



HURSTVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
 MONOGRAPH No 5
 THE BACKGROUND TO
 THE TOWNSON GRANTS
 BY
 B.J.MADDEN. B.A.

TABLE SHOWING THE DATES OF THE VARIOUS GRANTS

TO THE TOWNSON BROTHERS

CAPTAIN JOHN TOWNSON

1950 acres 9 July 1808	RE-GRANTED 11 April 1810
50 acres 9 July 1808	RE-GRANTED 11 April 1810
250 acres 24 October 1809	RE-GRANTED 11 April 1810

DOCTOR ROBERT TOWNSON

1925 acres 1 November 1808	Cancelled 1 November 1809
75 acres 1 November 1808	RE-GRANTED in May, 1811, but dating from 1 January 1810
480 acres 7 April 1809	Cancelled 1 November 1809
1605 acres 1 November 1809	RE-GRANTED in May, 1811, but dating from 1 January 1810
1000 acres 1 November 1809 (Minto)	RE-GRANTED in May, 1811, but dating from 1 January 1810

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B J MADDEN, BA

Foreword

I commend this treatise, written by the President of Hurstville Historical Society, Mr Brian Madden, to all who are interested in the history of the district of Hurstville and indeed to the many with a great love of Australian History.

Mr Madden is to be complimented on the manner in which he has meticulously researched the records to produce a fine account of the land grants of the early 19th century.

It is of particular interest to read of the difficulties two Englishmen encountered in obtaining grants of land, which later were destined to become part of Sydney's great southern metropolis. The issue of titles to these great estates signalled the beginning of civilised development in a vast untamed land - today the memory of John and Robert Townson is reflected in the innumerable certificates of title covering properties which form part of the original grants.

Mr Madden's work will, I feel sure, give great pleasure to members of the Hurstville, and other kindred Societies, and will undoubtedly prove to be of inestimable value to future generations of students of Local History.

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June 1977

Cover sketch by P Madden

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National Library of Australia Card No. and
ISBN O 9598502 5 2

Publication of this monograph has been supported by a grant from the Royal Australian Historical Society.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE TOWNSON GRANTS

Tens of thousands of people now live on the large grants made to the Townson brothers, John and Robert, early last century. Their grants cover the whole of Penshurst, most of Hurstville, and parts of Bexley, Kogarah, Carlton, Allawah, Blakehurst, Hurstville South, Mortdale, Riverwood, Narwee, Beverly Hills and Kingsgrove.

John Townson (1760-1835) served in NSW as an officer of the NSW Corps from 1790 to 1800. He was promoted to Captain in 1795. He retired in England in 1803. On 5 August 1806, he arrived back in Sydney on the same ship which brought Governor Bligh, and he had with him a letter stating that it was the intention of the Secretary of State to direct Governor Bligh to grant him (John Townson) 2000 acres of land and other assistance. Bligh refused to do this, as he had not received specific instructions. Perhaps he would have acted, except that Captain Short, with whom Bligh had had a personal feud on the voyage out, had a similar letter for 600 acres to be granted to him.

On 26 August 1806, Bligh wrote to the Secretary of State about the letters carried by Short and Townson. He refers to Townson as "a respectable gentleman and who has come out with means". He continued: "As I am under uncertainty how to proceed, as (neither) Governor King nor myself have received any authority according to the tenor of Mr Cooke's letter, I beg leave to request instructions on the subject". Incidentally, Historical Records of Australia incorrectly state that Townson's letter refers to 1000 acres.¹

In the meantime, Bligh offered to allow Townson to select and occupy land pending authority from London, but Townson would not risk his money and effort, in case he might lose his land and any improvements later, by not having title to it.² He seems to have reversed his attitude later.

