

# *George Meredith*

The early life and initial impact  
of an unusual colonial settler

A presentation originally given to the Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 11 September 2018

# George Meredith (1778-1856)

... the “King of Great Swan Port”, was an infinitely proud, domineering, quarrelsome man. Testy and unforgiving, he was easily moved to querulous resentment, and given to pin-pricking revenge. Obstinate and implacable in opposition, he frayed the government’s nerves and temper for more than a decade ... [he was] inordinately land- and power hungry ...

(Levy, *Governor George Arthur*, p. 170)

*George Meredith* by Thomas Bock, at the  
East Coast Heritage Museum



# George Meredith (1778-1856)

A resemblance?



Napoleon Bonaparte from biography.com

# George Meredith (1778-1856)

... the “King of Great Swan Port” ?



Napoleon I  
Anne Louis Girodet de Roucy-Trioson

# George Meredith (1778-1856)

He was also ...

driven, a bully, passionate to his wife, intelligent, loving to his family and a strategic and forward thinker

Meredith has come to the attention of most historians of colonial Van Diemen's Land as a noisy, combative figure during the administration of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur in particular

Why?





# George Meredith – early life

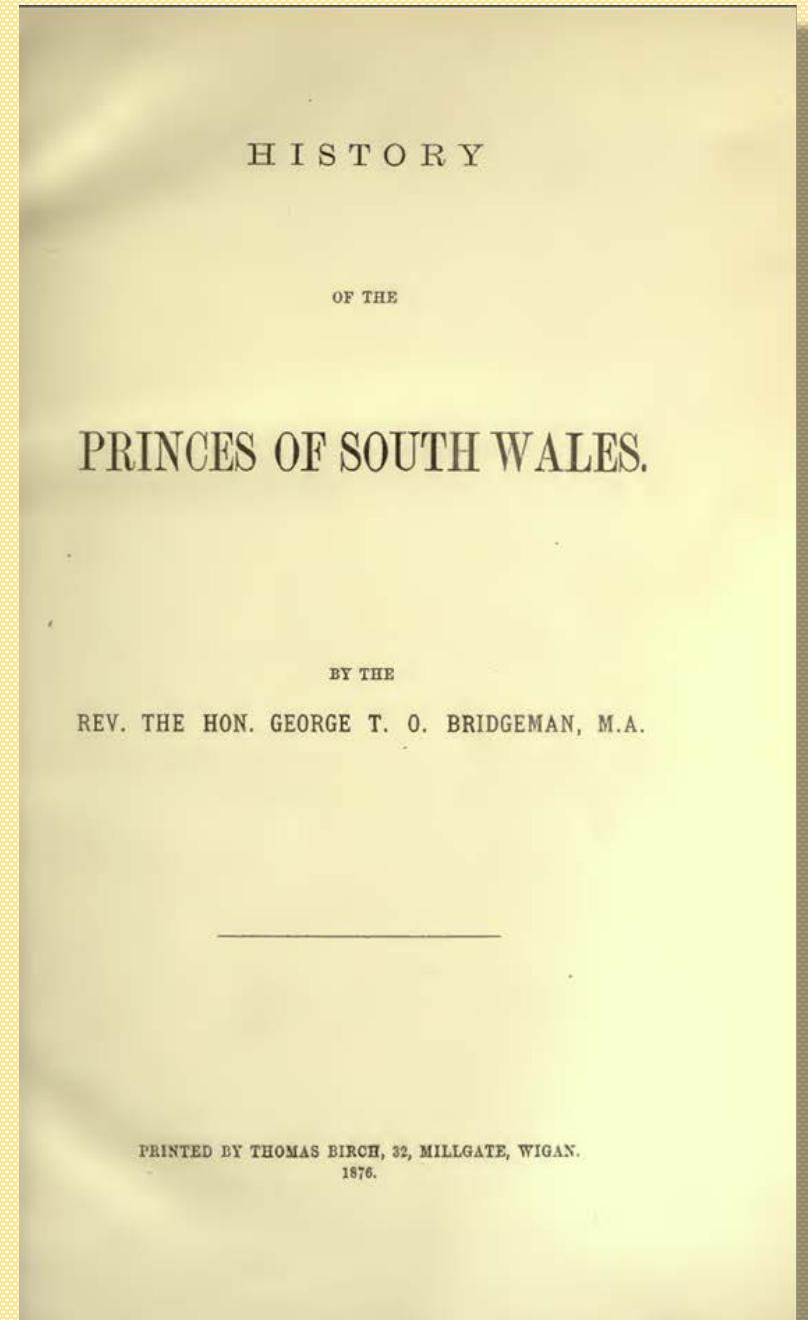
- He was born in Birmingham, England in 1778, the youngest son of a successful lawyer, whose clients were city merchants and the nobility
- In his early teens, they lived at *Castle Bromwich Hall*, a Jacobean mansion that his father leased



*Castle Bromwich Hall*

# George Meredith – early life

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- In his early teens, he lived at *Castle Bromwich Hall*, a Jacobean mansion that his father leased
- He was brought up to believe that the family was descended from the Welsh Royal family



# George Meredith – Marines

- After his father died, George was packed off to the Marines in 1796, aged 18
- On **7 May 1797**, during the Napoleonic war, he went on board *HMS Hind* at Portsmouth, as Second Lieutenant, commander of the 20 Marines on board



*HMS Carysfort, same design as HMS Hind (from a print by Thomas Whitcombe)*



# George Meredith – Marines

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- On **8 May**, the crew mutinied



*The red flag of mutiny.* Source: <https://www.scrimshawgallery.com/product/mutiny/>

# George Meredith – Marines in 1797

- War with France; huge expansion of Royal Navy manpower. Volunteers come on board with some education and perhaps some spirit of revolution
- In February, the crew on the *Queen Charlotte* at Portsmouth circulated a petition around the fleet about pay and conditions
  - No pay rise for 150 years
  - “... Navy dried peas, after boiling for hours, rattled like shot in the eating tub. Cheese was a rare treat and the suppliers who adulterated it were virtuosi. Without suspicion of cream, it furnished olfactory clues to kitchen scourings, beeswax, rancid fat, glue and yellow ochre colouring”  
(James Dugan, *The Great Mutiny*)

# George Meredith – Marines in 1797

- The petition was initially ignored by the Admiralty
- Later, crews elected two ‘Delegates’ from each ship, who convened in a ‘Parliament’ aboard one of the ships to refine their demands
- By April crews were in ‘orderly rebellion’, refusing to weigh anchor, putting officers ashore
- They promised to weigh anchor if the French attacked
- The major mutiny occurred in May when patience ran out



PM Light Breezes & thick M. with Rain, saw Adm. Coffey's  
flag hauled down & Red hoisted in lieu, the Monarch then  
At 5 about came alongside from the Mars, two Men  
came out. Apprehended the stripes for on the Fore Castle & order  
Mr. Humphries Boatsw. & Mr. Sutton Mid to quit the ship immediately  
Rose Yard Ropes, The ship in a state of Mutiny, At 11 the  
London made sign for the Fleet to go to St. Helens, we  
we & orders from the Delegates of the Mars to repair to St. Helens  
London Mars & several Frigates for St. H.

