

“Particularly suited to market gardens”: An horticultural history of Sunnybank

Hilda Maclean

Sunnybank, twelve kilometres south of Brisbane’s CBD, is transected by Stable Swamp Creek and an arm of Bulimba Creek. In the latter half of the 19th century the grazing properties in the Sunnybank district began to be subdivided into farms as the potential of the soil profile for intensive horticulture was recognised.¹

The South Coast railway between Yeerongpilly and Loganlea was opened in 1885 and Beenleigh Road formed a central axis through the suburb. Therefore Sunnybank was well positioned for the marketing of farm produce, fruit and vegetables, cut flowers and nursery products. By the 1920s, the horticultural industries were well established, peaking in the 1930s.



1. Davis Farm, Mains Rd, Sunnybank 1935 (BCC-B120-81164)

Thomas McMahon wrote a treatise about the merits of Sunnybank’s horticultural industries in August 1930 which is worth reproducing in its entirety as a contemporary overview of the industry.²

ALTHOUGH the district was settled many years ago, when Brisbane was in its infancy, little had been done up to 20 years ago [i.e. 1910] in the way of extensive development. Since then, however, Sunnybank has become one of the best-developed and prolific agricultural areas around the metropolis. The Sunnybank of these days may be said to comprise two sections-residential, immediately along the railway line, and the other a strip of rich ridgy country back from the line. On this section are several families holding well-improved farms of from 5 to 15 acres in extent. One of the earliest settlers was the late Mr. W. Soutter, a noted authority on agricultural matters, and for many years director of the Brisbane Acclimatisation Gardens, who often remarked that Sunnybank would one day come to be noted among the agricultural areas of the South Coast, and that it would be a prominent source of fruit and vegetable supply to the Brisbane markets. All this has come to

¹ *Telegraph* 2 February 1889:10

² McMahon, T. “Sunnybank - Fruit Growing and Market Gardening.” *Brisbane Courier* 30 August 1930:11

pass, and in the last 17 years the district has been developed in a remarkable manner.

The progress continues steadily, and fresh lands are being cleared and tilled. The area has many attractions, from a residential point of view, being high, healthy, and convenient to Brisbane—a motor drive of half an hour, and possibly some day there will be a demand for the rich farm lands for residential purposes. The farmers, however, are hopeful that this will not take place for years to come. Incidentally it may be mentioned that soon after the Great War a large area of the district was set apart as a soldiers' residential area, and was surveyed into quarter-acre blocks. There was no great rush of applicants, however, and the area is now being resurveyed into 10-acre blocks, which, it is expected, will be taken up readily by persons desirous of taking up farming or poultry raising.

When visiting the farming section of Sunnybank one is impressed with the well-kept, clean, well-tilled orchards and vegetable gardens. The homes of the farmers are very comfortable, and generally there is an appearance of prosperity in the district.

