

Glebe's Old Fire Station Site 1875-1974: the buildings and their uses

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The old fire station site occupies the entire Mitchell Street frontage from Campbell Lane to the rear of 115 Glebe Point Road. The development of this site is an amazing story. It has George Wigram Allen - Glebe's major nineteenth century identity and a prominent politician - as the key financier. And Edward Carr Fortescue – a local grocer – as his managing agent. The two had the shared experience of a major fire on Glebe Point Road in 1866. But they were brought together in 1876 by the land owner, the St Phillip's Trustees, who offered long term leases to develop the old fire station site. Included in Allen and Fortescue's arrangement were Fortescue's grocer shop and the adjoining shop, now 115-117 Glebe Point Road but better known to some as 'Fascination House', which is an integral part of this story. However, after improving the Glebe Point Road premises and building a two-storey house on part of the old fire station site, Allen and Fortescue did little more than establish a forge and, eventually, a fire station house on Mitchell Street. Why didn't they build three houses across the whole site? Perhaps Allen had bigger expectations for this top end of Mitchell Street. In any case, the final stage of the development of the old fire station site was left to the next generation – a new managing agent, his son as the new occupant, and most likely the Australian government - to complete the construction of the heritage listed old fire station site that we know today.

This web article outlines the changing context and pieces together the available evidence on the site's many users and uses, starting from the 1860s in the case of Fortescue and taking the story up to 1974. The accompanying web article focuses on the site in its most recent and long-lived use, as a *de facto* community centre. Both web articles are 'works in progress' and may be updated with further research. An overview which draws on the two web articles is published in the May 2018 issue of *The Bulletin*.¹

The primary source of information for this article was the Glebe Municipal Council Rate Books and related series² which provide the names of the lessee, the property's valuation, a description of its structures and use and, until 1907, the names of their occupants. To keep footnotes to a minimum, this article does not footnote each use of the Rate Books. *Sands Directory*³ was also used extensively, especially for the period after 1907, and its use is indicated in the text to distinguish it from information obtained from Rate Books. Newspaper articles are mostly indicated in the text, but the full reference for important articles and other sources is given in footnotes. Some extra information is also relegated to footnotes to make the article more readable.

¹ The overview article on the old fire station published in *The Bulletin*, this web article and its companion, 'Glebe's Old Fire Station 1975-2018: a community centre with a difference' <https://www.glebesociety.org.au/ofs-1975-2018/>, are the result of a collaborative project undertaken by members of the Community Development Sub-Committee, Janice Challinor, Diane Hutchinson and Jan Macindoe. Each member had input across the project. The named author for each article is the person with primary responsibility for that article. For this article, special thanks to Janice and Jan, and other members of the Glebe Society who, in their different ways, encouraged me to dig more deeply or think more broadly on the topic, or gave fine-tuning help.

² NSCA CRS664, *Glebe Municipal Council Rate Books (Bishopthorpe Ward)*, 1868-1940 (pdf copies viewed electronically at the City of Sydney Archives) and related hardcopy series, including NSCA CRS665, *Glebe Triennial Valuation Books* 1917-25. Later hardcopy valuations were also viewed but proved less informative. My thanks to City of Sydney archivists, Sarah and Ben, who helped me negotiate the rate books.

³ Available on-line through the City of Sydney at <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/sands-directory>

The land in question

The old fire station site was part of an 1842 land grant to the Church of England which became known as the St Phillip's Estate. It was managed by the St Phillip's Trustees from 1842 to 1930 when the Sydney diocese of the Anglican Church formed the Glebe Administration Board to manage all its property. The administrators retained the 'Old System Title' for the site until they were preparing to sell the estate in 1973 (a century after Torrens Titles were introduced), so land title records do not provide information about lot boundaries prior to 1973. However, the old fire station site and the adjoining land now at 115-117 Glebe Point Road was treated as a single parcel of land with a single lessee from 1942 to 1921. It was, though, subject to *de facto* subdivision, with the separate portions of land assessed individually for council rates. When street numbers were introduced, these portions had different street numbers and their occupants were listed separately in *Sands Directory*. For convenience we will treat these subdivided portions of the site as if they were separate lots to 1973 and refer to them as such, since they had different histories and different uses until at least the 1930s.

Street numbering was introduced for this area from the late 1880s but with subdivision, and more recently consolidation, the street numbers for the old fire station site lots changed frequently at least to the 1930s, so this article will refer to the *de facto* subdivided lots on the old fire station site by the following descriptors:⁴

- The corner or annex lot (corner of Mitchell Street and Campbell Lane), formerly a farriers' or blacksmith's shop, and now with a saw-tooth roofed -industrial structure.
- The centre lot, now with the fire station façade across its frontage and a saw-toothed extension that extends across the rear of this lot and the corner lot.
- The top or house lot, now containing a two-storey house.
- The extra lot(s), now part of the rear yard of 115 Glebe Point Road, but which were sometimes shown on maps as part of the top lot fronting Mitchell Street but also let separately.

The Glebe Point Road was formerly The Glebe Road, but is referred to here as Glebe Point Road, and the relevant lots are referred to by their current street numbers, 115-117 Glebe Point Road.

A Site in Need of Re-Development

⁴ Street numbers were first used for Mitchell Street in *Sands Directory* in 1886 and in Rate Books in 1894. With *de facto* subdivision, the Rate Books added a ½ to the previous street number, to differentiate the extra occupant from its neighbours, so the centre lot (originally part of the corner lot) was numbered 113½. An additional occupant between the top lot (155 and then 115 Mitchell Street) and the rear of 115 Glebe Road, was numbered 155½/115½; and on rare occasions such as in 1910 and 1911 when there was further subdivision and a second occupant in this space, it was numbered 117 (with the former 117 Mitchell Street across Glebe Point Road re-numbered as 117½). *Sands* broadly followed the numbering used in the Rate Books, although sometimes an extra occupant was simply listed with no street number. From the 1930s, and especially with a stable tenant for all 3 core lots from 1936, numbering was gradually simplified. By 1951, a single (but still flexible) number, 113-113½, was used by Council for the entire 52' frontage covering the 3 buildings on the site, and since there were no occupants on the adjoining land, the number 115 was re-allocated to the next structure in Mitchell Street, across Glebe Point Road.