On 6 July 1807, Dr Robert Townson (1763-1827), brother of John, and a classical scholar and scientist, arrived in Sydney with a similar letter and was similarly treated by Bligh. Again Bligh offered to let Robert Townson select suitable land to hold until he received instruction.³

The Townson brothers were understandably impatient at the long delay in getting a decision from London, and blamed Bligh for not proceeding on the authority of the letters they held. However, those in London seem to have neglected to send authorities to Bligh to confirm what had been promised. It was not until 31 December 1807, that a despatch from Viscount Castlereagh to Bligh authorised him to grant land in accordance with the "private recommendations" Bligh had sighted.⁴ However, by the time this despatch arrived (it was acknowledged by Foveaux on 6 September 1808), Bligh had been arrested in the Rum Rebellion, with Robert Townson taking sides against Bligh.

In his letter of 2 April 1808, to Viscount Castlereagh, Robert Townson states: "Bligh has suffered my brother, after waiting a year and a half, to take his 2000 acres together (without a grant) near Georges River".⁵ Mention of Bligh's name suggests occupation before 26 January 1808, when Bligh was arrested, but it may have been after the events of 26 January 1808, that John Townson decided it was worth the risk and accepted the offer made eighteen months earlier.

By grant dated 9 July 1808, John Townson received from Major George Johnston 1950 acres on the south side of Mrs Hannah Laycock's King's Grove farm, to be known by the name of Townson's Farm. This area is bounded by King George's Road, Stoney Creek Road and a continued line to Preddys Road just south of Canonbury Grove, a line along Preddys Road and continuing to just east of the Railway line between Kogarah and Carlton near Bowns Road, and a line passing along Tanner Avenue back to King George's Road.

On the same date (9/7/08), John Townson was given 50 acres on Kogarah Bay, to be known as the Retreat. This area is bounded by Kogarah Bay, from a point on the Shore near Souter Street to approximately the junction of Penn and Bruce Streets and then to the creek, and along Kogarah Bay Creek.

Subsequently, John Townson approached Lt Col Paterson for additional land, because "about 300 acres of my land being so bad as to be perfectly useless".⁶ This was in the south east corner - residents of Bexley, Carlton and Allawah within the grant, please note! On 24 October 1809, Paterson granted him 250 acres on the north side of his 1950 acres and to the west of Mrs Laycock's farm. The area is bounded by Kingsgrove Road, Stoney Creek Road, King George's Road, and a straight line between each end of Morgan Street.

Each of these areas given to Captain John Townson was subsequently confirmed by Governor Macquarie, but there will be more about this later. In the meantime, Doctor Robert Townson had also been active.

Robert Townson himself tells us: "Just before the arrest of Governor Bligh, I requested to have my 2000 acres in two separate farms, one near George's River, the other at Emu Island. On the assumption of Power by Colonel Johnston I made the same request, this was at first granted, but afterwards Colonel Johnston ordered me to take all my land together near George's River, and made a grant of the land at Emu Island (on the Nepean) to one of his natural children".⁷ In a letter to London, Townson complained that Johnston's son was only 17 and was not even living in the Colony.⁸ No doubt it was this that made Robert Townson just as bitter towards the insurrectionists as he had been towards Bligh.

The grants to Robert Townson were signed by Lieut Governor Foveaux and are dated 1 November 1808. They refer to land in the District of Botany Bay, the name then used for the area between the Cook's and George's Rivers.

One grant was for 1925 acres and adjoined his brother's grant on its south west side (King George's Road). The four corners were (i) King George's Road and Stoney Creek Road, (ii) King George's Road and Hurstville Road, (iii) a point near the corner of Gunyah Bay Road and Douglas Haig Street at Oatley, and (iv) near Belmore Road and Clarendon Road at Riverwood.

Another grant was for 75 acres on Kogarah Bay at Blakehurst. The area is bounded by Kogarah and Shipwrights Bays (including Tom Ugly's Point), a line along Church Street and along a creek north of Torrens Street.

