

Palmerston Studio: Our pioneer silent film studio



The long driveway at Palmerston estate, with Palmerston villa in the background c. 1920s. Photo: National Film and Sound Archive.

One of the leading Australian film production studios of the early 1920s, Palmerston Studio, was located in Waverley. But before it was a film studio, it was a beautiful colonial mansion called 'Palmerston' set on a 36-acre estate.

Named 'Palmerston' in honour of British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, it was described in 1875 as having a croquet lawn, a long pine-tree lined driveway, two natural springs (one with a waterfall), a lake and on the house's front lawn a large ornamental foundation. It rivalled nearby Bronte House in its size and setting.

In 1886 the owner of 'Palmerston', James Marks, started subdividing and selling his land. Land continued to be sold from the estate until its complete subdivision in 1925. These land sales mirrored other such subdivisions occurring across the Waverley area. An 1890 subdivision plan describes the distinguished Palmerston estate as 'well known as Marks Paddock', giving a sense of the locals' ironic comment on this grand estate in their midst.

As parcels of land were sold new streets were created to access these building blocks, with Dickson, Read and Henrietta Streets being created at this time. By 1920, when the Palmerston estate became a film studio, it had been reduced to five acres.

In 1919 Olympic swimmer and showman Reg 'Snowy' Baker and brothers Daniel and Edward John (E.J.) Carroll formed Carroll-Baker Australian Productions. They became important film entrepreneurs, confident that Australian audiences wanted to see Australian stories on the big screen.

The following year they moved into the 28-roomed 'Palmerston' and converted it into Palmerston Studio. For the next two years they made silent action films, somewhat like Australian westerns. The property's picturesque gardens, lake, rustic bridges and stately trees formed an atmospheric background to the stories.

After the Carroll brothers and 'Snowy' Baker moved out in 1922, two other producers, E. R. Jeffree and J.A. Bruce, moved in and continued filmmaking. Seven feature films were made at Palmerston Studio and pioneer filmmakers, Raymond Longford and Charles Chauvel, also worked there.

In 1923 the Studio closed. A couple of years earlier 'Snowy' Baker had left for Hollywood where he worked as a stuntman. Jeffree and Bruce also went to Hollywood to further their careers.

But the Carroll brothers stayed, in 1923 forming film company Birch, Carroll and Coyle. The company, now Greater Union Birch Carroll and Coyle, operate Bondi Junction's only cinema in the Westfield shopping complex.

In 1923 'Palmerston' was renovated, its exterior completely altered, and it became a block of flats named 'Palmerston House' at 18 Blandford Avenue. Two years later the remainder of the estate's lands were subdivided.

Only two of the seven Palmerston Studio films have survived, *The Man from Kangaroo* (1920) and *Silks and Saddles* (1921). Copies of these are held in the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

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