The St Phillip's estate, including the old fire station site, was developed from the mid-1840s under 28 year leases. Much of it was of weatherboard construction like the row of nearby buildings, discussed below, which were destroyed by fire in 1866. Many buildings on this estate were in poor condition by the time the 28 year leases expired in the 1870s. The old fire station site lots were no exception. The builder Robert Reeve still held the original leases on the old fire station lots and on 115-117 Glebe Point Road in the early 1870s.⁵ In 1875, the Rate Books described the structure on the top lot as an 'untenantable' butcher shop, with an annual assessed value⁶ – probably an estimate of potential annual rental - of £5.⁷ In view of the standard of some butcher shops that were in use as late as 1900, this one must have been very bad indeed.⁸ The centre lot had a cottage that was unoccupied despite a housing shortage, with an annual assessed value of £7; and the corner lot had an occupied cottage with an annual assessed value of £8. By way of comparison, of the few dwellings where the rent was specified in the 'To Let' columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, on November 13, 1875, the cheapest was a four-room cottage, with water and balcony (but seemingly no other attributes), in Surry Hills for a weekly rent equivalent to just over £24 p.a. In Glebe, there was a 'neat' four-room cottage with good stabling in Ebenenzer Place at a little over £31 p.a., and a 'comfortable' four-room house with kitchen, washroom and bathroom, in Broughton Street at a little over £36 p.a.⁹ The unoccupied cottage on the old fire station site was so far down this rental ladder by 1875 that it would not have been worth the cost of an advertisement.

The mechanics of redevelopment

When the St Phillip's leases expired, the Trustees issued new, longer leases, mainly of 45 or 50 years, to encourage re-development. George Wigram Allen, who had previously held isolated leases (including some leases in Glebe Point Road between Mitchell and Norton Streets), took a new head lease for most of the St Phillip's estate. He then assigned the leases to the Metropolitan Mutual Permanent Building and Investment Association as the financial intermediary responsible for funding the re-development and managing the tenancies.¹⁰

The lots running north from the current 119 Glebe Point Road to Norton street were treated differently, with Allen retaining the leases and directly financing their redevelopment. The old fire station site, 115-117 Glebe Point Road, and neighbouring lots such as those on which Park Terrace now stands, were different again – in these cases Allen assigned the leases to local business men. The Park Terrace lots (on Mitchell Street between Campbell Lane and Campbell Street) provide a valuable insight into the mechanics of re-development in this part of St Phillip's. Allen held the new leases on these lots and had already built the new Park Terrace homes when rates were assessed in

⁵ For more information on Reeve, see Max Solling, *Grandeur and Grit* (Sydney, 2007), p. 100

⁶ Glebe's early Rate Books did not provide unadjusted values so, for consistency, this article uses the council adjusted values throughout. Until 1907, the Rate Books also provided only annual values, not improved capital values, but thereafter the former was about 10% of the improved capital value (although the old fire station site was a little different).

⁷ Annual value has been used as an estimate of annual rent. In the Glebe Rate Books sighted, when there was an appeal over the Council's valuation the rent was noted indicating that actual rent was the key criterion for valuations in the nineteenth century.

⁸ For a photo see of one such shop, see Views taken during Cleansing Operations, Quarantine Area, Sydney, 1900, Vol. III, under the supervision of Mr George McCredie, F.I.A., N.S.W - Rear of 585 George St showing Weir's Butcher Shop, Sydney (NSW), NSW State Archives and Records, available on-line at https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/image/12487_a021_a021000041

⁹ Weekly rentals have been converted to an annual figure for the purpose of comparison.

¹⁰ <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=2427857>

February 1875. Within a year, these leases had been assigned to S. H. Holmes; they were later assigned to Robert Thallon. On Thallon's death in 1915, the leases reverted to the Trustees of G.W Allen's estate who remained the lessee until the leases expired in the early 1920s.¹¹

The key early changes on the parcel of land comprising the old fire station site and 115-7 Glebe Point Road happened between rate assessment dates. The leases on these lots were still held by Reeve in February 1876; by February 1877 a new two-storey house had already been built on the top old fire station lot and the leases for the entire parcel of land had been assigned to local businessman and occupant of 115 Glebe Point Road, Edward Carr Fortescue. After Fortescue died in 1910, the Trustees for G. W. Allen's estate became the lessee, indicating these leases had been assigned to Fortescue for the term of his life.¹² There is no record of the other conditions attached to these lease assignments, but a little background research indicates it is likely Fortescue's role was one of managing agent rather than co-financier of the redevelopment of the old fire station site and adjoining lots at 115-117 Glebe Point Road.

Fortescue and Allen's Roles

Fortescue seems to have been an enterprising young English immigrant. He was listed in *Sands Directory* as a carpenter residing in Mitchell Street from 1861 to 1864. He held a patent for a new 'smoke consuming furnace' and began promoting his furnaces in earnest at the end of August 1866¹³. Fortescue also established a grocery business on the corner of Mitchell Street and Glebe Point Road by October 1865, although he ran into difficulties the following year.