# George Meredith – Marines

- The officers from the *Hind* were all put ashore, but not Meredith – he was only 19, and on board for just a day, so was probably considered harmless
- The mutiny at Portsmouth ended peacefully when the Admiralty conceded all the mutineers' demands via an Act of parliament, signed in record time by the King, and the mutineers were all pardoned
- The experience must have influenced Meredith's outlook on both those in authority above him and those under his command
  - Don't trust those in authority to do the right thing
  - Control your own destiny



# George Meredith – Marines

- The *Hind* then cruised to Nova Scotia, around the Caribbean and to Egypt during the Napoleonic war until the Peace of Amiens in 1802
  - Took some prizes but mainly uneventful
- Meredith then ashore on half-pay until the recommencement of hostilities in 1803, going aboard *HMS Northumberland* and then *Illustrious* in the blockades off Spain, until 1806

# George Meredith – farming in Wales

- Meredith retired from the Marines and married Sarah Hicks of Berkshire – she had inherited some land. After several years there they moved to Wales. George first established a cottage near Neath and he wrote a letter to Sarah:

*I have already been introduced to some of the neighbouring Gentry & have reason to believe you may establish a pleasant formal Society - I understand they are beginning to be a little curious about Mrs. Meredith.*

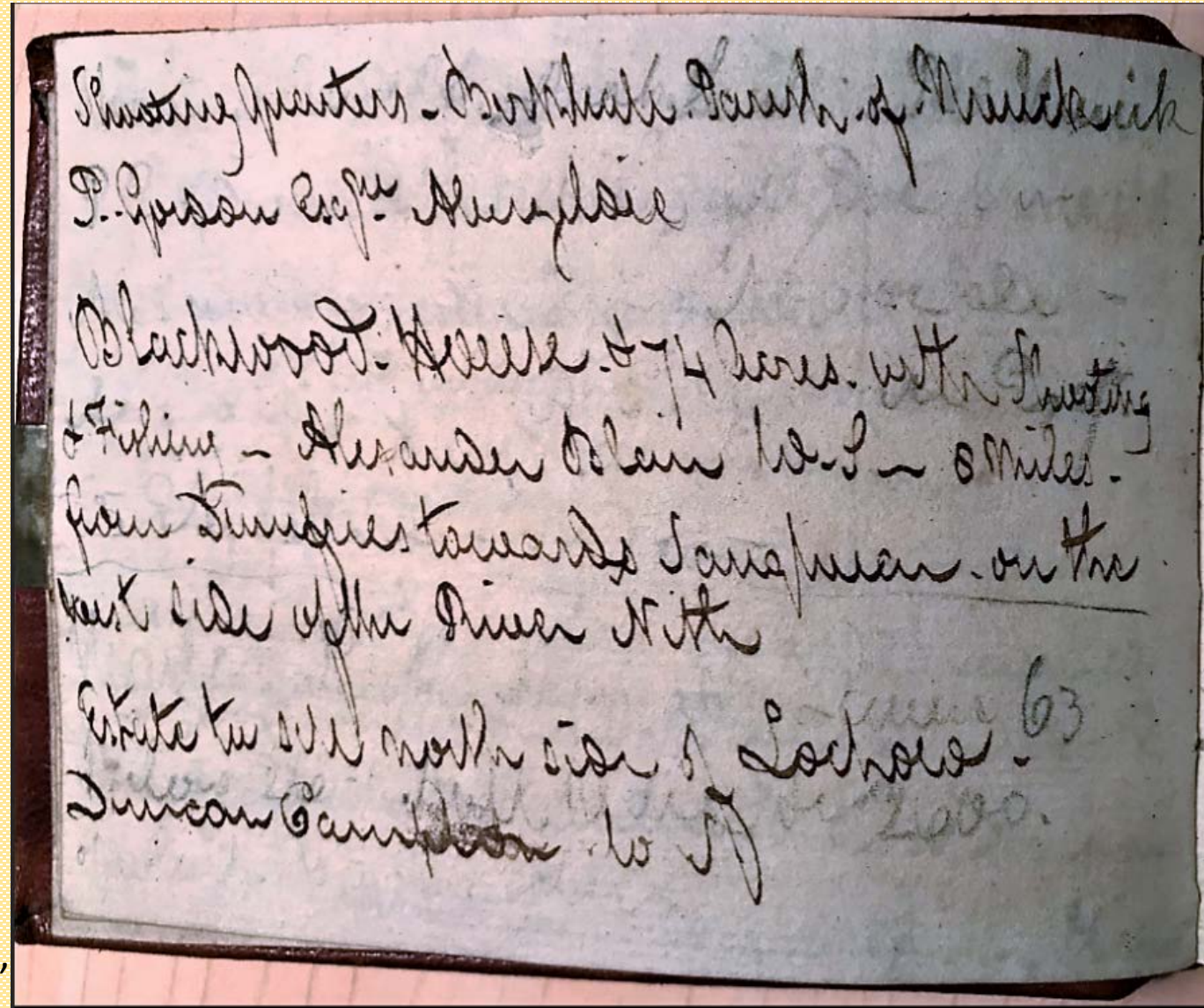
*You must therefore begin to withdraw your thoughts from idle gossiping & childish occurrences, and make yourself more the Woman of Consequence & the independent being.*

*We will set an example to the Natives of this County that you are a Wife praised for her Matronly and Domestic Qualities - and myself as a Husband who knows the value of such a Wife - and this Sarah I trust we may see realised.*

*(David Hodgson collection)*

# George Meredith – Wales & Scotland

- In 1811 he sold her (his) farms in Berkshire and bought a property in western Wales called *Rhyndaston*
- He toured Scotland in 1813, seeming looking for agricultural opportunities

