

Mill Flat: the ACT's Forgotten Soldier Settlement Scheme

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Freelance consultant and writer Mark Butz researches social and environmental history with a focus on the Canberra area. The following article arises from his research for a book on the environmental and social history of the Molonglo-Jerrabomberra floodplain. His previous book on Duntroon's World War I trench system was published in 2017 as *The Best System of Trenches in Australia*. He is also working on Black Mountain, Mulligans Flat-Goorooyarroo, and aspects of Tidbinbilla Valley history. This article marks the centenary (1920-21) of a Territory soldier settlement scheme that appears to have 'fallen through the cracks', lost to memory.

At the end of the Great War, the Commonwealth Government was focused on bringing home and rehabilitating 350 000 servicemen. Soldier settlement schemes were established around the country, and this included the Federal Capital Territory.

Soldier settlement schemes at Ainslie-Majura, Jerrabomberra-Tuggeranong, Woden and Belconnen have generally been regarded as the sole examples of soldier settlement in the Territory. However, at least one other scheme was partially implemented, and then cut short by natural forces.

This article tells the story of the ill-fated 'Mill Flat Soldier Settlement Scheme' – why it was different from the start, the soldiers who took up land under the scheme, how it stopped well short of success, and why it has gone unrecognised, to be so quickly forgotten.

The Territory 'Does Its Bit'

By the end of 1918, Australia had a war debt of £364 million. In those straitened times, the fledgling Federal Capital struggled to gain priority in funding, and the Canberra-Queanbeyan district went into deep depression. The Powerhouse was operating for only two to three hours per week and all work had stopped, except for Mr Griffin's temporary construction railway to Civic.

The post-war influenza epidemic disrupted further the repatriation of soldiers, and stifled recovery.¹

In a climate of publicly expressed doubts about the whole idea of continuing with the capital, Territory officials were still expected to push on with the transfer of Parliament and the public service from Melbourne, with Parliament due to open in the Seat of Government in 1926.

Officials were also under pressure to set up soldier settlement schemes in the Territory, but they proceeded cautiously. Surveyor-General Goodwin sought information on schemes operating elsewhere and concluded that 'a hurried and ill considered scheme for the settlement of soldiers in the Federal Capital Territory can only be disastrous.'²

Applications for the first soldier settlement blocks closed on 30 Sep 1919. Applicants needed to supply information about their capital, marital status, rural experience, war service, war injuries and pre-war occupation. They needed to have a good record, be residents of the Territory, and to have volunteered for active service abroad. They also required evidence of previous farming experience. Leases would run for terms of one, five, twelve or twenty-five years. Arrangements were also put in place for advances of funds for purchase of buildings, plant and equipment, fencing materials, stock and crops.³

The initial schemes at Ainslie-Majura and Jerrabomberra-Tuggeranong have been well documented. By April 1920 some 38 soldier settlers occupied 48 blocks ranging in size from 212 to 1140 acres, and there was potential to expand the scheme, which is on record with settlers at Woden and Belconnen. And that is where accounts of soldier settlement schemes in the Territory seem to cut out.⁴

A Scheme On Mill Flat

But there was another scheme. On the base map of a Territory cadastral record in the National Library, we can clearly make out the words ‘Mill Flats [sic] Soldier Settlement Area.’

Was this a ‘scheme’ or just an ‘area’? The ACT Soldier Settlers Guide does not list it or show it on the map guide, nor does it list most of the soldier settlers who participated in it. How has this fallen from memory and from the public record?

Mill Flat is the area we now know as Dairy Flat, extending south of the Molonglo River from Mount Pleasant and RMC Duntroon. It was formerly part of the Duntroon property. The deep rich alluvial soils of the northernmost paddocks, adjacent to the Molonglo, enabled the growing of lucerne, and there were ensilage pits here to stretch the availability of this important fodder.⁵