A major fire broke out on Glebe Point Road in the early morning of 2nd August, 1866.¹⁴ The fire reportedly started in the middle of a row of one and two-storey weatherboard buildings – some residences and others commercial or mixed use. It quickly spread south-east to Mitchell Street, destroying three buildings on lots leased to Robert Reeves (a cottage, a greengrocer and, on the corner of Mitchell Street, a grocer occupied by Fortescue); the fire also spread north-west destroying the buildings on three lots leased by George Allen Jnr. Three city fire brigades (The Insurance Brigade, No 1. Volunteer and No. 2 Volunteer) attended the fire. The seven buildings destroyed were already 'engulfed in flames' when the brigades arrived so, with the help of locals, the Brigades concentrated on checking the fire's north-westward spread. There was no loss of life, and some property (stock and personal effects) was saved, but the loss of property was estimated at £1500 – a substantial sum at the time. Fortescue and the other occupants had to re-locate, and lessees had to choose whether to re-build or forgo their rent for the few years remaining on their leases. Both Allen and Reeve reportedly had fire insurance with different companies. Allen's lots were still shown as vacant allotments when rates were assessed in February 1868, but Reeve re-built quickly.¹⁵ By February 1868, after consolidating his three lots, he had built two shops – one narrower (now 117 Glebe Point Road) and the wider corner shop (now 115 Glebe Point Road). The corner shop had a

¹¹ See NSW Births Deaths and Marriages for Thallon's death.

¹² From 1915, the family law firm, Allen, Allen and Hemsley was listed as lessee and it held the leases until they expired in 1921.

¹³ Fortescue placed many advertisements for his furnace, beginning with one in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 30 Aug., 1866.

¹⁴ For a full account, see 'General Intelligence.', *Queanbeyan Age and General Advertiser*, 9 Aug., 1866 p. 2., <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article30636962>.

¹⁵ Reeve may have begun rebuilding just weeks after the fire, as Fortescue was the advertised contact for 'about 200 perches (or about 1,000 metres) of Mason's work'. (*SMH*, 15 Aug. 1866).

relatively high assessed valuation compared to others in the vicinity, perhaps partly due to its width but these lots were shallow compared to others on the block.¹⁶ Reeve's decision to build apparently solid structures when his leases had just a few years to run was a curious one unless re-building was a condition of his insurance policy. However, according to the newspaper report on the fire, the insured value of his three destroyed buildings was only £200, unlikely enough to pay for the large and deep two-storey building we see at 115-117 Glebe Point Road today.

Fortescue also reportedly held fire insurance, but for him the fire was the beginning of a difficult period. Fortescue presented to the NSW Court of Insolvency in November 1866 and was declared insolvent on 3rd December 1866.¹⁷ Insolvency was a very public process - each step was advertised to allow creditors to make their claims, as was each effort to liquidate assets to pay their claims - so Fortescue's case is easy to trace. Briefly, it began with a petition from another grocer as creditor. The Court assigned Fortescue's assets to an official assignee who attempted to liquidate these assets by public auction; when that did not suffice, Fortescue was officially listed as insolvent. Six months later creditors received a partial distribution. Then in November 1869, with debts still outstanding after three years, Fortescue's remaining assigned estate was re-assigned to two other grocers who acted as trustees for creditors in winding-up the estate.

Insolvency was not uncommon at the time, especially among small business people. Forty-five other insolvents were listed in the same four-week period as Fortescue. There was one large company, as well as Thomas Metcalfe and Thomas Ambrose Foss and their grocery company, Metcalfe and Foss (Brisbane Branch), along with a gentleman and some graziers. There were also many small business men including a saddler, a butcher, a builder, a publican, and several storekeepers.¹⁸ In the 1860s there were no formal financial institutions to provide small businesses with working capital; some relied on family networks but others, forced to depend on trade credit, sailed too close to the wind. The fire may well have been enough to push Fortescue into insolvency – maybe he was not really insured, or maybe he did not get full compensation for partly damaged stock, and we shall never know whether his strenuous efforts to market his patented furnace from August 1866 helped or hindered his cause.

Fortescue was able to retain his 'tools of trade' and to earn an income as a grocer through most of this ordeal. He was listed as a grocer in *Sands Directory* in each successive year from 1865 and, just six months after being declared insolvent, advertised his address as his 'Glebe Store' (*SMH*, 8 July 1867). The Rate Books also show that by February 1868 Fortescue was the occupant of the newly built, larger store at 115 Glebe Point Road. Thereafter, Fortescue kept a lower profile. He did not trouble the Court of Insolvency again; nor did he try to market any inventions. Rather, he seems to have concentrated on building his grocery business. As part of that, he also continued the practice (common among grocers at the time) of acting as an *ad hoc* letting agent for vacant local properties.¹⁹ Fortescue must have become adept at the grocery business. He worked and lived above his grocery shop at 115 Glebe Point Road until he died at home in 1910. From Max Solling's descriptions, running a grocery shop in an area like St Phillip's was challenging.²⁰ That Fortescue

¹⁶ The annual council assessed value for 115 Glebe Point Road was £45 in 1868. The only property on the block running up to Norton Street with a higher initial assessed value was a 'house and paddock' (probably running through to Campbell Lane), which initially was assessed at £54 but this was reduced to £40 on appeal.

¹⁷ See 'Insolvency Court', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Dec., 1866, p. 5.

¹⁸ 'Insolvencies during the month.', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 Dec., 1866, p. 7.

¹⁹ Fortescue began advertising vacancies soon after he set up his grocery shop. (See *SMH*, 23 Oct., 1865, Advertising p. 5)

²⁰ Solling, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-114, 183-4

traded through the 1890s depression, when many others went under, is a testament to the business acumen he developed. But there is no indication that he became anything other than a savvy grocer.

The development on the old fire station site and adjoining lots at 115 Glebe Point Road absorbed considerable funds in 1876, 1879 and 1880. Since Fortescue was insolvent until early in 1870, it is improbable that he accumulated enough by 1876 to begin paying for this redevelopment. Fortescue's more likely role as assigned lessee was managing agent, a role for which he was well equipped. By 1876 he had spent over 10 years developing the general skills of his trade and the insights and local knowledge of his St Phillip's market. Those insights and local knowledge were just as relevant to property management as to his grocery business and Fortescue also had direct experience in property letting going back to 1865. Allen's choice of Fortescue as managing agent showed a shrewd assessment of his capabilities.