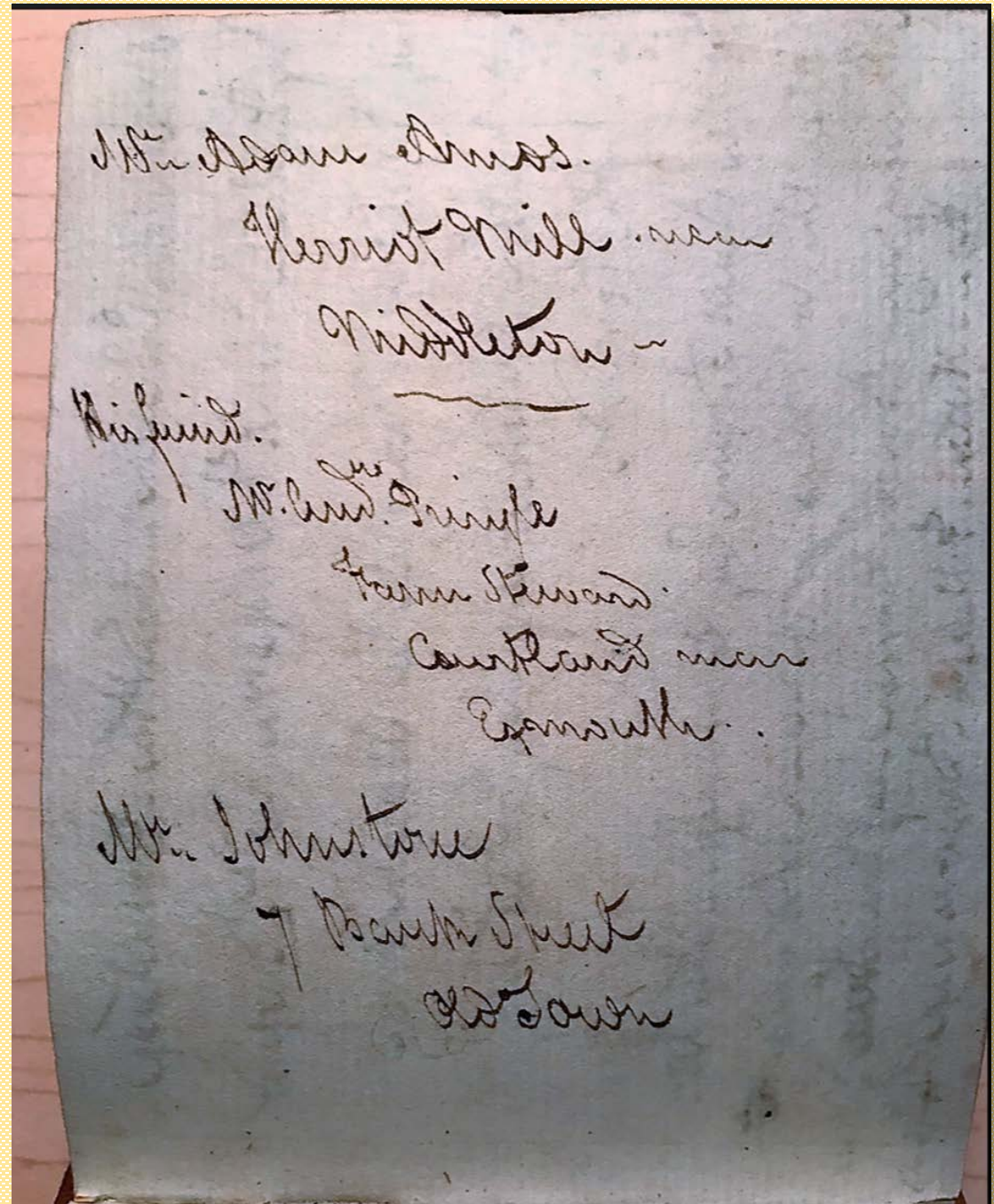


George Meredith's diary, April 1813,  
Meredith McFadden collection



# George Meredith

- During his tour, he met at least Adam Amos, of Heriot Mill, near Middleton (south of Edinburgh)
- Also met or heard of his farmer friend, Andrew Pringle of Exmouth, Devon



George Meredith's diary, April 1813,  
Meredith McFadden collection

# George Meredith – association with Amos

- Meredith offered the Amos' a partnership on *Rhyndaston*. Adam sought the advice of his friend Andrew Pringle, who replied:

*... I perfectly understand you in regard to what you say concerning the profit of the partnership but I would much rather that if you could agree with the Squire for to rent the 300 acres you speak of, as I do not think it would answer to lay out a Joint Stock in farming for you must know [the] gentleman is a little whimsical (at least I do). (Amos family collection)*

- The Amos brothers and their families joined Meredith at *Rhyndaston* and would remain associated with him for the rest of their lives



# George Meredith – Wales goes bad

- At the end of the Napoleonic wars, after 1815, prices for farm produce fell, but costs remained high. Some social discord arose in the rural counties
- Meredith began to spend more time in London and by 1817 was looking to sell the farm – the buyer, Burt, proved difficult to pin down
- The family moved back to Birmingham by 1819, together with the family nurse, Mary Evans, with whom he had an affair since about 1813
- In 1819, Mary had a son by George, named Henry

# George Meredith – emigration

- He decided to emigrate and in 1820 chartered the *Emerald* with Joseph Archer (Archer dynasty of northern Tasmania). Sarah died in childbirth early in the year and Meredith married Mary Evans just before they sailed
  - He had his own vessel (unusual), not reliant on others
  - They took house building materials, merinos, plus goods to sell on arrival
  - Meredith undertook some medical training prior to departure
  - He arranged with former Marine, Hobart merchant and settler Edward Lord to be supplied with ‘choice livestock’ on arrival
  - Edward Lord’s brother at ‘*Orielton*’ was Meredith’s MP in Wales

# George Meredith – arrival in VDL

- The *Emerald* arrived Hobart Town in March 1821 and Meredith obtained a 2,000 acre Location Order from Lieutenant-Governor Sorell and found land on a small river near Swansea – cut off from all other settlers in the colony
  - He explained in a letter to his brother: he wanted a direct sea route for his produce and room for expansion, with no ‘lower class’ neighbours
  - He arranged for several stills to be shipped out, anticipating the lifting of the ban on using grain to distil spirits
- Strategic and long term thinking

By William Lovell Esquire  
Lieut. Governor of His Majesty's  
Settlement on Van Diemens Land

Go - Go - Go -

Mr G Meredith has my authority to occupy  
Two Thousand Acres of Land, (the same being  
ordered in Grant to him) in the vicinity of  
Spar Point oryster Bay; subject to the said  
location by the Deputy Surveyor when that Part  
of Country shall be surveyed. This authority to  
be considered as giving priority of claim to the  
particular Land on which Mr G Meredith  
may fix himself. Except the Reserves required  
for the Custom shall interfere -

Government House.

8<sup>th</sup> July 1821.

Mr G Surveyor General.