Mill Flat was suggested for soldier settlement as early as 1916. Its virtues as

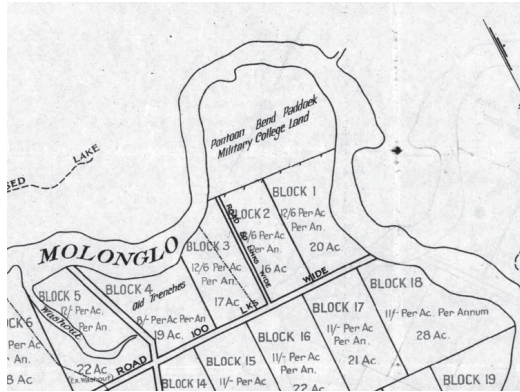
‘first quality land’ were extolled by the Campbells of Duntroon and by John Gale of Queanbeyan. This promotion made appeals to both altruism and nationalism: ‘A proposal to establish on this area a community of soldier-farmers is based upon a patriotic sentiment to which no true Australian will object.’ Gale envisaged an average holding of 100 acres. He believed that the ‘great water scheme’ planned for the city would enable easy irrigation for the flat, stating that even 20 acres of this land under irrigation would ‘provide a good living for a family.’⁶

As the war continued, and with the lakes scheme postponed indefinitely, in 1918 Frederick Campbell again recommended Mill Flat as suitable for subdivision, this time into blocks of 10 to 20 acres. Since its acquisition from Duntroon, parts of the Mill Flat area within the Molonglo Concentration Camp had been grazed on agistment, with A.J. McDonald of Hill Station and W.E. Oldfield paying fees to the Defence Department who managed the camp. McDonald was also paying rent for Willowbank Farm at the upstream end of the floodplain.⁷

Late in 1919, and again in 1920, the former Molonglo Camp site was recommended for use as soldier settlement

BELOW: A base map offers a glimpse of the short-lived Mill Flat(s) Soldier Settlement Area, overlain so quickly by Dairy Blocks 1 to 4.
 Source: Australian Capital Territory Cadastral map 1933-1949.
 NLA MAP 2661-2





ABOVE: Detail of Mill Flat 'lucerne lands' 1920, showing the site of the instructional trench system (reduced rental) and Pontoon Bend retained by RMC Duntroon.

Source: NLA: MAP RM 3146

blocks. However, the Surveyor-General delayed any such action, 'pending a decision as to the immediate intention of the Government regarding the Federal Capital'. This suggests limited optimism that Canberra would continue to be developed. It was agreed that a limited number of stock could be agisted, and while preference might be given to stock of returned soldiers, this was not to be exclusive.⁸

'Lucerne Lands'

In April 1920 it was decided that the Mill Flat floodplain would be divided into 36 'lucerne leases' (around 25 to 35 acres each), replacing stock agistment. The Pontoon Bend Paddock was retained by RMC Duntroon, perhaps because it contained the RMC vegetable garden or because it might be needed for encampments, training or manoeuvres. The former Duntroon 'Bombing paddock' was clearly labelled with 'Old trenches', with a reduced rental, although an earlier plan had indicated this block would not be made available at all.⁹

The blocks were advertised in June and July as leases available for five to ten year terms, comprising a third Territory scheme: the *Mill Flats Soldier Settlement Area*. If all the Mill Flat blocks were taken up, this would have nearly doubled the number of soldier settlers in the Territory.¹⁰

In September 1920 Walter Burley Griffin (Director of Federal Capital Design and Construction) had the Minister agree that no leases were to be issued on the 'highlands immediately adjacent to Mill Flat', which were to be planted with ornamental trees for his prestige suburb of Lake Park, bordering East Lake. Most of the former concentration camp site is accordingly labelled as 'proposed plantation'. With no residences permitted on the floodplain, Griffin's constraint meant that potential lessees could not make use of adjacent lands on higher ground.¹¹

It was decided that Mill Flat blocks would be open to general competition, with preference to returned soldiers, 'other things being equal'. They were made available for seven years with an option for three more years if the land was not required for the city. Applications closed in October. A Leasing Board considered all applications and, although disappointed with the low response received, recommended tentative allocations.¹²