By contrast, George Wigram Allen was a developer. He had represented Glebe in the Legislative Assembly from 1865, was appointed Speaker in 1875, and by then was on the way to becoming a substantial landowner and developer across Sydney and in places beyond. Although Allen commonly used financial institutions to finance his larger property developments (including most of the St Phillip's Estate), he certainly had the resources to directly finance the redevelopment of this, potentially commercial, precinct of the St Phillip's Estate. As the ultimate owner of the leases for 115-117 Glebe Point Road and the old fire station lots, Allan also had the incentive to finance their development to increase his rental income.²¹ And in the event of any of the contingencies specified in Allen's agreement with his managing agents, Allen was the residual claimant as we have seen from the reassignment of these leases to his estate after the death of his managing agents.

The Form and Pace of Redevelopment

The top lot on the old fire station site was redeveloped immediately after Allen acquired the leases on this site and the adjoining 115-7 Glebe Point Road. In February 1877, the Rate Books show a new two-storey house (now part of the old fire station complex) had been constructed with an annual assessed value of £24 – an impressive jump from the assessment of the lot the previous year, and higher than the new homes built on Allen's leases at neighbouring Park Terrace.

Allen and Fortescue's attention then shifted to the two Glebe Point Road properties backing onto the old fire station site. The annual assessed value of 117 Glebe Point Road increased substantially from February 1876 to February 1877, which may indicate this lot was improved immediately after the new leases were taken although the evidence on this is ambiguous.²² More clear-cut are the

²¹ We shall never know whether Allan paid his managing agents such as Fortescue a fixed amount for managing each lot, or whether he shared the net rental income (after deducting costs such as rates and maintenance) with them, but some form of profit sharing would have given them an incentive to maximize the rental return.

²² The lot's usage changed from shop to 'house and shop' in the February 1877 Rate Book, suggesting some improvement in the property. However, there is also evidence of attempted profit taking driving the increase in assessed value. E. J. Hinder (a chemist) seems to have been a long-term occupant of 117 Glebe Point Road. The 1868 Rate Book for Bishopthorpe Ward is badly water damaged so it is difficult to be certain of his occupancy then. He was listed as the occupant in the next available Rate Books for 1875-77, but he re-located in October 1877 (*SMH*, 27 Oct, 1877) and advertised that the new occupant (another chemist) had no connection with his business (*SMH*, 14 Nov. 1877). Hinder's move is unlikely to have been prompted by wholesale building work – there was no increase in the lot's valuation the next year. In fact, the valuation went down, suggesting that in 1877 Allen and/or Fortescue may have imposed a rent hike on Hinder who called their bluff by relocating. However, by the February 1879 rate assessment Hinder was back at 117 Glebe

changes in 1879 and 1880. First, the annual value of 117 Glebe Point Road jumped from £46 in February 1879 to £58 in February 1880, which was enough for the smaller shop to leapfrog the value of its larger neighbour. The next year the annual value of 115 Glebe Point Road jumped, from £56 in February 1880 to £70 in February 1881. The intriguing question is what type of improvements underlay these substantial increases in value in 1879 and 1880. The existing buildings were only 12 years old when this work began, and they still had relatively high annual valuations. The benefits of demolishing and fully re-building them are questionable.²³ In addition there is no evidence that Fortescue or E. J. Hinder, occupant of 117 Glebe Point Road, re-located for wholesale re-building of the site in 1879 or 1880. Both followed the normal procedure in paying the rates on the property they occupied in about the third quarter of each year; neither advertised their re-location in 1879 or 1880 although both had done so on previous occasions. The separate increases in valuation for the 2 lots – one in 1879 and the other in 1880 - indicate the work was piecemeal rather than a wholesale re-building. Yet the two shops, which are still standing today, have a common frontage which would have been difficult to achieve with piecemeal re-building. Their parapet frontage and other detailing are also more commonly associated with the 1870s than the 1860s²⁴, raising the possibility that the improvement to these lots consisted of adding a second storey and/or extending the rear of the earlier buildings. Detailed investigation by a heritage architect might be the only way to determine exactly how the buildings were improved.

The improvements to 115-117 Glebe Point Road made good sense though. Mitchell Street was a major thoroughfare from Glebe Point Road to the Park (now Wentworth Park) Road and on to the city for anyone wanting to avoid the toll on the Pyrmont Bridge. Glebe Point Road, at the intersection with Mitchell Street, was becoming a busy neighbourhood commercial precinct. By 1880 a hotel (*The Currency Lass*) and the Australian Joint Stock Bank occupied the corners on one side. On the other, a string of shops specialising in everyday essentials spread away from the corners – going northwest, after Fortescue corner shop, was Hinder's chemist, a greengrocer and a butcher. Going southeast, another grocer occupied the corner lot, then there was an ironmonger, yet another grocer, a draper, a chemist and a greengrocer. Beyond this cluster in each direction, the usage was a mix of residential and commercial, with the later mostly offering less essential items such as dressmaking and confectionary.

Allen may initially have had hopes of extending this neighbourhood commercial precinct down Mitchell Street onto the old fire station site. Such hopes are consistent with Allen retaining direct control over the site (and neighbouring Park Terrace) rather than assigning the leases to a finance company; and they are also consistent with Allen first developing the lot closest to Glebe Point Road, and with the form of that development – a two-storey house with scope for mixed use. The house has no set-back and no ground floor hallway, so the front room could easily have been used as a place of business. However, after several short-term occupants, the two-storey house's first relatively long-term tenant was William Jones, a quarryman who occupied the house from 1879 to 1882, during which time the Rate Books describe the property's use as a 'house'. Increasingly, retail and commercial development was focused on Glebe Point Road rather than the side streets as Glebe Point Road houses were replaced by shops and mixed-use premises (including those on Allen's other leases closer to Norton Street) in the early 1880s. The abolition of the Pyrmont Bridge toll in 1884

Point Road. (*Sands Directory* though, continued to show the previous occupant at that address in 1879, confirming the general view that these early issues of *Sands* were a year or so behind.)

²³ When improved capital values were also given in the Rate Books from 1907, they were typically about 10 times the annual value. Applying this ratio, demolition and wholesale re-building of 115 Glebe Point Road yielded only £140 increase in improved capital value in 1881 – surely less than the cost of a full re-build?