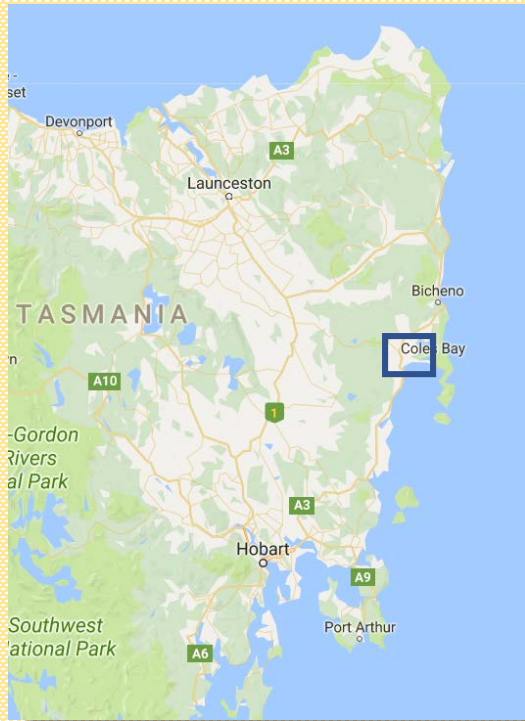
W. Lovell.

Lt Gov<sup>r</sup>

Memo } Secretary of State letter to Lieut Governor delegating to  
him the power to order Grants - 24<sup>th</sup> July - 1820 -



# Location





# George Meredith's Estate

**Riversdale – Major Honor**

**Belmont – Talbot and Charles Coghill**

**'Dolphin Sands' block**

**Original Cambria grant  
Main dispute with William Talbot**

**Cambria**

**Leased lands**

**Meredith River**

**Swansea**

TOWNSHIP OF SWANSEA

CAMBRIA & RIVERSDALE ESTATES

THE PROPERTY OF

JOHN MEREDITH ESQ<sup>RE</sup>

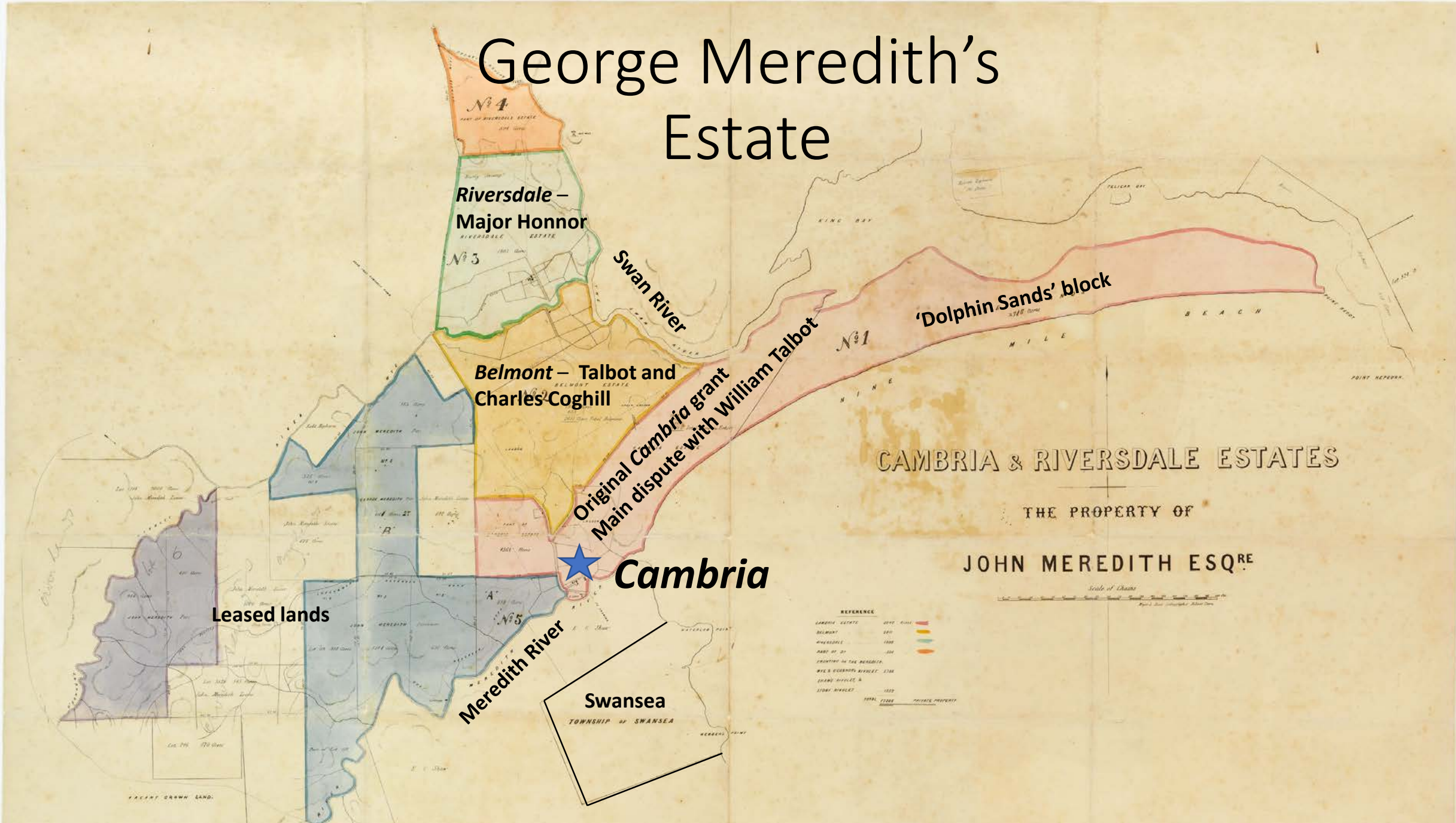
REFERENCE

LARDBY ESTATE	1851	1851
BELMONT	1851	1851
RIVERSDALE	1851	1851
PART OF ST	1851	1851
FRONTING ON THE MEREDITH	1851	1851
WELSH QUARRIES AVENUE	1851	1851
QUARRIES AVENUE &	1851	1851
STONY AVENUE	1851	1851
1851, 1852	1851	1851
1851, 1852	1851	1851
1851, 1852	1851	1851

Scale of Chains



Applied to the Cambria Estate



# George Meredith – soon after arrival in VDL

- Soon had 10,000 acres, accumulated by various means
  - *Cambria* block – there was a protracted dispute with William Talbot; M sent his case to London, over the head of ‘unhelpful’ Governor Brisbane in Sydney - win
  - *Belmont* – swapped land near Jericho with another settler (illegally)
  - *Riversdale* – foreclosed on his neighbour Major Honnor after lending him money
  - ‘Dolphin Sands’ – applied to buy 980 acres, measured over 2,000 acres ( 😊 )
- Legal battle in Sydney with Edward Lord over their livestock agreement – big loss
- Meredith spent a great deal of time away from his farm (huts only), sometimes months at a time (eg Sydney), leaving his young family there, facing threats from bushrangers and Aboriginal people