Dr Robert Townson continues: "From this circumstance" (that is, having to take all his land near George's River) "my farm was extended into the very worst ground, neither fit for Cultivation nor Grazing, and out of 2000 acres I suppose I did not possess a thousand that was of any use to me - I stated this to Colonel Foveaux on his taking the Government of the Colony into his Hands, and requested he give me some adjoining land, which being more open was more fit, or rather less unfit for sheep and this consisted of a range of hills of 480 acres".⁹ This area was on the north west of his earlier grant, and was bounded by King George's Road, Broadarrow Road and a continued line to Lillian Street, Riverwood between Henry and Bennett Streets, a line to near Belmore Road and Clarendon Road, and a line back to King George's Road and Stoney Creek Road. The grant of 480 acres was by Paterson and was dated 7 April 1809.

But Robert Townson still had problems: "I had found by sad experience that all my Land, and all the Country round, from being covered with wood was unfit for sheep, and I had been obliged to send my flock to another persons ground in a distant part, I therefore, a few months ago, requested that Colonel Paterson would allow me to Exchange 800 of my 2000 for some more open land in a distant part of the Colony. This farm of 800 acres was by the liberality of Col Paterson extended to a Thousand acres".

The 800 acres which Robert Townson wished to return were along the south-west side of his grant, "as it was quite unfit for sheep". This was land through Riverwood, Peakhurst, Mortdale and Oatley. On 1 November 1809, Paterson cancelled the grant of 1925 acres given on 1 November 1808, and the grant of 480 acres given on 7 April 1809, and in their place gave two new areas. An area of 1605 acres in one new grant is bounded by King George's Road, Broadarrow Road, Romilly Street, Bonds Road, Boundary Road and a continued line to Hurstville Road, and Hurstville Road to King George's Road. The second area, of 1000 acres, was at Minto. This was where Doctor Robert Townson built his house Varro Ville, and lived for the remainder of his life.

When Macquarie arrived in Sydney on 31 December 1809, to replace Bligh and to take control from the NSW Corps officers, he cancelled all land granted by the rebels and requested grantees to surrender their documents. Captain John Townson surrendered his grants for 50 acres, 1950 acres, and 250 acres on 23 January 1810, and Doctor Robert Townson surrendered his grants for 75 acres, 1605 acres and 1000 acres on 25 January 1810.¹⁰ The letters from John and Robert Townson requesting the re-granting of the surrendered grants give us the interesting details quoted above.

John Townson, writing from "The Retreat, George's River", also asked that, if Macquarie thought he had more land than he was entitled to, he be allowed to retain the 250 acres and an equal quantity be deducted from the south-east side of his 1950 acres grant. As a matter of interest there is this further statement: "Four cows given me by Lt Col Johnston as some compensation for the loss I sustained in being refused my grant of land by the said Wm Bligh Esq tho ordered by His Majesty's Secretary of State; two of the said cows died, one by the bite of a snake and the other drowned".¹¹

Robert Townson, in his long letter, admitted that he had a few hundred acres more than were ordered by the Secretary of State, "but I believe not more than a compensation for a considerable quantity of bad land I still possess".

The next development was a letter of 6 April 1810, from Robert Townson at "The Retreat" asking Governor Macquarie for the immediate making out of the grants to John Townson, as John was dangerously ill, and he should have the grants to avoid the problems concerning their disposal which might arise if he died.¹² Macquarie confirmed the fact of John's illness with John Townson's physician, and issued the grants of 50 acres, 1950 acres and 250 acres on 11 April 1810, without the restrictions which were later included in other grants, including Robert Townson's. Macquarie was to refer to John Townson as "an old and respected officer", and "a worthy and deserving man".¹³

A few re-grants were issued during 1810, but most were not available until 1811.

During his visits to farms throughout the Colony, Governor Macquarie visited Dr Robert Townson at Minto on 6 November 1810. On Thursday, 13 December 1810, the Governor and his party travelled cross-country from Homebush "through the woods and after a very pleasant drive through a thick forest, arrived at Capt Townson's farm house on Botany Bay at half past 9 o'clock". (This would be The Retreat on Kogarah Bay.)