²⁴ Thanks to Neil Macindoe for information on this point.

meant less traffic on Mitchell Street and the opening of the tramway service to Glebe Point in 1892 reinforced the trend towards Glebe Point Road becoming more of a high street-style shopping strip, rather than the focus for a series of neighbourhood commercial precincts.

In the face of this shift towards Glebe Point Road as the focus for commercial and retail trade, the remaining lots on the old fire station site were used for more peripheral or low-cost activities, and the house lot's use and users from 1884 to 1906 were intertwined with these. The corner lot on the old fire station site was vacant at the 1877 and 1878 rate assessments, although the cottage was demolished, or perhaps converted – by 1878 the sole structure was described as a workshop with an annual value of £6. Then a more substantial workshop structure was built. The Rate Book values indicate it was let jointly with the undeveloped centre lot from 1879 to 1881. Like the house, the corner lot workshop initially attracted short-term occupants. However, in 1881 the Cawley family began a long-term tenancy.

Cawley and Sons first occupied the workshop with adjoining yard in 1881, then William Cawley occupied the workshop only from 1881 to 1894, followed by Charles Cawley who remained the occupant until 1921. The Cawleys were farriers, or blacksmiths who specialised in making and fitting horseshoes, but farriers were multiskilled tradesman of a type common in the nineteenth century. They often provided a range of services for horses, including looking after their teeth; and they also did other types of customised blacksmith work. The Cawley family seem to have been substantial operators and, for a time, had a second workshop nearby. Their workshop on the corner lot of the old fire station site was described in the Rate Books variously as a forge, a blacksmith's shop, a smith's shop and a farrier. After the Cawleys vacated in 1921, another farrier, David Burke, occupied the premises with different partners from 1922 to 1926 but the farrier trade was a casualty of the downturn and changing technology. After a total of 45 years continuous use as a farrier's or blacksmiths shop, the corner lot was vacant from 1927 to at least 1932, but possibly until 1936.

The centre lot remained undeveloped until 1892. The sole structure shown on the Surveyor General's map in 1889/90 was along the rear boundary, probably a shed of some kind.²⁵ After being let jointly with the corner lot, the centre lot seems to have been vacant in 1882, and its use in 1883 is unclear. Thereafter the centre lot was let jointly with the top or house lot when George Charlton was listed in the Rate Books as the occupant of a 'house and shop' from 1884-88, with a combined annual value of £59. Charlton was listed in *Sands Directory* at the same address, and in 1888 his occupation was given as greengrocer. In 1889 and 1890, *Sands Directory* lists another greengrocer at these lots; then in 1891 another new occupant moved into the two lots, with the use described in the Rate Books as a 'wood and coal yard and house'. Then, in 1892, a fire station house with an assessed value of £47 was built on the centre lot and the Glebe Volunteer Fire Brigade became its new occupant.²⁶ Their new building has an impressive Victorian façade across its wide frontage, but behind the facade was a simple structure - one wide, shallow room, probably with bare brick walls and (according to locals) a stone floor over which the current floor was built, with a stable at the rear of the block.

Glebe Volunteer Fire Brigade, 1880-1906

²⁵ Department of Lands (Survey Branch, Surveyor General's Office), *City of Sydney survey section*, State Library of New South Wales, No. Z/ M Ser 4 811.17/1, available on-line at [NSWSL Glebe and Forest Lodge Digital Maps](#)

²⁶ The Glebe Volunteer Fire Brigade Captain paid the rates for part of 1892 although the Brigade is not listed in the Rate Books as the occupant until the following year.

This raises the question of where the Glebe Volunteer Fire Brigade was located from 1880, when it moved from Derby Place to Mitchell Street, until the latter part of 1892 when it moved into this new fire station house.²⁷ The answer seems to have been on land fronting Mitchell Street between the two-storey house and the rear of Fortescue's shop at 115 Glebe Point Road. From 1881 to 1892 *Sands Directory* consistently placed the Brigade at the last location fronting Mitchell Street before the intersection with Glebe Point Road.²⁸ The Rate Books do not list the Brigade at all until 1889, but this was because its location was not assessed for rates. The 1889 Rate Book listing is curious²⁹ but, like *Sands Directory*, the Rate Books for 1890, 1891 and at the 1892 assessment all put the Brigade between the two-storey house and Glebe Point Road. This was relatively undeveloped land, likely with a simple storage structure and, once assessed for rates, Council gave it an annual value of £13.

The Glebe Volunteer Fire Brigade relied in its early years on concerts and other fund-raising events. It had little equipment and limited storage needs, so a spot between the house lot and 115 Glebe Point Road with a simple storage facility may well have sufficed in 1880. The location also had compensations. Fortescue, as the managing agent of a largely undeveloped site, is likely to have been supportive. And the Brigade's new Superintendent, Adam Newton, was licensee of the Great Britain Hotel (since demolished) on the corner of Campbell and Mitchell Streets, adjoining Lorne Terrace.³⁰ The Brigade's proximity to Newton's premises meant volunteers had a convenient meeting space.³¹

However, the Brigade's funding and its needs changed dramatically over the 1880s as firefighting became more professional and more reregulated, beginning with the creation of the Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board in 1884. As a registered volunteer brigade, the Glebe Brigade received an annual subsidy until 1901 when part payment of volunteer firefighters replaced subsidies. In the interim, the subsidy meant the Glebe Brigade had an assured income stream, but its needs were also escalating. It was subject to regulation, including scrutiny of response times which necessitated an on-site fireman to sound the alarm for his fellow volunteers.³² And, after several major fires in the city, the level of equipment expected of all brigades was increasing. The Glebe Brigade, like some other volunteer companies, began to fall behind. In the late 1880s it still relied on a hand pulled hose reel and a manually operated pump.³³ But it had no facilities to keep a horse or to store larger

²⁷ For more information on the Glebe Brigade, see https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/glebe_fire_brigade and on the sector more generally, see Colin Adrian, *Fighting Fire: a century of service* (Sydney, 1984)

²⁸ The exception was in 1882, a year in which there were other clear errors in the Mitchell Street listings.