# George Meredith – VDL independence

- Meredith joined with ‘radical’ Thomas Gregson (a passenger on the *Emerald*) and others to lead the campaign for VDL’s independence from NSW. Meredith was the leading speaker and wrote the petitions
  - There were many difficulties in VDL being a dependency of NSW – such as Sydney-based courts and land management
  - Commissioner Thomas Bigge agreed; *NSW Act* in 1823 allowed for VDL independence and its own Supreme Court
  - Lieutenant-Governor Sorell opposed it, but sent the petition onto London
  - George Arthur appointed 1824 with increased powers, then independence was granted in 1825. Meredith was an important contributor to this

# George Meredith – arrival of George Arthur

- The arrival of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur in 1824 substantially changed the way the colony was administered
  - It was a penal colony first, settlers second, servicing the penal colony
  - Arthur ran the colony with sound administration, unlike the ‘free wheeling’ way of his predecessor (which permitted Meredith’s land grabs)
- Meredith reacted viscerally to Arthur as one who was restricting and striking out the ‘rights of good English gentlemen’
  - Probably more to do with not letting Meredith, in particular, do what he liked



# George Meredith – antagonism to Arthur

- As soon as he arrived in 1824, Arthur realised that Meredith had accumulated much more land than he was entitled to. Even when Meredith won the battle over Talbot regarding his land grant, he sought 'compensation' from the government for his 'opportunity loss'. Arthur refused this point blank
  - From this point, Meredith held a grudge against Arthur
  - Feeling was intensified in 1825 after Arthur refused Meredith's request for a military post at Swan Port, and then Meredith's home and family was held up by the Brady bushranger gang (Meredith was absent)
  - Intensified again when Arthur refused Meredith's numerous requests for help with his whaling and various for compensation (eg hut fire)



# George Meredith – nascent political agitator

- Meredith's opposition to Arthur took the form of leading petitions and public meetings on issues such as 'liberty of the press', 'establishment of a House of Assembly' and 'trial by jury'
- These were all 'rights of Englishmen' that Arthur considered incompatible with a penal colony
- Although these were important issues for the infant colony, Meredith was probably using them as levers to discredit Arthur, ultimately seeking to have him recalled

# George Meredith – conflict with Aboriginal people

- Meredith's land was in the middle of the migration grounds of Aboriginal people and there was considerable conflict between them and the stockmen etc on Meredith's land (and surrounds) during the 1820s
  - Meredith eventually took an extreme position against the Aboriginal people in his answers to the 'Aboriginals Committee' questionnaire (he again blamed Arthur for the deteriorating situation)
  - After the 'Black Line' of 1830, Meredith organised his own local 'Freycinet Line' in 1831, which, although a failure, likely was material in the eventual capitulation of the 'Oyster Bay tribe' to George Augustus Robinson

# George Meredith – other unusual aspects

- In 1824 Meredith started shore-based whaling and sealing and became one of the top four operators in the colony by 1830
  - Substantially helped cash flow after the slow start on the land
- Meredith's absences from his farm resulted in him writing frequently to his wife and others and hundreds of pages of these letters, plus accounts, house and ship plans, legal papers, memos and some diaries survive
  - Reveal key insights into Meredith's thinking and opinions
  - Also a passionate relationship with his wife

# George Meredith – Next studies: beyond 1830

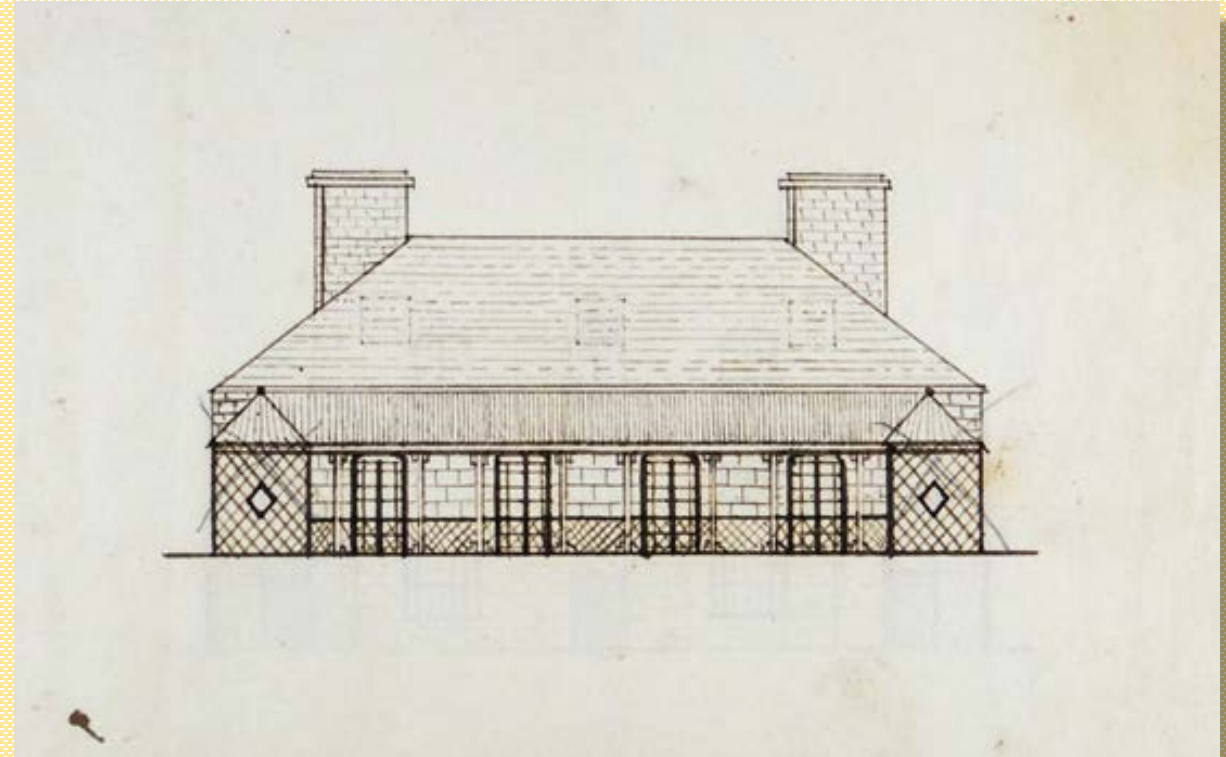
- Arthur retaliated against Meredith's agitation by restricting his convict labour, first in 1828 and later in the 1830s
  - Potentially ruinous for Meredith's large landholdings
  - Meredith had his '*Correspondence ...*' published by Bent and then:
- *The Meredith denunciation*
  - '*The oppression of one can be the oppression of many*'
- Meredith and Gregson set up and ran the '*Colonist*' newspaper in 1832 to prosecute attacks against Arthur (interest in Bent's *HTG* in the 1820s?)
- Further impassioned campaigns in respect of 'freedom of the press'



