

The Harrower Compound (Bexley)

May 2017



The sale in 2017 of Jack and Jean Burchmore's marital home at **22 Abercorn Street, Bexley** (ultimately from the estate of our late beloved Michelle Lynne Baltins) ended a 126-year continuous connection of the Harrower family/descendants with Bexley and what may whimsically be dubbed **The Harrower Compound**, though no-one who lived in it would have called it that.

The Harrower Compound covered four contiguous blocks comprising 9 and 11 Highgate Street, and 22 and 24 Abercorn Street in the southern Sydney suburb of Bexley, NSW.

When Robert Harrower bought **9 Highgate Street, Bexley** in 1891, he and his family was living and working in Richmond Victoria. Bexley was then a relatively new suburb with only 1,138 houses in the entire Rockdale municipality area since being opened for housing development after the railway reached nearby Hurstville in 1884. It is unlikely that Robert foresaw the whole block of 4 contiguous lots being ultimately owned and occupied by his own family. But as this timeline reveals, he was to be surrounded by the families of three of his children, including seven grandsons and a granddaughter, during his lifetime.

The four houses were hand-built by Robert Harrower (a qualified bricklayer and carpenter) with the assistance of his bricklayer sons (Donald and David), Robert jnr (carpenter and former bricklayer) and William (engineer, and fitter & turner). Significant sandstone retaining walls and sandstone foundation blocks were fashioned by traditional stonemasonry techniques from sandstone quarried from outcrops situated on these sites.

At the time of writing this article, only three people (all octogenarians) who grew up in these homes survive: Ken and Noel Burchmore, and Joan Bowie (nee Harrower).

9 Highgate Street, Bexley: "Alva Glen"



9 Highgate Street, Bexley (c. 1916)

1891	Robert Harrower purchased 9 Highgate Street as vacant land
1894	New home construction was completed with Robert & Jane Harrower, Mary Jane Wright Hutton, Annie, Robert Jr., William & Donald moving in. They named their house, "Alva Glen", presumably after the spectacular Alva Glen that cuts into the Ochils immediately north of the town of Alva, being from where Jane hailed and where Jane and Robert were married.
1895	David Ogilvie McDonald Harrower born at home
1898	Sarah Margaret Harrower ("Sadie") born at home
1900	Municipality of Bexley was officially named and incorporated.
1901	Mary Jane Wright Hutton left home as Mrs Forest Sydney Taylor
1903	Jeannie Alveen Harrower ("Jean") born at home
1910	Allen Edward Harrower (aka Dexter) joins the family
1915	Whilst relaxing in the backyard, Robert Snr. was shot in the leg from an accidental revolver discharge by a neighbour from Smith Street across the gully.
1919	Annie Ferguson Harrower died in hospital from Spanish flu.
1919	William Hutton Harrower married Eileen Mary Campbell
1920	Sadie Harrower left home as Mrs. William Thomas Raine
1924	Jean married John ("Jack") Thomas Burchmore
1929	Jane Carneby Harrower (nee Hutton) died, aged 67
1938	Robert Harrower Snr died, aged 78
1940	Robert's estate sold the property to James and Jesse Stewart



Jane Harrower¹



Bob and Jane Harrower²



The Camden Vale Depot milk cart delivered milk to Bexley residents during the early 1920s. The local 'milko' would pour milk from a small bulk tank in his van straight into their jug. Sitting next to the 'milko' is (we think) Allen Edward Harrower.



¹ The date of this photo is unknown. Some have surmised it may have been taken in the late 1890s.

² The date of this photo is unknown. However, it is thought that it may have been taken during the mid-to-late 1920s.

22 Abercorn Street, Bexley: "Langour"



24, 22 and 20 Abercorn Street (c. 1930)

1913	<p>Robert Harrower purchased the site as vacant land.</p>  <p><i>Title Deed showing transfers to Robert Harrower and then Jack Burchmore</i></p>
1925	<p>Robert transferred the property to his new son-in-law, Jack Burchmore</p>
1926	<p>Jack took out a mortgage for £720, presumably to fund the construction of the new home.</p>
1927	<p>New home construction completed with Jack and Jean Burchmore moving in, along with their 3-year old son, John Robert (Jack jnr). Jack and Jeannie decided to name their house "Langour", being the name of a narrow short street in Devenside near Tillicoultry, Scotland (just off a road known as The Glen) in which Robert lived with his grandmother, Catherine (then a widow), after Robert had been orphaned before the age of 10 following the early deaths of both his parents from tuberculosis.</p>  <p><i>Original house sign</i></p>
1929	<p>Kenneth George Burchmore ("Ken") born at home</p>
1931	<p>Noel William Burchmore ("Noel") born at home</p>
1955	<p>Young Jack married Yvonne Estelle Stewart</p>

