

JACKSONS LANDING

The Pyrmont Ultimo peninsula was inhabited by clans of the Eora nation, who occupied most of the Sydney basin when the First Fleet arrived in 1788. Early colonial painters recorded clumps of trees separating areas of grassland: the typical pattern produced by Aboriginal fire-stick farming, to ensure year-round hunting. Clans around the harbour also harvested a wide variety of fish and shellfish. The peninsula was much higher than it is now: decades of quarrying have lowered the profile drastically.

As the settler population expanded, the peninsula was parcelled out to influential colonists (John Macarthur in Pyrmont, Surgeon Harris in Ultimo) who subdivided it. At the northern end, iron works and shipyards appeared, and stonemasons including the Saunders family began quarrying sandstone, mainly from the western slopes.

By the 1860s Pyrmont no longer resembled a picturesque European spa: it was an industrial suburb supporting a working population. Pyrmont and Glebe Island bridges provided reliable access to the city, and the peninsula hosted essential but dirty activities: the area was also polluted by sewage flowing into Blackwattle Creek, joining dairy effluent and offal from abattoirs here and on Glebe Island, shrouded by smoke from the iron works.

In the 1870s the Colonial Sugar Refining company began refining sugar in Pyrmont, carried by its own ships from northern New South Wales, Queensland and Fiji and unloaded at deep-water wharves. This evolved into a high-tech industry and CSR became a powerful influence throughout the South Pacific. The Pyrmont complex produced a range of sugar products, and employed hundreds of engineers, chemists and manual workers. After 1900, the company acquired more land for a distillery, and diversified from rum and raw alcohol into industrial chemicals.

When war broke out, CSR had the skilled personnel and the equipment to turn to the production of armaments. Nearby, the public school building accommodated naval offices, while Wentworth Park became an American base.

After the war, armaments were abandoned and sugar production resumed, but CSR began to diversify into building materials, first making Caneite by processing bagasse, the residue of sugar cane once sucrose is extracted. Light-weight building materials became the third leg of CSR's operations, leading eventually to a tragic involvement in mining and processing asbestos.

From the 1980s onwards, as other industries moved out of Pyrmont, the suburb became depressed. The working class society declined, to be replaced by distressed families. Churches moved out and pubs were closed or gentrified. By 1995 CSR's industrial site was sold to Lend Lease, to be redeveloped as Jacksons Landing, a collection of high-rise apartments. The short-lived Republic of Pyrmont (in 1992) expressed local protests against the removal of much of the older population and top-down urban planning.