# George Meredith – *Cambria*

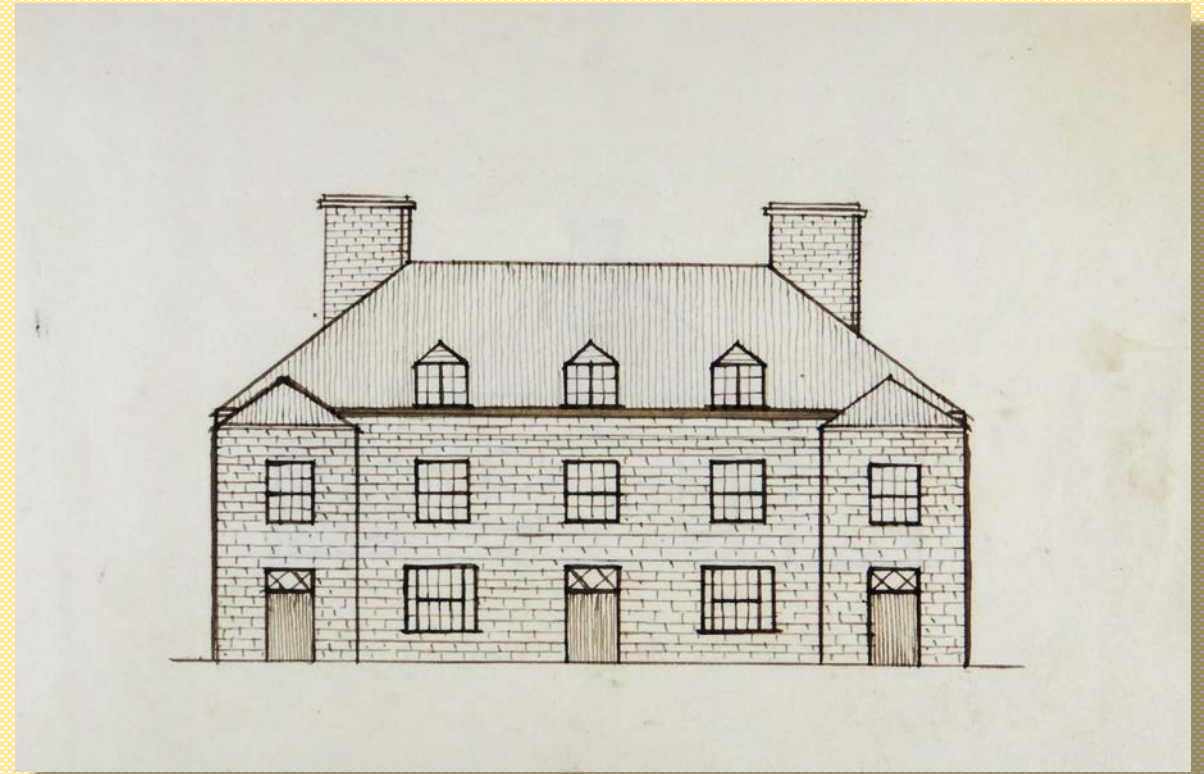
- Although *Cambria* wasn't built until 1836, its planning began in the 1820s when Mary Meredith began to lay out its gardens
- Construction began c1834 but there is little documentation of its construction
- Charles Meredith in 1879 wrote how a convict, 'Old Bull' was responsible for *Cambria* and also *Riverside* and *Spring Vale*
- Extensive searches have failed to connect 'Old Bull' with any of the known convicts assigned to George Meredith, but some candidates in the district remain
- 'Old Bull' may have been an 'unofficial' convict