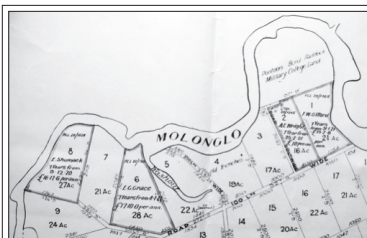
However, the Surveyor-General did not concur with the Board's recommendations, instead agreeing allocations to just eight returned soldiers. All held other leases in the district for grazing, so were more likely to remain viable, and all had options for accommodation. Six other eligible returned soldiers were unsuccessful because they were not resident in the district. It was hoped that residential options might be provided in the future, should 'the decision to plant the whole of the Molonglo Camp hill be reviewed, which is recommended'.¹³

The Mill Flat Blocks

The original eight Mill Flat lessees, and the three later replacement lessees, were all returned soldiers. They took up blocks in three areas of Mill Flat.

The Mill Flat Soldier Settlers: A Snapshot to 1920

Space here does not permit a strong account of the lives and circumstances of the eleven Mill Flat soldier settlers; they will be profiled



Molonglo downstream

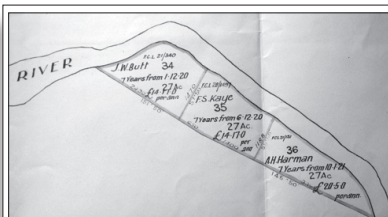
Block 1, 21 ac, F W Gifford

Block 2, 16 ac, A E Wright (later E H J Paynting)

Block 6, 28 ac, E G Crace

Block 8, 27 ac, Edw. Shumack

Note: Reuben Hill took up Block 3 after cessation of the soldier settlement scheme at Mill Flat.



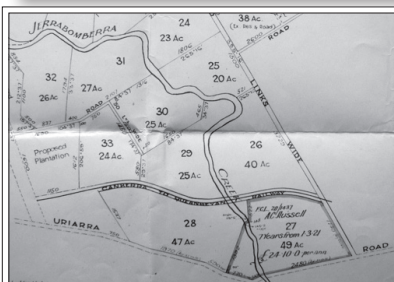
Molonglo upstream - 'Willowbank'

Block 34, 27 ac, J W Butt

Block 35, 27 ac, F S Kaye

(A S Fitzgibbon after Kaye surrendered lease 1923)

Block 36, 27 ac, A H Harman



Jerrabomberra Creek

Block 24, 23 ac, (A E Wright exchange for vacated Block 2, reallocated to E H J Paynting)

Block 27, 49 ac, A C Russell

Block 28, 47 ac, (Ernest Murray in 1922 to compensate for land lost to altered Uriarra Road)

in greater detail in a forthcoming book.

As a snapshot of their collective stories, we can readily say that they were a diverse group on enlistment and had varied fortunes in the Great War (and just beyond):

- Their enlistment dates ranged from August 1914 (less than a month after the war started) to April 1918 (seven months before the war ended).
- Their ages at enlistment ranged from 20 up to 42.
- One was married but delaying children

- until after the War.
- One married a month after enlisting.
- Two had been notable champion sport cyclists in the local district.
- Two enlisted in the local 'Sportsmen's Unit'.
- One was part of the first landing at Gallipoli.
- Seven saw service in France, two in Belgium, two in Egypt and one in England.
- One went in as a Lance-Corporal and returned a Lieutenant.
- One could have gone in as an officer but chose to remain 'a cook's offsider'.
- One was decorated and also mentioned in despatches on two occasions.
- Three were wounded, one having an arm amputated, another losing use of an arm, and another suffering for the rest of his life from the effects of gas.
- One was hospitalised with trench fever on multiple occasions.
- One missed most of the fighting, and another missed it altogether.
- Two were from family groups that had three sons enlisted (in one family, all three sons were wounded in action, one of them twice).
- One was at the Front when his mother died.
- One was delayed from rejoining his

family after return due to influenza quarantine requirements.

- One embarked as a single man and three years later returned married with two children.