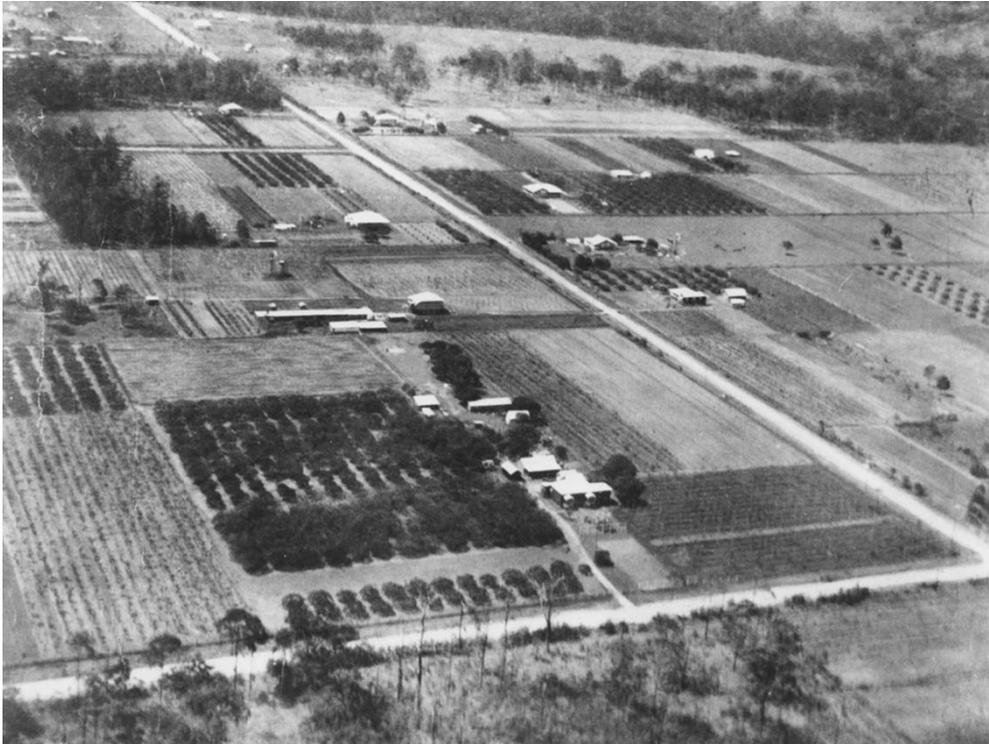


2. Soutter family's market garden at Coolibah, on Mains Road, Sunnybank, ca. 1940 (JOL neg. no. 118194)

The farmers are a hardworking lot, and employ up-to-date methods and implements. Those who were spoken to are not quite satisfied with the present markets and the prices they obtain for their products, and they regard the valuations put upon their properties by the Brisbane City Council as most unreasonable. They admit that they have good roads in their district, but are hopeful that the time is not far off when the valuations will be considerably reduced.

Grapes are grown and chiefly did well but the 1929 crop was disappointing owing to the havoc caused by hailstorms. Goose-berries are fast becoming a profitable product. The present season has been exceptionally good, and the demand for the fruit has been, constant, and the prices obtained very satisfactory. On the other hand strawberry growers have had a disheartening year. Tomatoes, if favoured with good

seasonal conditions, usually yield a prolific crop, and find a ready market in the Southern States. Citrus fruits, especially lemons, appear to do well. One farmer stated that the district could produce all the lemons the Brisbane markets could want, but there was little encouragement given to cultivate largely.



3. Aerial view of orchards at Sunnybank, November 1932 (JOL neg. no. 10716)

The cultivation of the papaw is out-standing in the district; plantations of this fruit are very general, and contain from 100 to 2000 trees, which at present are looking well, and give promise of a generous harvest. Sunnybank papaws have a reputation for their rich flavour, hence the reason why the farmers claim that the district is "the home of the papaw." The fruit invariably commands very satisfactory prices. It is estimated that between 5000 and 7000 bushels of papaws are sent to the Brisbane markets every season, and the demand increases every year. Custard apples are very largely cultivated in the district. On an average from 5000 to 6000 cases of this fruit are sent to the Brisbane and Southern markets each year.



4. *Queenslander Pictorial*, supplement to *The Queenslander*, 11 October 1918:28

Figs also are extensively and successfully cultivated, and the farmers claim that there are few places in the State which can grow this delicious fruit to such perfection. The trees, however, need much attention and care, and have to be sprayed frequently to protect them from insect pests. Something like 135 tons of figs are marketed each season In Brisbane; on an average 100 trees produce from 10 to 12 tons of fruit.



5. Fig Grower's Orchard and Residence, Sunnybank, 1937 (QSA Item ID 2156770)

The present season is amply demonstrating how well many kinds of vegetables can be grown in the district. There are acres of cauliflowers and cabbages and carrots and other root crops. Many of the farmers are sending to the Brisbane markets more than 100 dozen carrots every week.

Many of the settlers in the 1890s turned to the growing of pineapples and 100s of acres of land were put under cultivation. The pineapple crops started to give away to other general fruit (including avocados) and vegetable growing with the improvement of irrigation techniques.



