

Australian Garden

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HISTORY



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Glenlee, a piece of living history in danger of destruction



A bird's eye view of *Glenlee*, image Garry Housley

Set on the Lugarno peninsula in New South Wales, *Glenlee* is an oasis in a desert of urban sprawl. Listed by the National Trust for its Aboriginal cultural heritage and significant early settler history, it is a time capsule of our earliest NSW history. Residents are fighting to save it from destruction.

Glenlee's history

Glenlee, according to the diaries of Philip Gidley King, Second Lieutenant of the HMS *Supply*, is the most likely place where the first amicable meeting between Governor Phillip and the Bidjigal people of the Eora nation took place on 20 January 1788. The site is a short distance from Gertrude Point, where Philip and his men landed, searching for fertile soil and fresh water. *Glenlee* has the only source of fresh water on that part of the peninsula.

The 'footprints' of the Bidjigal people still remain in the creek bed and soils of the site. Archaeological features associated with the First Nations people's occupation and use of the site include grinding

grooves, a water hole and shell midden material. They remain well preserved to this day.

It would be another 68 years before Europeans set foot again on what is now called *Glenlee*. In 1856, it became one of the first land grants in Lugarno made by Governor Sir William Thomas Denison. Over the next 167 years, it was only settled by two families. John Henry Geddes, who built a timber cottage on the site for his family and established the first oyster leases in the area. He defaulted on his loan and City Bank foreclosed. Otto Emil Matthei and his wife Anna Marie became caretakers of the property for City Bank and gradually bought 16.5 hectares (41 acres) and oyster leases from the bank.

In 1910 Otto built a new home, which he called *Glenlee*. It still stands today, a fine example of houses of the era. Its century-old walls are witness to four generations of the Matthei family. Stone paths and steps descend to the river and its boatsheds and pier, a reminder of the importance of river transport when roads were little more than bullock tracks and all supplies were brought by boat.

Maybe because of this isolation, Otto established a garden that helped keep the family largely self-sufficient. He laid out a mixed orchard and extensive vegetable gardens that supported the family through the Great Depression and war years. In more recent times, Otto's grandsons sold produce from the garden to the community, providing a welcome source of organic fruit and vegetables. The gardens are still productive. The orange trees, well over 100 years old, still bear abundant fruit, and the peach trees provide a great crop each summer.

Development application

Following the death of Otto's grandson, William Emil Matthei, the property was listed for sale. In early 2020, a development application was submitted to the Georges River Council, proposing 31 residential dwellings be built on *Glenlee*. This required the felling of 230 mature trees, many more than 100 years old. These trees included blackbutt (*Eucalyptus pilularis*), smooth-barked apple (*Angophora costata*), red bloodwood (*Corymbia erythrophloia*), grey gum (*Eucalyptus punctata*), and Sydney peppermint (*Eucalyptus piperita*). The coastal swamp oak (*Casuarina glauca*) found on the site is listed as threatened by the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999.

These trees are a vital part of a forested river foreshore corridor extending from Oatley, through Lugarno, to the Georges River National Park. They are home to a wide range of wildlife and at least 12 threatened species including the powerful owl, grey headed flying fox, white-bellied sea eagle, eastern osprey and threatened microbats. These mature trees provide the hollows and crevices essential for birds, mammals, reptiles and invertebrates



Top Matthei family, courtesy Linda Henderson

Bottom *Glenlee* homestead, courtesy Linda Henderson



Top Otto's vision extended beyond the orchard and vegetable patch. Influenced by his German descent, he wanted to grow grapes and make his own wine. He planted black Muscat and white Muscat cross. Those wonderful old grape varieties are still fruiting. Photo Linda Henderson

Bottom White-bellied sea eagle inspecting his catch, photo Rob Annesley

to roost and nest. To the rear of the site is a remnant blackbutt forest, untouched since Europeans set foot on the land.

All this was to have been demolished, as well as the original homestead and the National Trust-listed Aboriginal cultural heritage embedded in the creek bed.

The impact on threatened flora and fauna through the destruction of their habitat, and the damage that will be caused to terrestrial and estuarine ecosystems on the property, will be an environmental disaster. **Debbie Andrew, zoologist**

Residents acted

In 2021, a resident's action group was formed. It lodged 270 submissions against the development with Georges River Council. Residents then formed an incorporated association called Friends of Glenlee, which fought tirelessly to defeat the development, and to petition the three levels of government to purchase the property. This would preserve and protect *Glenlee's* irreplaceable heritage for the community and future generations.

There have been victories. The development application has been defeated. The council commissioned a report from GML Heritage consultants to investigate the historic value of the site. The report recommended heritage listing. The site now has local heritage listing but the *Friends of Glenlee* continue to fight for it to be State Heritage listed.

Due to its comparative integrity, and landmark quality within the Lugarno area, *Glenlee* is likely to have exceptional significance within NSW as a rare, intact, early European riverfront settlement, with a high degree of representative significance as a demonstration of an early way of life, and of significant activities in NSW. **GML Heritage Assessment**

However, the property is still in danger of further development so the Friends are still lobbying for the State Government and Georges River Council to purchase the property for community use.

Glenlee is living history. Because it has remained largely undeveloped for 167 years, nature has been able to do what nature does best: the level of biodiversity within the site is extraordinary. This property is a time capsule worth fighting to preserve.

Glenyss Barnham, the author, is a local historian and lifelong gardener with a passion for drought-hardy gardens. She wrote a history of the area where *Glenlee* is located called *Riverside Reflections, Memoirs of Lugarno*.

See <https://www.saveglenlee.com/>