1957	Ken relocated to Bangkok, Thailand
1960	Noel married Yvonne Dawn Martin
1974	Jean Alveen Burchmore died at home, aged 71
1985	John Thomas Burchmore died at home, aged 86
1986	John Robert Burchmore bought out his brothers' entitlements to become sole owner
1994	Michelle Lynne Burchmore purchased a 50% interest in the property from her father, Jack jnr.
2004	Michelle bought out the other 50% interest in the property from her father
2015	Michelle, now Mrs Baltins, died, aged 58.
2017	Michelle's estate sold the property to a young couple, Mr Hamke and Miss Tawbe

Ken recalled that:

"At the rear of #22, Dad had built a fernery, replete with a grape vine. I suppose he thought they were an edible variety, but never were, but choko , rhubarb and parsley seemed to be always growing in abundance. We also had Granny Smith, blood plum, figs (near the air raid shelter) and Worthington plum and guavas in the middle. The fernery also gave us access to the Raine's gate, constructed by Uncle Bill and used habitually. Remember in those days, Highgate Street was on the edge of Bexley gully. So that small gate gave us a short cut during our Bexley 'barefoot days'."

Ken's recollections about World War II included:

"Once again, thoughts of Bexley 'barefoot days' abound. This time, fighting the battle on the home front. Jack was 16 or so, thus self-driven to emulate Dad who he asked about how best to help safeguard the family under the threat of invasion? Dad, being an air-raid warden at Crown Crystal Glass and no doubt aware of his responsibilities in repelling the 'yellow hordes', suggested 'Build an air raid shelter, of course'. Luckily, Bexley was never bombed. So, Jack's wartime effort wasn't tested under fire. In fact, the family didn't set foot in it: it was small and devoid of any ventilation that I can recall. But its main shortcoming was drainage and, despite floor boards, it kept on filling with rain water and was abandoned - no doubt after The Coral Sea victory had turned the tide."

24 Abercorn Street, Bexley



24 Abercorn Street, Bexley (2017)

1925	William Hutton Harrower purchased the site, being a double-sized lot that occupied the entire distance between Abercorn Street and Highgate Street.
1927	William subdivided the Lot into two lots and sold what became 11 Highgate Street to his brother-in-law, William ("Bill") Thomas Raine (Sadie's husband).
1928	New home construction completed with William and Eileen Mary (née Campbell) Harrower moving in, along with sons William Ross and John ("Jack") Raymond.
1928	Joan Eileen born
1942	William married Eileen Beryl South
1948	Jack married Joan Marie Alexander
1948	Joan married Allan Frederick Phillis
1971	William Hutton Harrower died at home, aged 81.
1980	Eileen Mary Harrower died at Loreto Nursing Home (Strathfield), aged 88

Ken recalled that:

"Uncle Bill Harrower had a row of fruit trees always heavy with sweet plums just over our paling fence. Somehow, we 'accidentally' hit lots of balls over and were forced to hop the fence."

11 Highgate Street, Bexley: “Neiwalla”



11 Highgate Street, Bexley (2017)

1927	Bill Raine purchased the site from his brother-in-law, William Hutton Harrower.
1928	New home construction completed with Bill and Sadie Raine moving in, along with their sons, Neil William and Wallace Robert (“Wal”). The Raines decided to name their house “Neiwalla” after their two boys, Neil and Wallace.
1947	Neil married Noni Irene Ferguson
1951	Wal relocated to Auckland NZ
1988	Sadie died, aged 88 and Bill died within a few months, aged 91.
1989	Property sold to third party

Noel’s memories about #11 include:

“I too was a frequent visitor. I recall wintry Sundays when I would pop over and partake of Aunt Sadie’s gem-scones and whatever was on offer. She could make a great sponge cake! Oh, the sisters were very good cooks.”

Ken’s memories also begin with gastronomic reminiscences:

“#11 Highgate has a wealth of happy memories for me. In fact, it was my second home and Aunt Sadie’s rissoles still figure prominently. The two sisters, who were only two years apart, shared a life-long affinity that endures between our families to this day. Right up to Mum’s untimely death, Sadie would take the shortcut at the intersection of the two lots via the gate that Bill had cleverly provided and swap notes on her daily expedition to the Forest Road shopping.

Despite the spread of eleven years between Neil and Noel, the five cousins were pretty close, particularly Wal and Jack, during childhood. Each of us had his own gang of mates, but the ties and contact between #22 and #11 were very strong. The years went by and Wal and Jack would put up with me for my first games of golf at Bexley Municipal Golf Course. I

remember them well, astride the pillion on Jack's BSA SilverStar with two skinny golf bags (persimmon driver, 3,5,7 irons and a putter) on my back, arriving at the course, putting a ball in the rack and on the starter's command, driving into a heavy fog, often losing the precious ball - always one of those soft, English size Dunlop 65's that cut so easily. Any quick study of the hole layout shows that it's on a very tight 54 acres -so tight that I once drew blood with a sliced 5 iron to the face of a golfer 2 holes over! He was really p***ed and threatened to clock me.