²⁹ In 1889 the Rate Books show the Brigade as occupying the location Charlton had just vacated but this may have been a simple mistake. The assessed value is low; and for the following years the Rate Books place the Brigade back on the last site before Glebe Point Road.

³⁰ *Sands Directory* places Newton's hotel on the other side of Mitchell Street, as well as in its correct location (adjoining Lorne Terrace), as shown in the Rate Books.

³¹ It was a common practice for licensees to be in charge of the early volunteer brigades but they were controversially prohibited from being members of any associated brigade after 1884. See Adrian, *op.cit.*

³² There are numerous references to an on-site fireman or engine-keeper at the Glebe station who sounded the alarm from the mid-1880s. See for instance <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/13760977#>

³³ A list of equipment held by volunteer and professional brigades was published in the Government and Parliamentary listings in *Sands Directory*, from 1886. Although these lists may have been a year or so out of date, they show how under-equipped the Glebe Brigade, and other volunteer brigades, were. The Glebe' Brigade's equipment list from 1886 to 1894 included only a hose, a hose reel designed to be pulled by firemen and a manual engine (ie. a hand operated pump). In 1895 a single horse was added; then in 1897 a horse drawn hose carriage was added, but the Brigade did not acquire ladders or a second horse until after the move to St John's Road in 1906 and a steam driven pump (known as a steamer) came even later. See also 'History: Excerpts from Ted Holloway's letter', *The Glebe Society Bulletin*, 1975 (5), at

equipment or a long ladder. A newspaper report on the Brigade's annual meeting in February 1885 made an explicit call for better facilities. It lauded the 'stalwart' young firefighters then stated that "the building they now occupy is inadequate for their purposes; but, upon a proper representation being made this will, doubtless, be remedied."³⁴

George Charlton, who occupied both the house lot and the centre lot from 1884 to 1888, may well have provided a partial solution to the Brigade's inadequate facilities. Charlton was listed in *Sands Directory* as a greengrocer. There is no evidence he was a member of the Brigade prior to his occupying the centre and house lots in 1884. Nor do we know why Charlton left Mitchell Street in 1888 – perhaps his business fell victim to the deepening depression.³⁵ But if he was not associated with the Brigade beforehand, Charlton certainly did build a strong and lasting relationship with it. By 1894 he was the Brigade's foreman and in 1896 he became its Captain – a position he held for over 10 years.³⁶ If Charlton did help accommodate the Brigade when he was its greengrocer neighbour, he was not the only local to provide active support. Chas Cawley – farrier and long-term neighbour on the corner lot - provided New Year refreshments for the Brigade on at least one occasion.³⁷ Little snippets like this show the goodwill and community support engendered by the Brigade volunteers. But goodwill could not substitute fully for a permanent, purpose-built station house.

The Brigade's need for the new station house had been obvious from at least 1884. What is less obvious is how this need was finally met in 1892. There was no publicity about the impending construction of a new station house that could provide a clue as to how it was funded. Nor was there any publicity about an official opening that might have revealed who footed the bill. This is in stark contrast to the publicity given two years later to the opening of the new Balmain station house, funded by the Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board. But construction of the new Balmain station house was accompanied by that Brigade's change to fully-paid or professional firefighters. The Glebe Brigade and its supporters were determined to remain a volunteer unit in the 1890s, and with still limited regulatory control over volunteer brigades, the Board was not yet funding their new stations. The Glebe Council had its own financial difficulties by the late 1880s and, far from funding a new station house for the Brigade, began charging it rates in 1889. In the absence of any feasible alternatives, the most likely external financier must be G. W. Allen. He was the main potential beneficiary of the increase in rent flowing from development of the lot. Allen also had been a strong supporter of the Brigade, hosting a major event for it at Toxteth Park in 1880.³⁸ But Allen had died suddenly in July 1885, so funding would have been up to the trustees of his estate. Maybe Fortescue contributed, but 1892 was not a good time for any small business operator to be making contributions. The alternative is that the Brigade saved enough from its annual subsidies to build the

https://www.glebesociety.org.au/wp-content/uploads/bulletins/1974_05.pdf, for a personal recollection which includes just one horse at Mitchell Street.

³⁴ 'Glebe Fire Brigade.', *Evening News*, 14 Feb., 1885, p. 4.

³⁵ Charlton did not move far – he was listed in *Sands Directory* from 1889 to 1894 at 106 The Glebe Road, which was then about mid-way between Mitchell Street and St Johns Road. His occupation was given as a horse dealer in 1890, then as a horse clipper and cab proprietor, by which point he may have been in a family partnership as the business was called Charlton and Sons. That these new occupations involved horses suggests Charlton's greengrocer business had been a horse and cart trade, so the house and centre lots at the old fire station site were ideal for his purposes.

³⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 Jan., 1896, p.3

³⁷ *The Australian Star*, 3 Jan., 1896, p. 3

³⁸ Baptist Union's *Banner of Truth*, 4 February, 1880, p. 70

<http://www.baptisthistory.org.au/journals/bot/bot54a?sessid=6dd6fba2a3cbf969969d1fd984f22de4>

station house itself. More research³⁹ may uncover the answer but the fact that no-one organised an official opening suggests the new station's financing may remain a mystery. Even the iconic photograph of the new station house with two horses and carts and a large assembly of uniformed fireman, has been dated about four years after the building was constructed.⁴⁰

The Brigade occupied its new station towards the end of 1892. It also began using the two-storey house as the engine keepers' accommodation from 1894. But the Brigade's occupancy was to prove relatively short lived. In 1906, after just 14 years in the new station house and adjoining house, the Brigade moved to a new, much larger station in St John's Road, funded and built by the NSW government through the Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board. While the Brigade and its supporters were still holding firm to a volunteer brigade, its members were already partly-paid and it would not be long before it became a fully professional unit.