"We found the Captain at home in his very pretty neat clean little cottage, where he received us with hospitality and in a gentlemanlike manner; and whilst our breakfast (which we had carried along with us) was getting ready, he walked with us to show us his garden, and all the other little improvements of his farm. His garden we found in excellent order and producing the largest and best strawberries I have yet seen or eat in this Colony. After breakfast we embarked on the water in Capt Townson's boat, in order to see his own and his brother Doctor Townson's farm, which join each other at this place. The Doctor's farm we found in miserable bad order, with only one solitary hut on it, occupied by two of his indented servants, a man and his wife, the latter being very sickly and to all appearances half starved; there were no appearance whatever of any improvements on this farm which is as yet in a state of nature".¹⁴ It should be noted that the small grants of the Townson brothers do not join each other, and that they are separated from the large grants, by half a mile in John's case and over a mile in Robert's case. Macquarie apparently refers to the small grants.

They then crossed Botany Bay to the entrance and returned after two hours. They left Captain Townson at 1 pm to visit Mrs Laycock's King's Grove farm.

Macquarie was the next to receive Robert Townson's wrath.

On 20 April 1811, in the Sydney Gazette, Macquarie announced that the grants of land to replace the surrendered grants would be available for collection from his office from 24 May 1811, and that if not collected within two months, they would be offered to others - this was extended to 24 September 1811. On 8 June 1811, he announced in the Sydney Gazette that, to increase the resources of the Colony, all land grants would specify that they could not be sold or alienated for five years, and that a certain proportion of the land had to be cleared and cultivated within the same period; otherwise the grants would revert to the Crown. Incidentally, the re-grants, though issued in mid-1811, were back dated to 1 January 1810. Thus, although John Townson's re-grants were dated 11 April 1810, they were issued before Robert's re-grants of 1 January 1810.

Robert Townson did not collect his documents, and on 22 September 1811, he wrote to the Earl of Liverpool. He outlined his disagreements with the various Governors, and he complained that when Macquarie re-issued his grants after a year and a half, they contained restrictive clauses "not according to the usage and custom of the Colony, but with such clauses (unknown to all former Governors) as will render my land liable to confiscation".¹⁵ In fact, the conditions were that he could not sell or alienate his land for five years and he had to cultivate 17 acres of his 75 acres grant and 75 acres of his 1605 acres grant. He said that when he wanted to sell his land and return to England, this was refused. He appealed to his Lordship to be allowed to dispose of his land and return to England. He concluded: "If your Lordship will order that my Grants shall have no other clauses inserted in them than what are in my Brother's Grants, which grants were made out only a twelve Month ago, and by order of the present Governor, I shall be satisfied. I shall then return to England or continue here, as I may think will most contribute to my own Happyness".¹⁶ (Macquarie did not get an opportunity to comment on this letter for over 12 months - see below.)

In a letter to Macquarie of 23 March 1812, Robert Townson says that Mr Secretary Campbell wrote to him on 1 October 1811, "to take out my grants or they would be given to persons more deserving", and he had taken out the two principal grants (1605 acres at Botany Bay and 1000 acres at Minto) without delay. He continued: "I determined to give up the small grant of 77 acres on the banks of George's River, tho so beautifully situated", (residents of Blakehurst will be interested in this early reference), "rather than be compelled to cultivate a soil on which I was sure to lose in proportion to the quantity I should cultivate and the labour I should employ on it.

"Having in the course of four years that I have been living upon this spot, employed a deal of labour, and expended a considerable sum of money in Building, forming a stock yard, making and enclosing a large garden, clearing and inclosing paddocks and making roads, etc., etc., I hope your Excellency will think I have a just claim to indemnification and that you will give me at least a quantity of land equal to what I have been compelled to give up, with assistance to enable me to remake a similar establishment".