6. Pineapple Plants, Sunnybank, 1937 (QSA Item ID 2156776)

By the 1930s, every farmer has an irrigation plant, some with piping through which many acres can be watered at the one time. The district is well watered by Bulimba Creek, and by bores. Water can be obtained almost anywhere, and the depth of the bores range from 100 feet to 400 feet. New settlers are coming into the district and establishing poultry farms. One such farm carries 4000 head of well-bred White Leghorns. The district also possesses a nursery, from which plants are sent all over the State.

Among the well-known names of farmers in the district are Parker, Pitt, Keys, Herdman, Chester, Clayton, Fulton, Gager, Chippendale, Gibbons, Streeter, Henderson, Davis, Netting, Harland, Johansen, Martin, Jackson, Telfor, Reedle, Pool, Woff, Shaw, Thomas, Howard, Judge, Arron, Rogers, Rawson, and Huxham.

However, there has been no mention in the roll call of growers of the significant labour force who were well established in the area by the 1880s.



7. Chinese Market Gardener – South East Queensland 1890s (JOL – reprinted in *With Courage and Hope*:17)

From the 1870s to the 1890s the Chinese were welcomed for the skills they brought in alleviating the critical shortage of fresh fruit and vegetables. Newspaper editorials of that day sang their praises.

The Chinese distinctly supply a want as Gardeners, pursuing their calling with a care and perseverance that white men could not and would not compete with in the tropics. By his economical habits of life the Celestial can supply the market at a cheap rate. In short, he is a born agriculturalist.³

Chinese market gardeners were particularly valued for their ability to convert low swampy land into highly productive food sources. Unlike other market gardeners in the Sunnybank area, they tended to grow quick rotation crops (lettuces, cabbages, radishes, shallots, carrots, etc.) rather than fruit trees and relied on diverting and managing surface water. When this dried up, they drew water, usually by bucket, from the numerous creeks.

³ *Geraldton Advocate and Johnstone River Guardian* 4 January 1895:2

Therefore the riparian locations of their gardens made them susceptible to frequent flooding. In March 1908, the flat near the Sunnybank railway station was inundated, and in the portion cultivated by the Chinese market gardeners, large quantities of growing vegetables were washed out by the roots.⁴



These are anxious days for the Chinese market gardeners in the suburban outskirts who are doing all in their power to avoid loss from flooding.

8. *The Telegraph* 23 February 1934:10

The metropolitan gardens were generally organised like this. A Chinese headman leased ground from the land owner. He then recruited young single men, generally from his extended family to migrate and work in the garden. Most came from the area around Hong Kong, or Canton. Many returned home after they paid off their passage, earned enough for the return ticket and to provide for a bride. However, many did not return home and did not marry as there were so few Chinese women in Queensland. A small number of Chinese did marry non-Chinese women, but these tended to be shopkeepers, merchants and restaurateurs.

Beryl Roberts in her collection *Stories of the Southside* captured the recollections of Herbert Bendell who grew up in Sunnybank in the 1920s. His story is one of the very few which describes the daily routine of the Chinese market gardener. Herbert remembered that Chinese market gardeners diligently grew small crops throughout Eight Miles Plains, Runcorn, Sunnybank, Sunnybank Hills and Coopers Plains.

Herb recalled:

Warrigal Road, linking Padstow and Beenleigh Roads, was known to us as Chinaman Road. Two market gardens, efficiently farmed by Hop Sing and Gu Lee, employed a number of Chinese farmhands to produce first class vegetables.

⁴ The Week 20 March 1908:14

The Chinese gardeners who tended the swampy area near the Sunnybank Railway Station, often sought the veterinary knowledge my uncle [Alfred Bendell], when their overfed horse developed some gastric ailment.

I was intrigued by the Chinese methods of farming. They rose early and slaved in their fields until the middle of the day. Gathering under a shady tree, they made cups of hot, brown tea which they sipped slowly. They ate no food at the midday break.