Hiatus After the Fire Brigade:

After the Brigade re-located, their fire station and the two-storey house were vacant at the 1907 rate assessment but *Sands Directory* shows W. R. Purnell, a produce merchant, as the occupier of the old fire station, and George Munro as the occupant of the two-storey house in 1908.⁴¹ Fortescue was also active in recruiting occupants for the land between his shop and the house lot – mostly small commercial operators including a plumber, a newsagent and a bootmaker, George McGovern and by 1910, there were 2 occupants on this land. While the old fire station site buildings may have had limited market appeal, Fortescue was doing his best to ensure a good rental stream.⁴²

After Fortescue died in 1910 and the Trustees of G. W. Allen's Estate, and then Allen, Allen and Hemsley, became the old fire station site lessee, vacancies became more common. First, the extra occupants at the rear of 115 Glebe Point Road disappeared, although McGovern moved to the two-storey house late in 1910 and remained there until 1920. However, Purnell, the product merchant, moved from the fire station lot to Abercrombie Street, Chippendale in 1913-4. Thereafter, that lot seems to have been vacant until 1917 when *Sands Directory* and the Triennial Valuation Books show Arthur Allen as the occupant, with the latter giving the use as a storeroom.

After the leases on the old fire station site and adjacent lots expired, and management of the site reverted to the Trustees of the St Phillip's Estate, the vacancies escalated. Arthur Allen stopped using the centre/fire station lot as a store and *Sands Directory* listed no further occupants for this lot from 1921 up to and including its last issue in 1932-3. The Cawley's vacated the blacksmith's shop on the corner lot in 1921. Other farriers occupied it to 1926, but *Sands Directory* listed no further occupants from 1927 to 1932-3. McGovern also vacated the house lot after 1920. He was followed by short term tenants to 1925, but *Sands Directory* listed no further occupants from 1926 to 1932-3. There are no other sources to verify the picture that *Sands Directory* presents, nor to extend it past 1932-3. However, it is likely that 1 of the 3 lots was vacant from 1921 to 1926, and that all three lots were vacant from 1927 to 1932, and possibly to 1936. These vacancies meant the site was

³⁹ Archives held at the Museum of Fire (<https://mgsw.org.au/organisations/museum-fire/>) may shed more light on this, as may G. W. Allen's personal papers.

⁴⁰ This photo date is consistent with the Brigade's acquisition of its first horse (with a second horse on loan or visiting). For the photo, see Solling, *op.cit.* p. 109, or for an on-line version see the copy in the heritage listing at <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/HeritageltemImage.aspx?ID=5062463#ad-image-2>

⁴¹ From this point we need to rely on *Sands Directories* as most subsequent Rate Books do not list occupants. The exceptions are the Triennial Valuation Books available from 1917 to 1920.

⁴² Fortescue had also become the managing agent for 119 Glebe Point Road.

generating no income. Since the St Phillip's Estate Trust still had to pay Council rates, the site was in fact a net cost to the Trust at least from 1926 to 1932 but probably for most of the period 1921 to 1936.

A new lease of life for the site

The St Phillip's Trustees appointed Harry Hibble as managing agent for the Estate. Hibble was a bank manager at Balmain for eight years until he resigned to set up a real estate business in 1910 (*SMH*, 26 Feb., 1910). Max Solling discusses evidence showing that Hibble was already collecting rent on the Estate by 1913.⁴³ From 1921 when the leases on the old fire station site expired, Hibble was the managing agent responsible for the payment of rates. When the Glebe Administration Board became responsible for all the Church's property in 1930, Hibble's real estate business', Clubb and Hibble, was listed as managing agent but Hibble remained its public face on the Estate. Hibble's views on public housing in Britain would seem extreme today (*SMH*, Feb. 17, 1928), but he undoubtedly kept a close eye on the St Phillip's Estate and served the Anglican Church well as its managing agent over a long period.

The vacancies on the old fire station site were ultimately Hibble's responsibility. But even if the St Phillip's Trustees and the new Glebe Administration Board carried out basic maintenance, these properties would have been difficult to let. The two-storey house had been used as either a place of business or an adjunct to a business for most of the time since 1876. The old farrier's shop and the old fire station had a narrower range of possible uses as a primary place of business. With a combined frontage of 38' and a depth is 50', it was a small site containing an old fire station house, stables and blacksmith's shop. These buildings proved well-suited though, to a new start-up company - Automatic Screw Pty. Ltd - founded by Hibble's son, Miles.

Miles Hibble founded Automatic Screw in 1936 at the age of 21, borrowing the start-up capital from his father to set up operations in the old fire station.⁴⁴ His company was a precision engineering firm, its name taken from the machinery employed. The automatic screw machine is a type of machine tool – an automatic lathe that can mass produce metal components to tight tolerances.⁴⁵ Hibble's company was part of an industry group that developed to supply components to the emerging electrical goods and motor vehicle industries in the 1920s, and more particularly from the mid-1930s. Hibble's first order was for electrical components for AWA. Other small modern engineering firms such as ERI also located or re-located to Glebe, but they more commonly chose larger sites along Wentworth Park Road and Bay Street where a cluster of engineering and repair works had developed. There is a strong sense of historical contrast, though, in Hibble's choice of location. The corner lot's use as farriers and blacksmith's shop for 40 years represented nineteenth century metal-working; Hibble's firm was at the forefront of twentieth century metal-working, albeit in the role of a small component supplier.

The precision engineering capabilities Australia developed through small firms like Automatic Screw, and some much larger concerns, were critical to the manufacture of a wide range of products which had to be locally made under war-time conditions from 1939. Some munitions such as ammunition

⁴³ Solling, *op.cit.* p. 188. Hibble's initial appointment may have been as a rent collector for one of the lessees because even the earliest of the 45 year leases on the St Phillip's Estate would not have expired by 1912.