At 12 years of age, Uncle Bill Raine took me under his wing at the .22 rifle range down at the west end of Highgate Street. Each Saturday, we would tramp down, he with his Mossberg slung over the shoulder. For some years, I had to be content with one of the lousy Club rifles which were .303, rechambered for the small-bore calibre, but then gravitated to a decent target rifle. Eventually, I outgrew the Bexley Saturdays and took on 'big bore' at Anzac military range and .22 competition at night.

Sadie and Bill, like Darby and Joan shared a long life together and I'm glad that I was able to share those early years with them."

20 Abercorn Street, Bexley

This property (pictured above) was also temporarily part of the Harrower Compound, but for different reasons that deserve a mention.

Jack Burchmore Snr bought 20 Abercorn Street on 24 June 1968 (3 days before grand-daughter Michelle's 11th birthday) from the deceased estate of Mrs Jessie Stella Hobbs. Jessie acquired the property in 1960 following the death of her husband, Thomas Hobbs [son of James Pearce Hobbs (greengrocer) who originally purchased the property in 1936].

Ken recalled that Mr James Hobbs was a mobile greengrocer, who offered fresh produce to his mother and many others from a cart drawn by a big "nag" which he stabled in the backyard near the fence dividing "20" and "22".

The Burchmore boys thought they'd have a lark one "Cracker Night"³ by throwing a fire-cracker near this horse, which promptly went berserk and created major commotion and damage. Jack, being the eldest (albeit innocent), suffered the brunt of severe sanctions exacted by his parents for this "thoughtless prank". To this day, neither Ken or Noel (both octogenarians) have confessed as to who indeed cast the offending cracker that night.

Ken's more general memories of Cracker Night include:

"As Dad was a manager at Crown Crystal Glass, we had a glass mail box at #22, the benefit being you could see from the front door if any mail had come. However, it was vulnerable on Cracker Night. One year, it was blown to bits by a basket bomb- a powerful cracker

³ Empire Day was established throughout the British Empire after Queen Victoria's death in 1901 to honour her on 24 May, the day of her birth. It also became "Cracker Night" in Australia, where everyone gathered together to celebrate membership of the Empire at big community bonfires and to let off fire-crackers (including "Tom Thumbs", "penny bungers", sky-rockets, Catherine-wheels, etc.). It was re-named Commonwealth Day in 1958 with the date later moved to 11 June (now known as the Queen's Birthday holiday). Stricter government safety regulations eventually reduced the availability of fireworks for purchase and caused "Cracker Night" to be no more.

capable of removing a finger or two. For subsequent years, we plugged the drain hole with soap and filled it with water.

A particular highlight was the Empire Day bonfire on (then dirt) Highgate Street right outside Bob Harrower's. For many weeks, we would gather combustibles of all sorts, but mainly dried tea tree bushes and rubber tyres. As the date closed in, we would build this mountainous structure which would then require careful guarding until the big event. On the 24th of May, everyone would gather with their skyrockets and crackers to watch the bonfire go up. The thrill of the year!"

Noel also had fond memories in 20 Abercorn Street:

"Ah, Jessie Stella ... and pre-1957 (KGB's departure), the three boys indulged in card games and general hilarity at *20".

Ken's memories of the circumstances of his father's purchase of "20" included:

"Old Jack Hobbs, an unfriendly type next door, had a fruit and vegetable wagon pulled by a draft horse conveniently stabled immediately over our fence. The Hobbs residence was a modest structure and as soon as it came on the market, JTB, by then retired, bought the property so he could raze it together with the large outbuilding which was also an eye-sore. Dad and Bill Raine spent days sifting through decades of bits and pieces found in that shed.

The rabbitoh came once a week and Mum would go to his truck to buy a pair. The vendor had previously gutted them, but would chop off the head and feet, then deftly pull off the skin and place the pair of bunnies on a dinner plate. My favourite preparation was crumbed.

Before the miracle of the Hills Hoist, we had a pair of clothes lines across the back yard held up by forked props. The clothes prop man could frequently be heard summoning customers as he flogged his saplings from street to street.

We also had bread delivered by horse and cart, but ice and milk came by truck, if memory serves."

Having bought "20", Jack Snr (ably assisted by Bill Raine) promptly removed the large camphor laurel tree and old ramshackle residence which he had long detested. He also adjusted the building line on title so that the frontage of any new residence was in line with "22". He then sold the property only 18 months later on 19 December 1969 to an "appropriately approved" new neighbour.