# *Cambria* – front elevation



Drawing from c1835, TAHO, NS123/1/10

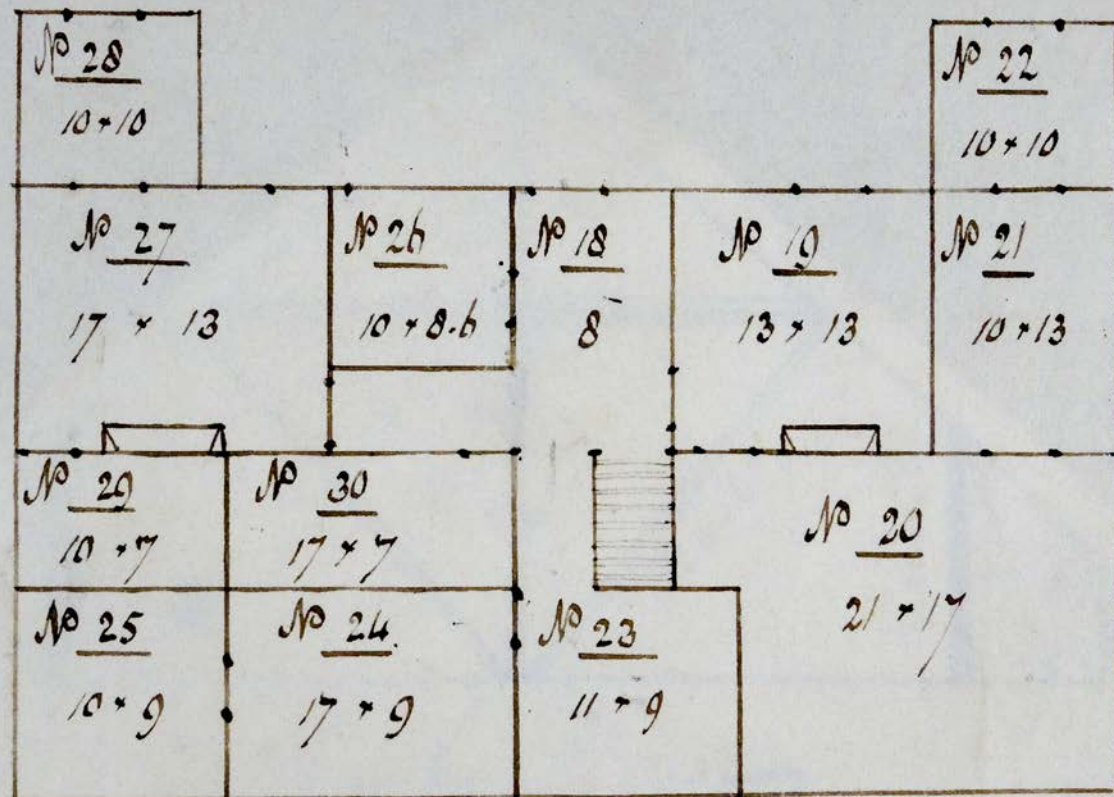
# *Cambria* – rear elevation



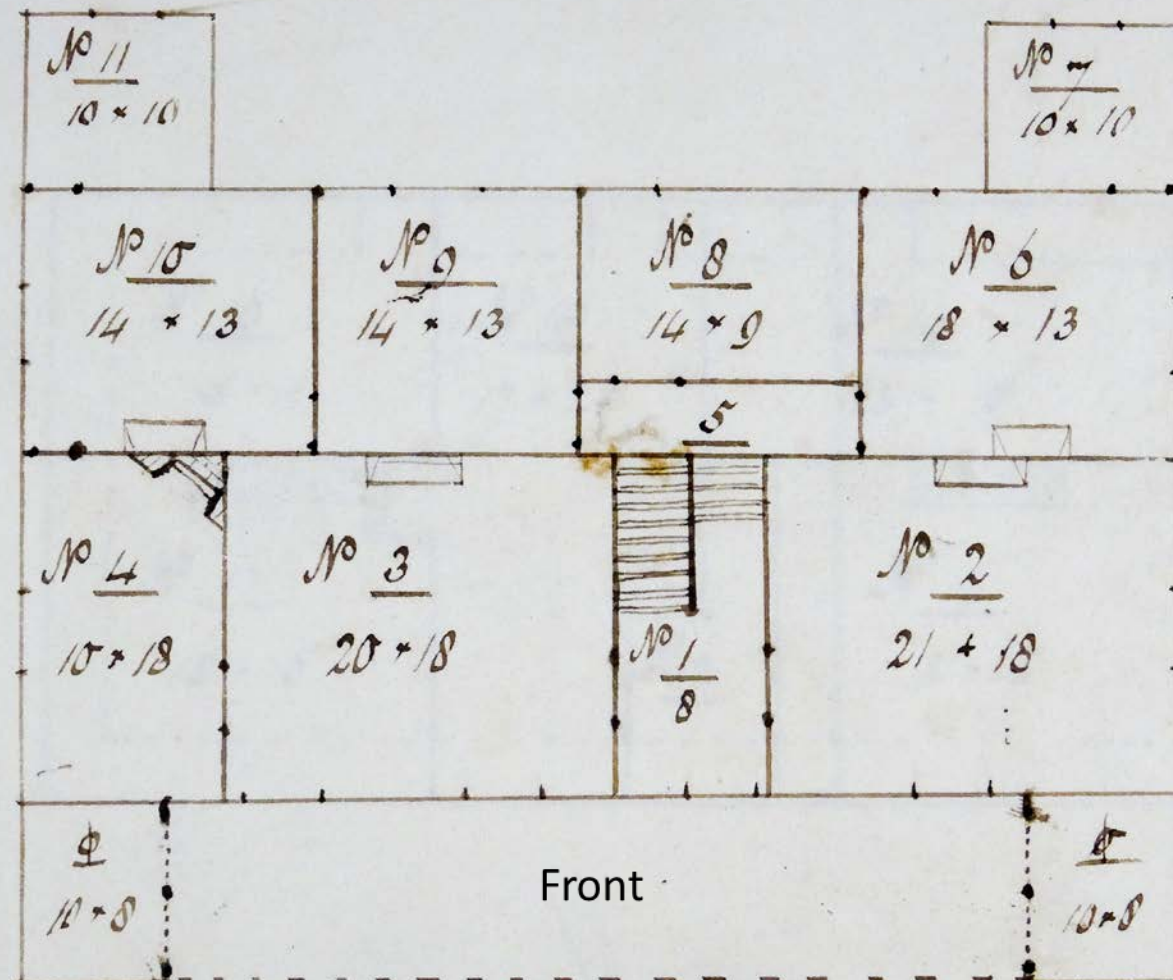
Drawing from c1835, TAHO, NS123/1/10