⁴⁴ The company, re-named Hibble Industries, is still in business. See <http://www.hibble.com.au/about.htm>

⁴⁵ Unlike modern CAD machines where automation is achieved by computers, the earlier machines were mechanically automated by cams that guided the lathe.

and rifles were produced only in government factories, but even this relied on private sector component suppliers. Some other munitions and components could be obtained from private suppliers by simple tender, but cost-plus contracting was more common when the suppliers needed to produce totally new goods. The government also established annexes on suppliers' sites when their capacity to produce new goods was constrained. These annexes were usually operated by the private supplier with oversight by the Department of Supply, and then the Department of Munitions. The list of government annexes in the official war history is a long one and includes an annex at ERI in Glebe (for the manufacture of bomb pistols and primers), and one at Slazenger in Alexandria (for the manufacture of wooden rifle components and boxes).⁴⁶ Automatic Screw is not included on the list, but the company's own web-site says its 'factory was taken over for the war effort,' to produce firing pins, rifle sights and other essential material.⁴⁷

Rifle production was one of the first to be ramped up - from 'a few hundred' rifles before the war production reached 3,800 in the first year of the war and continued to climb, with a war-time total of over 400,000 rifles – but the supply of machine tools like automatic screw machines was a constraint on production in this and many other industries until Australia began making its own machinery.⁴⁸ From 1942 the government had extensive control over the allocation of resources but in the early stages of the war it worked with private suppliers that had the necessary machine tools rather than commandeer their equipment. Automatic Screw was one of the few private firms with the modern machine tool needed for rifle manufacturing, but it had only been in operation for 3 years at the outbreak of war. And it operated in premises that seem to have been little changed from the 1890s when they served as a blacksmith's shop and fire station with stables. It is conceivable that the government built the annex at Automatic Screw's premises to expand its capacity, but that this annex was omitted from the official war history list – perhaps because of its small size.

The Rate Books do record a massive increase in the improved capital value of the combined corner lot and centre old fire station lots, from £500 in January 1939 to £850 in January 1940.⁴⁹ This massive jump (after only a £50 increase over the previous 5 years), is strong evidence that the saw-toothed structure standing today on the corner lot and extending across the centre lot behind the old fire station, was built in 1939 – perhaps after the declaration of war. That the corner lot portion of this structure is still referred to locally as 'the annex' is also consistent with the terminology used for government annexes during the war.

Automatic Screw remained a private company, so not a lot more is known about it at this stage, other than that it relocated to a larger factory in Rockdale in 1952, using the opportunity to install new, more modern precision engineering equipment, before finally moving to Wyong in 1980. Automatic Screw's move from the old fire station site in 1952 was part of a more general process of deindustrialisation of the inner city, driven by manufacturers' need to areas with larger lots and bigger factories, to capture economies of scale. The alternative of remaining in small inner-city workshops and factories spelt economic death for those whose competitors had already found advantages in larger scale production. Automatic Screw's site was small and after an early establishment period it might well have made an earlier exit from Glebe, had it not been for the 1939-45 war and the shortage of building materials in the early post-war years.

⁴⁶ See D. P. Mellor, *The Role of Science and Industry, Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Series 4, Volume V (Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1958), pp. 50-56

⁴⁷ See fn 44.

⁴⁸ Mellor, *op.cit.*, Ch 8 and Ch 15.

⁴⁹ The valuation of the house lot remained constant at £350

In the late 1940s there were still many small manufacturers in Glebe (including 14 engineering firms) who provided substantial employment, but some were pleased to see these factories gradually move out of the densely settled parts of Glebe.⁵⁰ Even those like Automatic Screw that used modern technology impacted on nearby residents. Janice Challinor, in her interviews with locals, uncovered the story of one resident who, when walking up Mitchell Street to Glebe Public School (with bare feet) in the late 1930's, had to cross the road to avoid the filings on the footpath outside the screw factory and, on windy days, she said it was even worse because the filings would be blown across the road onto the opposite footpath too.⁵¹

Despite the local residents' mixed feelings about Glebe's deindustrialisation, in Automatic Screw's case there was a very positive legacy: its 16-year occupancy and re-purposing of the site for a modern industrial use ensured the old fire station's survival after a long period of vacancy; and it left behind a solidly built saw-toothed annex in place of a nineteenth century blacksmith's forge and stables. In short, Automatic Screw provided the completed structure which later became the *de facto* community centre.

The site as a warehouse

In the years after Automatic Screw vacated the site, the Glebe Estate attracted publicity for its increasingly derelict condition. In that period the old fire station site was described in Rate Books as a house and two factories, suggesting it had at least some separate tenancies from 1953 to 1973. However, the known tenants – those who submitted development applications to alter the use of the site - used the whole site including the house, as a warehouse and office. The first, in 1955, was Component Parts Pty. Ltd/Belmont Trading Company which used the site for the storage of screws, nuts and bolts. Another, in 1970, was Australian Chicago Products Pty/Ltd which used the site to warehouse motor parts. These relatively mobile commercial tenants were probably sufficient to ensure the Glebe Administration Board kept the site weatherproof. There is casual evidence that the site was not as derelict as some other properties in the St Phillip's Estate by the 1970s in the Glebe Administration Board's application for a new torrens title on the lot in October 1973. This showed the old fire station site (including the house) was occupied on a weekly tenancy, while five other new lots on the same DP (mostly on Campbell Street) were vacant.⁵² But while the old fire station site is likely to have been weatherproof and tenantable when the Glebe Estate was sold to the Commonwealth Government in October 1974, it was still a warehouse with adjoining house and far from fit from its new purposes as a temporary Project Office and more especially its long-term role as a People's Hall or *de facto* community centre. The companion article to this takes up the story of the old fire station from 1974.

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⁵⁰ See Max Solling, 'Glebe's Industrial History', *The Bulletin*, April/May 2006

(https://www.glebesociety.org.au/wp-content/uploads/bulletins/2006_03.pdf)

⁵¹ See the companion article to this one at <https://www.glebesociety.org.au/ofs-1975-2018/>,

⁵² DP 246373, Lot 4