The old man of the group had a metre length of bamboo, round enough at one end to cover a person's nose and mouth. About 20cms from the top of the bamboo, a small pipe, 2 or 3 cms long, jutted out. The old Chinaman would take a strong twig, dip it in a black gooey substance, hold it over a candle flame until it bubbled and then placed the smoking substance in the small pipe. The length of bamboo was then placed over the nose and mouth and a deep breath was inhaled before passing the bamboo to the next person. The smoker would then sit back and relax. Food was partaken in the evening after the day's work drew to a close. This meal consisted of steamed vegetables and sauces.

Kong Hop, another "Boss Chinaman", often left his horse and cart full of vegetables overnight at the Evans farm on the corner of Padstow and Warrigal Roads. This would have saved him time on the slow uncomfortable journey by dirt tracks and over creeks to the Roma Street Markets (which opened in November 1885) when he left at 4.00am next morning.

It would take the whole day to deliver the goods and make the return journey. Despite the proximity of the Chinese gardens to the Sunnybank Railway Station, horse and cart remained the preferred means of transportation,



9. Roma Street Market – South East Queensland 1890s (JOL – reprinted in *With Courage and Hope*:17)

Further evidence of how the Chinese market gardeners lived can be found in this description of an attempted holdup at Moorooka in 1938.

Two men held up two Chinese market gardeners in their hut at a lonely spot off Ipswich Road. Hop Lee, Low You, Goo Lett, and Charlie Joy worked in the garden. They lived in a small hut close to the entrance, and bordered on three sides by dense bush and lantana.

About 7 o'clock Hop Lee and Low You were working in a shed near the hut and Goo Lett and Charlie Joy were in the living room preparing a meal.

They heard the barking of their small dog, which was chained near the steps of the hut. The man who had forced his way in ran round the side of the hut and into the bushes, and the man who was standing outside ran into some lantana near where the horses were kept. Hop Lee notified the Moorooka police who scoured the bush without result.⁵

MOOROOKA HOLD-UP



10. *Courier-Mail* 2 September 1938:2

A correspondent to the *Adelaide Chronicle* in 1940 painted a more idealistic scene.

This I saw on the way to Sunnybank, which is about nine miles south of Brisbane. It was in the early morning, and the sun was just up as I came to a bridge - a large, still pool of water to one side of the Creek. The watercress grew thickly where the creek trickled over the stones. As a Chinaman came down to the waterhole with an eel basket on his back and a picturesque pointed hat on his head, I thought I had better be on my way or next thing I'd be spending the morning watching him catch eels.⁶

However, by World War Two, the Chinese market garden was in serious decline, and scenes such as those described above disappeared within 20 years.

After Federation in 1901, resulting from the *White Australia Policy* Chinese agricultural labourers were prevented from entering Australia. Without the renewal of the labour force, the Chinese market gardeners literally died out. The leases reverted back to the land owner, or passed onto new groups of migrants willing to try their hand at market gardening.

⁵ *Courier-Mail* 2 September 1938:1

⁶ *Chronicle* (Adelaide) Thursday 5 December 1940:53

Restrictions had progressively been placed on the activities which the Chinese could do in Australia such as the growing of Bananas in North Queensland. *Banana Industry Preservation Act* (1921) where only Chinese who had been in the Colonies prior to 1899 could apply for an exemption in order to remain in the industry. This is on top of the restrictions enacted by the *Sugar Cultivation Act* (1913). Whereas the Chinese market gardeners were pleaded for in the 1880s, twenty years later concerted efforts were made to remove the remnant from the industry and to replace them with other groups.

The Chinese market gardening population decreased sharply from the 1930s as it was not replenished neither through natural population growth nor immigration. The Dictation Test acted as a total immigration colour bar to new arrivals after 1909. And only those who had arrived in the Colonies prior to Federation were able to apply for a Certificate Exemption Dictation Test. By WWII, the youngest of the original population are now in their mid-60s which was the male life expectancy at that time.

