



# Custodians of *Tarrawarra*

OVER THE PAST 200 YEARS THE LAND NOW USED AS TARRAWARRA ABBEY, HAS BEEN HOME TO SOME OF VICTORIA'S MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE. HELEN COLLIER REVISITS THE HISTORY OF TARRAWARRA AND DISCOVERS THE BEAUTIFUL PROPERTY IN THE HEART OF THE YARRA VALLEY.

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OPPOSITE PAGE The long and winding drive. THIS PAGE Clockwise from top left: In 1954 transitioning from the Houghtons home to becoming an Abbey. Monks in black and white are professed monks, monks in white are novices and the monks in brown (far right) are the lay brothers. Idyllic rural 1.5km driveway to Tarrawarra. Founders from Roscrea 1954, Fr Carthage O'Dea (far right), Fr Mark Ryan (standing, second row, far right), Br Celsus Hendron (standing last row, second from right), are the remaining monks from the founding group. Blocks of wood from Ash Wednesday fires were used to create furniture inside Tarrawarra's Abbey.



PICTURED FROM TOP Avenue of elms line the drive to Elm Cottage, one of Victoria's oldest buildings. Monks walking in the early years of Tarrawarra. Lucie Macalister watching 'The Run' at Tarrawarra early 1900s.



The 400 hectares of prime grazing land at what is now Tarrawarra Abbey, between Yarra Glen and Healesville, has been home and host to some of Victoria's most significant individuals over the past 200 years. Many dreams have been formed, broken and realised on this land. Prior to the arrival of the European settlers in 1836, the Wurundjeri inhabited the land where the Abbey now stands and many Aboriginal artifacts have been found on the land. Squatter William Ryrie took the lease at *View Hill* in 1845, then a pastoral run of 3,000 hectares. It is assumed Ryrie built the wooden hut now known as *Elm Cottage*, constructed of horizontal slab, potentially the 'oldest building in Victoria still on its existing site'. Over the years, the cottage has been added to, partially destroyed by fire, restored by the monks and listed by National Trust. It is used today as a retreat and contemplative chapel for guests staying at the monastery.

Between 1853 and 1871, *View Hill* was declared forfeit twice before being purchased by Robert Woolcott (originating from Devon, England) in 1872 who made it his home for 21 years. He extended *Elm Cottage* into a 15-room brick house, creating a u-shape courtyard around a well. Under Woolcott, improvements to the river flats and drainage enabled the property to carry 7,000 sheep, 300 cattle and 120 horses.

Woolcott cut an impressive figure; one of the first law students at Melbourne University, he was an attorney for 15 years in Melbourne and became a local Justice of the Peace when he moved to the Yarra Flats area. He furthered the progress of the

Set over 92 square metres, the house included servants quarters, a meat house and an electricity room with an engine that went off at 10pm every night...



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Looking to the mountains from Tarrawarra. The Syme House as it is today, which is now the Abbey of Notre Dame of Tarrawarra. Red Angus have been farmed on Tarrawarra for many decades.



local area considerably in his two decades. Three times president of the Eltham Shire Council he was an advocate of the Education Act and Chairman of the Yarra Flats Railway League, instrumental in getting the railway line constructed. It opened in 1889.

With the railway line now running through the property, *View Hill Estate* was a prime piece of real estate. Yarra Valley landowner and Owner/ Editor of *The Age* newspaper, David Syme, purchased *View Hill Estate* in October 1894 at auction. He had a 25-room house built for his daughter Lucie in 1901, on her marriage to William Macalister, the estate manager. The house was designed by Syme's friend and architect Bill Godfrey, and Syme changed the name of the property back to *Tarrawarra*. The word is said to mean 'slow moving waters' or 'white cloak', referring to the characteristic mists the Yarra Valley experiences.

The Macalisters were very socially minded and always hosting events. From flower shows to concerts, fox hunt teas to fundraising balls. They hosted memorable Christmas Eve parties for the local children, and New Year's Eve dances in a specially prepared barn.