Townson's description of his improvements over four years do not agree with Macquarie's comments when he visited the farm on 13 December 1810. No doubt this was in Macquarie's mind when he minuted the letter for reply that "the request for indemnification for his Improvements on his Farm of 77 acres, on the banks of George's River being most unreasonable, cannot be complied with. The grant of that farm has been confirmed and made out long since and lies in the Secys Office ready for delivery when called for".¹⁷

When, on 14 November 1812, Macquarie had the opportunity to comment on Robert Townson's letter to the Earl of Liverpool, which Macquarie had received on 25 October 1812, he pointed out that he had required time to review the surrendered grants and consider the eligibility of the grantees. He had decided that, to stop the immediate re-sale of grants and to increase production, restrictions should be introduced. (John Townson's grants were re-issued before this decision was made.) Macquarie commented: "Possessing a large extent of most fertile soil in the country, it is a fact that Dr Townson in five years occupancy of it has not contributed five acres of wheat or other grain to the general consumption of the Colony". He thought Dr Townson ill-entitled to special consideration,

and that if granted to him it would lead to others more deserving wanting the same treatment. Macquarie also said: "The frequent, unreasonable, and importunate demands of Dr Townson, couched in terms highly disrespectful and insulting to me, became so troublesome that I found it necessary finally to close further correspondence with him by returning his Letters unanswered".

Macquarie refers to "the uncandid manner" of Dr Townson's reference to his brother's case, and to the "disingenuousness and illiberal allusion to the more favourable terms of his brother's Grants".¹⁸

Three days later, Macquarie wrote in a Despatch that "Gentlemen Settlers", encouraged by "extraordinary concessions", did not further the Colony's progress in agriculture, and that they were "the most discontented, unreasonable and troublesome persons in the whole country".¹⁹ He was referring to the Blaxland brothers, but must have had Dr Robert Townson in mind as he wrote.

Captain John Townson sold his Botany Bay grants to Simeon Lord in 1812 for £800. One local historian refers to "a paltry £800", and another to "a mere £800". However, this was an excellent profit for land he had obtained free less than five years before. It surely vindicates Macquarie's restrictions, although in practice the conditions were not enforced. Lord's ownership of John Townson's grants led to the district becoming known as Lord's Bush or Lord's Forest. In 1850 Michael Gannon acquired the main grant for £732 (not much appreciation in value in 38 years) and the area became known as Gannon's Forest.

When John Townson died in 1835, his estate was sworn at £5000.

Doctor Robert Townson became a recluse on his farm at Minto, and nursed his hostility to Macquarie. In a despatch in 1817, Macquarie included Robert Townson among 12 persons whom he looked upon as his "secret though not avowed enemies and from whom I have always experienced every opposition" to his measures and administration. The comment "discontented" is listed against Dr Townson's name. The twelve persons "have all along been in the habit of writing Home the most gross misrepresentations".²⁰

Only when Macquarie left Australia did Robert Townson begin to take his rightful place in the community. He became active in various organisations and was appointed a magistrate in 1826.²¹

When Robert Townson died at Varro Ville on his Minto grant in 1827, he left 1600 cattle, 10 000 sheep and an excellent vineyard there. The Botany Bay grants formed part of his estate. In 1830, John Connell acquired the main grant and the locality became known as Connell's Bush.

The story of the involved connection of the Townson brothers with the district of Botany Bay makes an interesting beginning to the history of our area.

References

1. Historical Records of Australia, Vol 6, page 21, and Archives Office 4/1822, p 313.
2. Historical Records of NSW, Vol 6, page 287.
3. HRA 6-191.
4. HRA 6-204.
5. HRNSW 6-570.
6. AO 4/1822 p 313.
7. AO 4/1822 p 314.
8. HRNSW 7-58.
9. AO 4/1822 p 314.
10. There is an error in HRA 7-308. The 1000 acres is at Minto, not Botany Bay.
11. AO 4/1822 p 313.
12. AO 4/1723 p 260.
13. HRA 7-551.
14. Macquarie's Journal, Trustees of Public Library of NSW, 1956, pp 36-37.
15. HRA 7-493.
16. HRA 7-494.
17. AO 4/1727, Bundle 6, 1812.
18. HRA 7-551.
19. HRA 7-560.
20. HRA 9-499.
21. Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol 2, p 536.