For example, Ah Loui, 68, a Chinese market gardener, of Sunnybank, collapsed and died in a fellow countryman's premises in Ann Street, in the City. Ah Loui, as was his custom every Friday, visited the premises of Lipp Moy, about 8 a.m. He was quieter than usual and had just sat down on a seat when he collapsed and died.⁷

Jock Hing would have been one of the last Chinese market gardeners to work the Sunnybank area. He farmed one of the market gardens established by the Chinese in the Stones, Jackson and Beenleigh Roads area of Sunnybank. He was born in Surat in 1922 to storekeeper William Hing and his wife Nellie Quee.

Jock first went to work for one of the older Chinese gardeners, later taking over the running of the garden in 1938/39. He continued to farm the garden until his death in December 1944 at the young age of 22.

Jock had health problems and it was thought that the outdoor work would be good for his health. However, the long hours working the garden in adverse took their toll. He became seriously ill and died of Tubercular Meningitis at the Nundah Private Hospital. He was buried at the Toowong Cemetery. He is commemorated by Jock Hing Park which lies along on Stable Swamp Creek south of the Banoon Railway Station.

Had Jock Hing lived longer, it is conceivable that the market gardens in Sunnybank may have continued for another generation. Jock Hing would have been a valued member of the Chinese community. As an Australian-born Chinese, and not subject to immigration controls, Jock Hing was one of the decreasing number of young Chinese able to take over the Chinese businesses.

Another factor that hastened the demise of the market garden was the allocation of water to service the growing population. In 1920 it emerged that:

The Sunnybank area has been depending for its water supply upon a natural spring, which arises in grounds held by some Greeks. This supply was the subject of a deputation representing the Yeerongpilly Shire Council and the Cooper's Plains Progress Association which waited upon the Treasurer (Hon. E. G. Theodore). They complained that the Greeks holding the land on which the spring rises had allowed the flow to be diverted by Chinese market gardeners for the irrigation of their land. The other residents were thus deprived of the supply. The deputation suggested an

⁷ *Daily Standard* 26 June 1936:8

amendment of the *Rights in Water Act* to enable the Government to deal with the matter.

Mr. Theodore, pointed out that the holders of the land on which the spring rose had a perfect right to do as they liked with the water. He would, however, look into the position and see whether anything could be done.⁸

It seems that nothing was done as in 1939, an almost identical request was placed before the authorities.

[The residents of] Sunnybank, repeated its request to the Lord Mayor (Alderman Jones) yesterday for an extension of the water supply to its area. Several speakers said that, except for private tanks, the district during dry weather had to rely on the soakage from a spring which passed a piggery and two Chinese market gardens. Dead cats and dogs had often been seen floating in the pool.

Alderman J. E. Lane said that a main from the present terminus at Orange Grove, Cooper's Plains, if extended for three miles, could provide the service. Probably 1000 consumers would benefit. Alderman S. Greene said another proposal was to take supply from a main which might provide water for Beenleigh.

The Lord Mayor said that Sunnybank was part of Brisbane, and the council's first obligation should be to its own people. He would have a survey made without delay, but whether the council proceeded with it would depend on the cost. He was not in favour of any proposal for using a local spring to provide water for the district.⁹

So with a declining and aging workforce and increasingly difficult access to water Chinese market gardening faded away. It is ironic that due to the low-lying location of the Chinese market gardens, these sites have not, on the whole, been built over.

⁸ *The Week* 23 January 1920:24

⁹ *Courier-Mail* 2 June 1939:2



11. By 1960 many of Sunnybank's market gardens had disappeared under housing. Jock Hing's former garden is circled.

References

Byrne, D. *With Courage and Hope: The contribution of six migrant communities to life in Queensland (1838 – 1945)*. Kangaroo Point, Department of Migrant Services, n.d.

Lightfoot, J. *Sunnybank – An Australia Post and Telecom History*. Brisbane, Postal and Telecommunications Museum, 1977.

McMahon, T. "Sunnybank - Fruit Growing and Market Gardening." *Brisbane Courier* 30 August 1930:11

Roberts, B. *Stories of the Southside Volume 1*. Archerfield, Aussie Books, 1991.