By the time the Macalisters sold in 1923, *Tarrawarra* had increased from 3,684 to almost 7,000 acres, reaching from the present day Yarra Glen racecourse to Healesville racecourse.

It wasn't until 1929 that the next influential family moved to *Tarrawarra* - the MacDonalds. Charles MacDonald was already a wealthy landowner, who brought with him his Corriedale stud flock, one of the largest in Victoria. During MacDonald's 13 years at *Tarrawarra*, he farmed cattle as well as sheep and under his

stewardship he increased the property's carrying capacity even further.

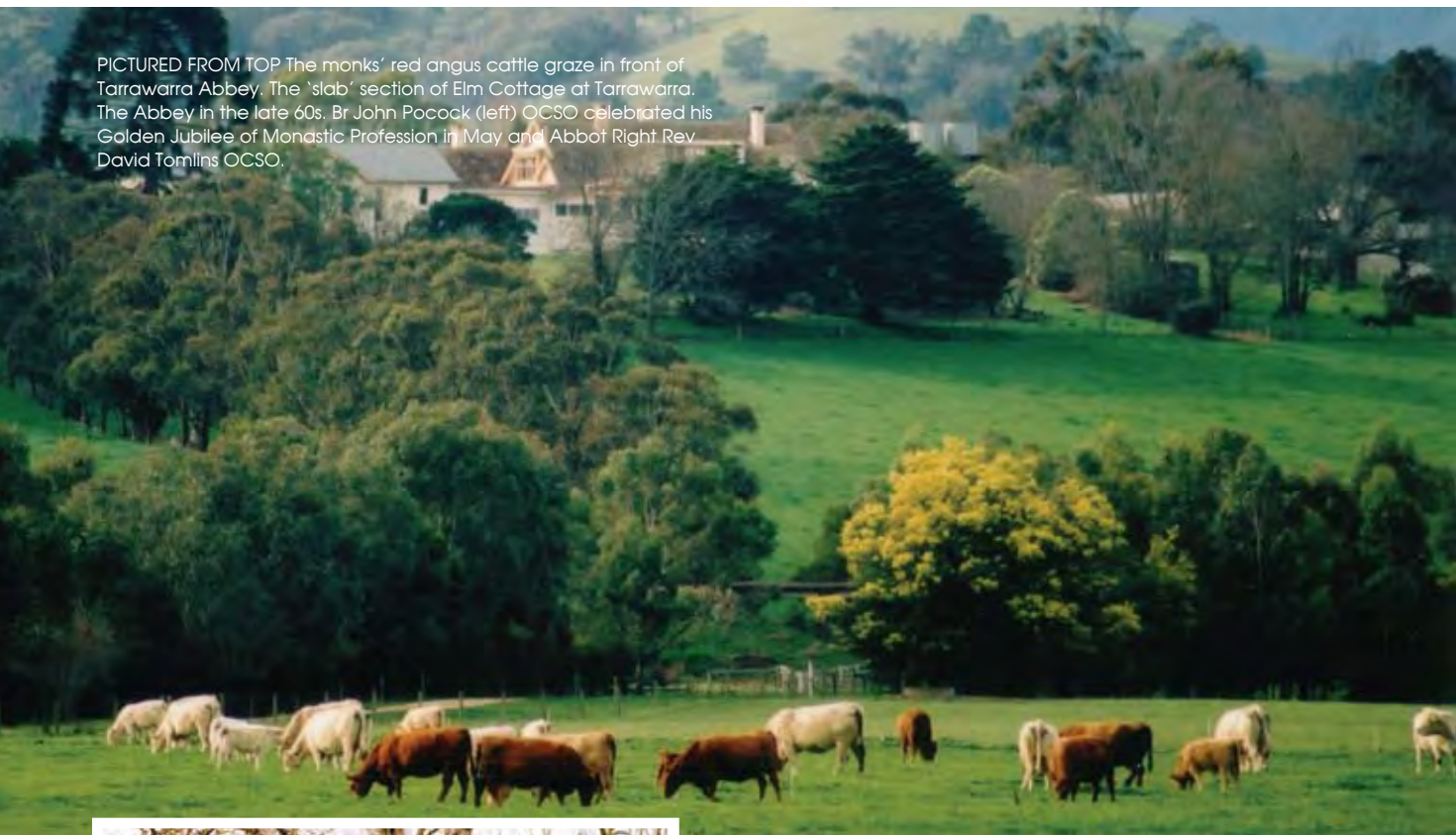
The MacDonalds had three daughters and three sons each of whom were very active in local affairs. All sports minded and great riders, they were regulars with the hunt and point-to-points, hosting them as well as riding.