Nature Takes Its Toll

Whilst only eight of 36 lucerne blocks (totalling 293 acres – 119ha) were allocated from the start of the Mill Flat scheme, it was intended that the remainder would be readvertised ‘when residential land is available’, but by October 1921 the Surveyor-General had decided that no additional blocks would be made available for the time being. This was at best a faltering start to the soldier settlement scheme, and the situation did not improve.¹⁴

A major flood in July 1922 covered the Molonglo-Jerrabomberra floodplain, the largest flood to hit the area in more than 30 years. Many head of stock were lost, particularly on Mill Flat, and numerous old riverbank willows were swept away. The floods also damaged recently constructed bridges, including the trestle bridge carrying Griffin’s construction tramway from the Powerhouse to Civic. This did little to boost morale in the fledgling capital city, frustrated by strictures during wartime and its aftermath, and still feeling both the loss of its young men killed and the disappointment of those who returned maimed or otherwise

damaged.¹⁵

It is fortunate that no additional blocks had been made available nine months earlier, because with blocks strung along the banks of the engorged Molonglo, the Mill Flat soldier settlers were hit hard:

- Bert Wright rescued about 4 000 head of mixed stock but lost a few head of sheep, as did Frank Kaye, who surrendered his lease on Block 35 early in 1923. Kaye’s place on Block 35 was taken by Archie Fitzgibbon on a four-year lease.¹⁶
- Albert Harman lost several lucerne stacks and many sheep from Willowbank, on top of the loss of 20 tons of hay and other crop damage in a grasshopper plague the previous February.¹⁷
- Unable to sustain the loss of fencing, both Gregory Crace and Ted Shumack surrendered their leases by the end of 1922.¹⁸

Meanwhile, William Gifford could not fulfil the conditions of his lease on Block 1 and it was terminated.¹⁹

The Mill Flat scheme was effectively over within a couple of years of commencing. In common with schemes elsewhere, some Mill Flat soldier settlers were defeated by poor seasons and floods, while others struggled to deal with falling farm commodity prices between 1920 and 1924.²⁰

Two stories illustrate the varied fortunes of this cohort of soldier settlers:

Bert Wright responded to the flood by exchanging his riparian block for Block 24, which lay above flood level and would enable stacking of lucerne hay. This allowed him to escape the worst impacts of a second major

BELOW: The 1922 floodwaters on Mill Flat viewed from Mount Pleasant; Duntroon at left and in foreground. Images are from different angles – aligned but not quite continuous.

Source: *National Archives of Australia*: A1 527, 27 and A1 527, 30



flood in 1925. But having moved closer to town, he complained in 1926 that 'the area is subject to molestation by raiders,' and he tried (unsuccessfully) to install a caretaker on site.²¹

In 1927 Wright began a tussle with officials over his lease, describing himself as 'practically a sole survivor of the original Mill Flat subdivision ... I have hung on while others have lost heart and gave up their leases'. He now had 12 acres under lucerne and nearly nine acres growing potatoes and pumpkins, with about 30 tons of lucerne hay stacked. Officials finally offered Wright a three-year extension, partly because he was seen as the only lessee of a lucerne block to have actually complied with the conditions. Having won the battle, Wright gave up the block.²²

Wright's former Block 2 was later transferred to Ern Paynting. He had first leased Block 18 but exchanged it for Block 19, and then exchanged again for Block 2. Paynting had avoided the flood of 1922 but he experienced great difficulty. He had intended to raise potatoes and other crops, but had failures due to unseasonal frosts and the second major flood in 1925. He attempted to generate revenue from a vegetable garden lease at Acton, but the produce was almost entirely eaten in a grasshopper plague.²³

Despite extensions of time, Paynting could not meet his repayments and forfeited his lease in 1926. Officials considered him to be a 'steady and industrious man,' and they did not wish to be 'impolite' to a soldier settler, so the Commonwealth wrote off more than £70 of his debts. Paynting thus had the dubious distinction of being 'the only instance up to present [8 Aug 1927] of a failure in connection with the Territory Soldier Settlement Scheme'. Note that this statement aligns the Mill Flat subdivision with a 'scheme,' not just an 'area.'²⁴

Lives Continued and Completed: A Snapshot 1920 Onwards

Once again, space here allows only a snapshot of this cohort's stories in the 1920s and beyond:

- All eleven married – two prior to the War. Two became brothers-in-law.
- At least eight had children.
- One had waited to start a family until his return, but by 1920 had lost his wife and one of his two children.
- Eight continued as rural producers, several active in local district agricultural show societies.
- Of the three others, one was a gardener, one a butcher (later a clerk), and one served 40 years in the Public Service, receiving the Imperial Service Medal in 1962.
- Four served again in World War II. The two brothers-in-law joined the same unit.
- Reflecting their range of ages, the group met the end of their days from the 1950s to 1980s – two in their 50s, three in their 60s, three in their 70s, one in his 80s, and two in their 90s.
- Having survived the War, one died aged 81 after being struck by a tourist bus in Civic.

Restoring To Memory – The Scheme

The cadastral map (1933-49) showing Mill Flat offers a catalogue of ill-fated Griffin projects: Civic railway, East Lake, and the prestige suburb of Lake Park (rescued by Griffin from becoming the site of the Arsenal during the War).²⁵

The Soldier Settlement Area it portrays was equally ill-fated, having been hit by two big floods in three years. It was quite different from other soldier settlement offerings in the Territory, with only small blocks for intensive use, constrained by being on a floodplain and with no prospect for use of higher ground adjacent. Perhaps it was always an experiment of sorts, and it seems a rather half-hearted effort on the part of the authorities, who clearly had larger concerns.

After the 1925 flood, the Federal Capital Commission sought to foster local production ahead of the move of Parliament to Canberra. The 36 'lucerne leases' (25 to 35 acres each) on Mill Flat were now overlain with four

'dairying blocks' eight times the size (200 to 270 acres each). The flat became known only for its dairy farms, and over time it assumed a whole new identity as Dairy Flat, thus erasing memories of the lucerne paddocks and the short-lived soldier settlement area.²⁶

While the Mill Flat scheme might well have been quickly forgotten at the time, it seems appropriate that it now be included in the ACT Soldier Settlers Guide, along with the soldiers who participated in it. Its absence leaves researchers and other readers with a picture that is incomplete, both geographically and biographically. Using information already at hand, hopefully a supplementary record can be developed to complete that picture.

Acknowledgments

This article arises from preparation of a comprehensive history of the Molonglo-Jerrabomberra floodplain and environs. This larger undertaking has had the support of the Woodlands & Wetlands Trust and ACT Parks & Conservation Service.

Research has been assisted by the dedicated staff and volunteers of: ACT Heritage Library, ArchivesACT, Canberra & District Historical Society, National Archives of Australia, National Capital Authority, and the National Library of Australia (including Trove).

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- 26 NLA: MAP G8984.C3G46 I

The Soldiers of Mill Flat



Frank William (William) GIFFORD (1888 Braidwood-1953 The Entrance)

Service no. 1514

Enlisted 11 September 1914 Sydney aged 26, single, motor mechanic and driver.
Embarked 22 December 1914. Lance-Corporal Driver; 301st Mechanical Transport, ASC 17th Divisional Ammunition Park. Served in France; selected in 1917 for Officers Cadet Battalion, Trinity College, Cambridge; Lieutenant with 34th Battalion, fought at Villers-Bretonneux; served 4½ years in France and England.

Image: AWM E01465 (detail)



Ernest Harry Jeffs (Ern) PAYNTING (1889 Birmingham UK-1980 Cabramatta)

Service no. 21027

Enlisted 29 April 1918 Sydney aged 28, steward at RMC Duntroon. Married. Private with Hospital Transport Corps (unfit for Active Service due to varicose veins).

Embarked 18 September 1918 on hospital ship *Karoola*.



Everard Gregory (Gregory) CRACE (1874 Qld-1928 Canberra)

Service no. 6785

Lived at Gungahleen. Married. Enlisted 8 January 1917 Queanbeyan aged 42.

Private with the 40th Battalion, later Lance Corporal, self-described as 'a cook's offsider'. Joined the Sportsmens Unit; embarked 16 July 1917, serving in France. Discharged fit.

Image: CDHS photograph 15876



Edward (Ted) SHUMACK (1888 Canberra-1950 Canberra)

Service no. 6875

Enlisted 22 March 1917 Queanbeyan aged 28, single, farmer at Ainslie.

