitchen gardens and orchards of an ambitious scale. Townson is known to have had one which he told Lachlan Macquarie he installed in the 1810s. If this feature is the remnants of Townson's famous kitchen garden then this site is of considerable archaeological interest. This has also been ignored in the Urbis CMP and nor does the CMCT's proposed 'heritage curtilage' take the archaeological potential of this former feature into account.

All of these attributes, along with various others, help inform the cultural significance of the Varro Ville landscape which has been rigorously assessed as having exceptional value at a State level under all but one (social) of the Office of Environment and Heritage significance assessment criteria. That is, the enveloping cultural landscape beyond the homestead (and beyond Lot 21) can be readily shown to hold cultural significance at a State level. This clearly justifies the immediate Varro Ville estate landscape (comprising Lot 22, Lot B, Lot 4 and Lot 1 DP 218016) for listing on the SHR and for the existing inadequate curtilage to be expanded to encompass these additional lots (as a minimum).

What are the conservation implications of this assessment of significance and the clear eligibility of the broader landscape for SHR listing? The most fundamental implication is that the immediate cultural landscape (comprising Lots 21, 22, B, 4 and Lot 1 DP 218016) encompassing the former estate core should be conserved in its entirety as the minimum heritage curtilage to preserve the critical setting of Varro Ville.

Looking through the CMCT's master plan proposals (as described in the material by Florence Jaquet) I have serious concerns about how the cemetery would interact with the cultural landscape attributes summarised above. In short, I am unable to see how the nature of the cemetery environment would preserve the intrinsic rural and open pastoral landscape without cluttering it with a substantial and extensive network of roads and pathways, sculpture, structures, signs, plaques, monuments and plantations. I am also at a loss to understand how a considerable number of grave excavations (let alone those for civil engineering and building works) would preserve the extensive area of exceptionally significant colonial-era archaeological resources. Beyond these overall concerns I offer the following observations:-

* A closely mown and irrigated lawn landscape (c/- Figures 42 and 43 of the CMCT master plan) is not the traditional landscape character of the Varro Ville estate – no such aesthetic existed in its 200 years as a cultural landscape. It has always been a roughly grassed rural landscape that reflects the drier Australian country aesthetic rather than an English one. The two are entirely different.

* The master plan proposal is illustrated with many images (from elsewhere) and computer graphics of scenes that convey an enclosed and intimate setting. The plan at Figure 50 of the CMCT master plan shows the intention to form a network of 'burial rooms'. By creating a great number of these types of spaces, the existing expansive open and simple landscape would be substantially changed. Historical records indicate that the Varro Ville estate was largely cleared by the mid-19th century and photographic evidence shows that it remained so for much of the 20th century. Vigorous regrowth of woodland copses and the infestation of African Olives are more recent phenomena. The proper conservation of the Varro Ville landscape will entail retaining its traditional broad open spaces with woodland thickets kept more to the edges. This will ensure historic views across the Varro Ville landscape are retained. The opportunity for great depth in its field of vision (especially to and from the homestead precinct) is one of the highly valued assets of the place (and likely has been since the 1810s). The introduction of numerous landscape 'rooms' throughout the site would visually break up this simple landscape and result in the loss of critical views as well as change the intrinsic character of the landscape. This would result in considerable heritage impact.

* The CMCT master plan proposes an extensive network of principal roads (with kerbs and gutters?) throughout the site. It also states that further subsidiary roads and paths would be necessary in order to ensure that access to grave/memorial sites would be no further than 50m at any one place. The picture this then paints is of a landscape laced with a considerable network of accessways of concrete and bitumen along with earthwork modifications to accommodate them. This has the potential to seriously impact on both the critical view lines from and to the homestead core as well as the extensive area of colonial-era archaeological resources. It would be difficult to still appreciate the broad pastoral landscape around the homestead with a network of anachronistic roads and paths crisscrossing it.

* The master plan proposal also features numerous built elements including sculptures, structures (including boardwalks), signs, plaques and monuments etc. Other funerary structures are not specifically mentioned but the future prospect of crypts, vaults and mausolea may be expected as there remains a demand for these commercially desirable forms of interment by various ethnic groups. It is difficult to see how the introduction of these kinds of structures within a simple rural landscape would not significantly impact on its cultural value.

* The dams are generally visible from the homestead core as they (in their previous forms) likely were well into the 19th century. Certainly the old chain of ponds would have been a feature of the very early Varro Ville estate landscape. The master plan report shows various new structures and landscape treatments around the existing dams that suggest that it would be difficult to see them from the homestead precinct. Given the importance of these traditional views, such an intervention would amount to an unacceptable kind of heritage impact.

The CMCT master plan is inherently incompatible with the Varro Ville landscape. It cannot be otherwise given the nature of what is proposed which is to effectively and substantially alter the way the rural landscape has been historically perceived. Its traditional open pastoral character would no longer be recognisable and it would necessarily entail the removal of exceptionally significant attributes of the estate landscape that have the potential to reveal important information about Australian colonial culture.

There appears to be little capacity in the nature of this master plan proposal to accommodate the special conservation needs of the Varro Ville landscape. It requires its longstanding expansive open fields to be retained as such enabling its critical views to remain unencumbered but this proposal has no capacity to do so – it overrides the broad spaces and divides it up with a network of confined, enclosed spaces. The site requires the retention and conservation of its significant and extensive colonial landscape features and archaeology but many (if not most) of these would be expunged for the sake of an unnecessary cemetery development that is yet to establish its justification in regional (or even local) planning terms.

The areas of rural landscape surrounding Varro Ville homestead and its outbuildings are shown to amply qualify for listing on the State Heritage Register. It is my observation that the CMCT proposal takes neither the SHR-listed Lot 21 site nor the integrally related surrounding landscape (assessed as having State heritage significance)

into any convincing account. There is no doubt that this proposal would seriously compromise the many attributes of the Varro Ville landscape that testify to its exceptional cultural value. It would no longer be a landscape of State heritage value. This would have consequences too for the 1850s homestead which would be marooned and closeted in isolation from the integral landscape that gives it its critical historic context.

In my professional opinion the CMCT proposal is intrinsically incompatible with the essential conservation objective of maintaining a rural and open pastoral cultural landscape as the only appropriate setting for the Varro Ville estate core.

Yours sincerely

Geoffrey Britton
BLArch (Canb), M.I.COMOS
Principal

NB. One page of Figures follow.



Figure 1 A view from the northern wing of the 1850s homestead illustrating one of the traditional views to the western valley and demonstrating how the estate core is inextricably linked to the former estate landscape beyond (probably as intended by William Weaver in his location, orientation and design of the house).



Figure 2 View from St Andrews Road (near the Priory entry) looking to the Varro Ville homestead core.



Figure 3 View of the eastern valley from Lot 21.