William Houghton bought the property in 1942. His son Vasey returned home from the war in 1946 and married Audrey Gourlay two years later and he and his bride made 500 acres of the property their home. Like Woolcott, Vasey had studied law at Melbourne University, but his studies were interrupted by the outbreak of war and on his return, he chose farming over the legal profession. Like Woolcott, he was also President of Eltham Council, (and President of Healesville Shire which he annexed) after which he became a Member of Parliament, serving for 18 years.

Audrey and Vasey lived in the Syme house for the first six years of their marriage. The house had been extended over the years and now has 36 rooms. The stumps had sunk, doors wouldn't close and Audrey recalls that the house was never warm. The house included servants quarters (occupied by shearers and cooks), a meat house, an electricity room with an engine that went off at 10pm every night and a store room of zinc lined bins. Six stables housed their stock horses.

Vasey and Audrey were the last family to live at *Tarrawarra* and *View Hill* was divided up in 1954, due to death taxes, with a third being purchased by a Cistercian Order from Roscrea

PICTURED FROM TOP The monks' red angus cattle graze in front of Tarrawarra Abbey. The 'slab' section of Elm Cottage at Tarrawarra. The Abbey in the late 60s. Br John Pocock (left) OCSO celebrated his Golden Jubilee of Monastic Profession in May and Abbot Right Rev David Tomlins OCSO.



in Ireland. The Syme house became the Abbey of Notre Dame of Tarrawarra - Australia's only Cistercian monastery.

Formed in Europe in the Middle Ages from the Benedictine Order, the Cistercians became great agriculturalists, founding self-supporting farming communities. 32 monks made up the initial community at *Tarrawarra* in 1954, all having journeyed from Ireland. The monks observed the Liturgy of the Hours; eight services of worship, beginning at 4am with the Office of Vigils. They slept communally, communicated by sign language and wore their habits and scapulas as they farmed. Managing a dairy herd, they also lambled ewes, raised steers for beef and implemented a program of crop rotation to improve the pastures.

In the years after the Second Vatican Council (1962-66), sign language was phased out, private sleeping quarters were built for each monk and the Latin Liturgy replaced by English. Today, meals are still taken in silence, listening to a reading from one of the brothers, and the 'grand silence' is observed at night. The daily round of Benedictine worship still involves eight services, and on Sundays, the monks hold a Eucharist mass, which the public is welcome to attend. The dairy herd was sold off in the late 90s and the monks concentrated on farming Red Angus for beef. In addition, they took on a new business, one not dependent on the land, distributing Eucharistic breads throughout Australia.

The monks have toiled hard, improving and extending *Tarrawarra*. The abbey church took the monks two years to build (in 1955 to 57) and was renovated in 1998. Large blocks of cypress, from wood burnt in the Ash Wednesday fires, were donated to the monastery and used to build the church's furniture. A cemetery was established in 1958, and a library built in 2004 to mark *Tarrawarra's* Golden Jubilee.

Three of the original monks from Ireland are still living at *Tarrawarra* – Fr Carthage O'Dea, Fr Mark Ryan and Br Celsus Hendron. It is a testament to their faith and their vow of stability that they have lived their lives in contemplation, solitude, hard work and above all, prayer, for 57 years at *Tarrawarra*.