Private, later Lance Corporal, with 19th Infantry Battalion, serving in the Sportsmen's Unit, and embarking 16 July 1917.

Joined 35th Battalion in Jan 1918 in France, fought at Villers-Bretonneux April 1918.

Invalided to England, hospitalised with trench fever on multiple occasions.

Image: CDHS photograph 2539 (detail)



Albert Edward (Bert) WRIGHT (1888 Tombong-1970 Canberra)

Service no. 7847

Descendant of the Wright and Davis families of Lanyon, Booroomba and Ginninderra.

Enlisted 28 June 1917 Bombala, aged 29, single, travelling salesman, the third son in his family group to enlist.

Private, A/g Corporal, embarked 28 Feb 1918, serving in England with 12th Training Battalion and in France from Aug 1918 with 45th Battalion.

Image: Sydney Stock and Station Journal 8 March 1918, p.12



Alister Campbell (Dick) RUSSELL (1889 Young-1979 Victoria)

Service no. 27643

Enlisted Brunswick Vic 10 May 1916, aged 26, single, pastoralist living in Melbourne.

Gunner with 23rd Howitzer Brigade and Brigade Ammunition Column.

Embarked 20 October 1916 and served in France.

Wounded in action in September 1917, with gunshot wounds to both arms.

Discharged medically unfit due to wounds, with right arm disabled.

Image: F. Douglas, Not Without My Corsets, 1996 p.8 (detail)

The Soldiers of Mill Flat



Ernest (Ernie) MURRAY (1880 Surry Hills-1935 Canberra)

Service no. 151

Enlisted 27 August 1914 Sydney, aged 33, single, mechanic.

Sapper; Sergeant with 14th Field Company Engineers. Married.

Embarked 18 October 1914 and served in Egypt, part of the first landing at Gallipoli, also fought in France and Flanders, serving in 1917 with ANZAC Light Railways in France.

Received Military Medal and Bar, and was twice Mentioned in Despatches in 1917. Severely wounded in a mustard gas attack in January 1918.

Image: AWM P03656.001



John Walter (Jack) BUTT (1885 Sutton-1959 Canberra)

Service no. 53690

Enlisted 13 October 1917 Queanbeyan, aged 32, single, farmer at Ainslie.

Prior to the war, in 1912-14, he and his twin brother Tom were prominent local cyclists, along with Albert Harman and his brothers.

Private in 4th Reinforcements, later Corporal in 13th Battalion.

Embarked 19 June 1918, and effectively missed the War, serving in France after cessation of hostilities. Hospitalised with 'disordered action of the heart'.



Tom Butt

Images: Barbara Malpass, Cycling Canberra, 1999 (detail)



Frank Sandford KAYE (1896 Canberra-1985 Canberra)

Service no. 16279

Worked for the Dept of Home Affairs as a messenger and clerk.

Enlisted 12 October 1916 Sydney, aged 20, single, a clerk.

Driver with 8th Field Company Engineers.

Embarked 11 November 1916, serving in France.

Injured in battle, dislocating his right elbow in July 1918.

Image: ACT Memorial img-2982-1 (detail)



Archibald Samuel (Archie) FITZGIBBON(S) (1888 Queanbeyan-1952 Sydney)

Service no. 1392

Enlisted 27 August 1915 Goulburn, aged 26, single, butcher of Crawford St, Queanbeyan.

Private in 2nd Light Horse Brigade Machine Gun Squadron.

Embarked 20 November 1915, serving in Egypt, later in the Postal Corps in Cairo.

Image: CDHS photograph 14769



Albert Henry HARMAN (1893 Majura-1967 Canberra)

Service no. 2902

Enlisted 7 September 1916 Goulburn as Alfred Henry Harman, aged 23, single, labourer at Majura (one of three brothers to enlist).

Private in 60th Battalion. Embarked 3 November 1916, serving in France and Belgium.

Wounded in April 1918 near Villers-Bretonneux. Left arm amputated due to a gunshot wound, and had another gunshot wound to his left thigh. Both brothers also wounded.