# Cambria – basement and main floor



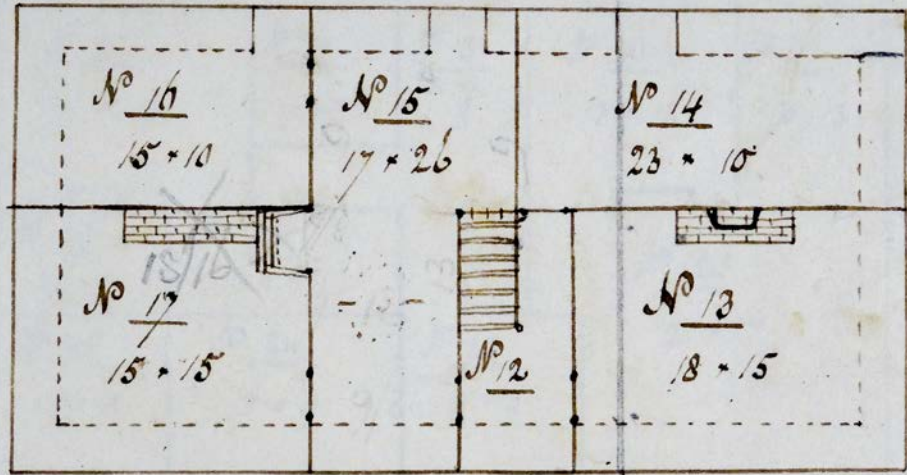
Front



Front

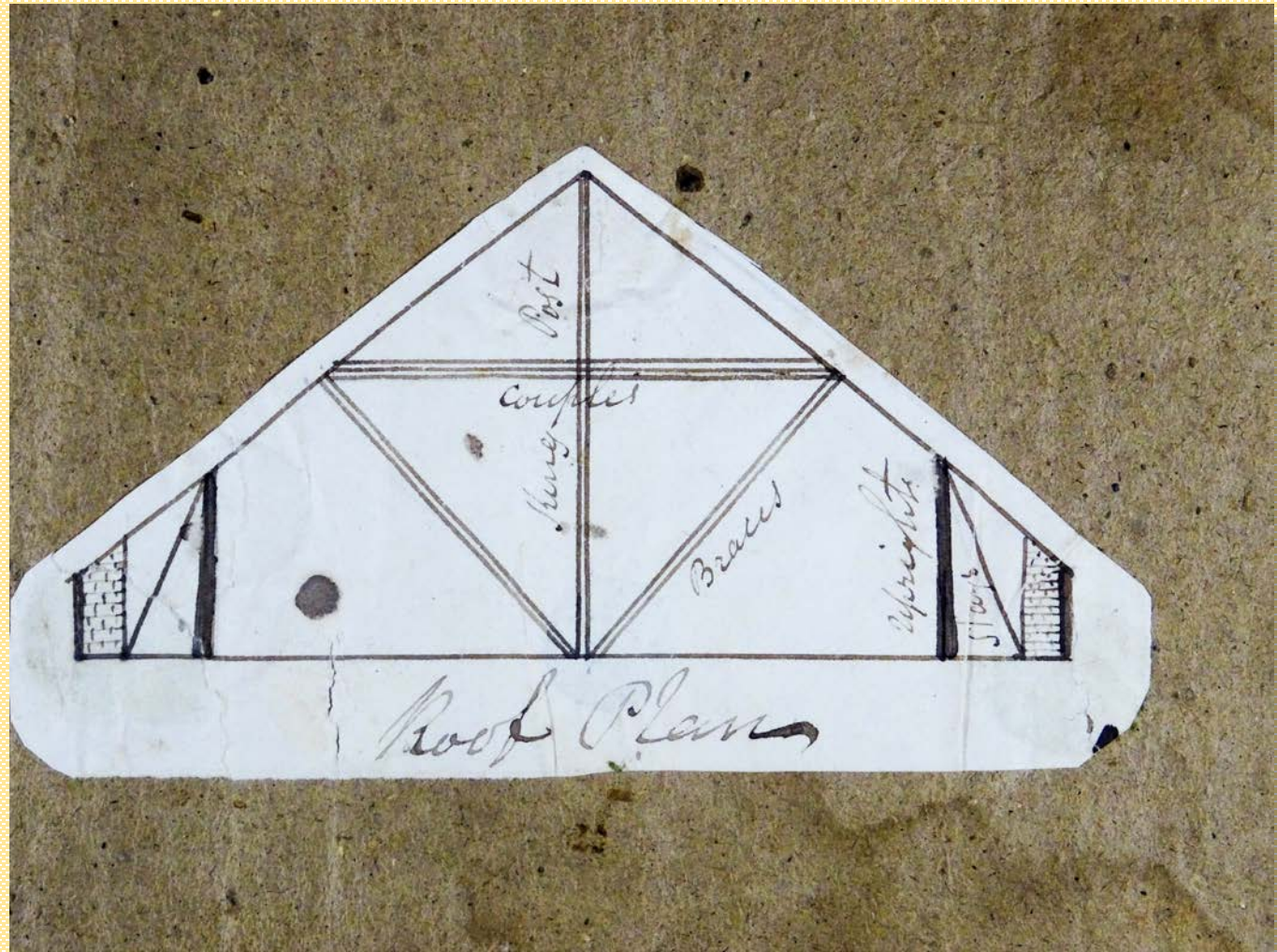


# Cambria – Attic and roof bracing



*Attic floor*

Front



*Roof Plan*

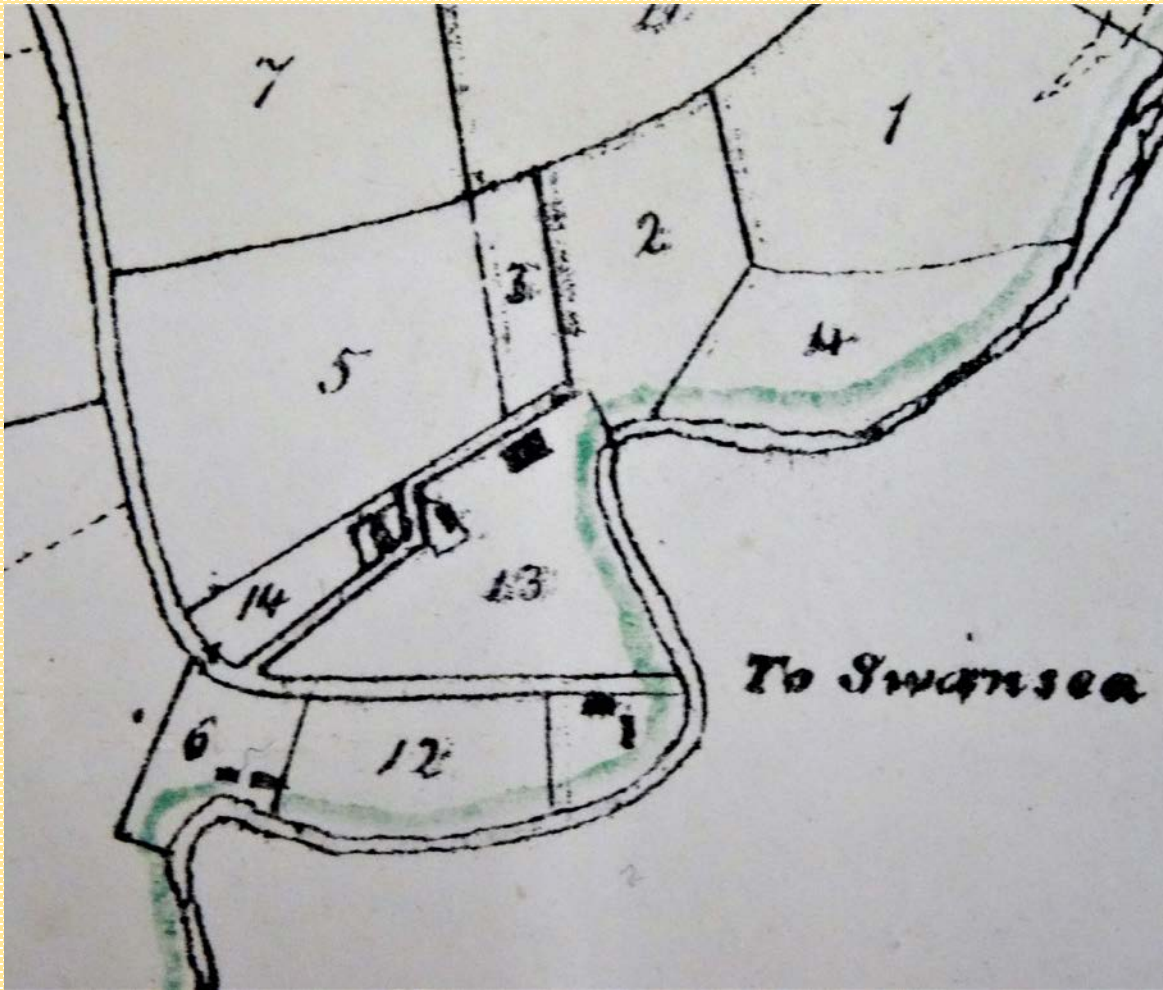


*Cambria*

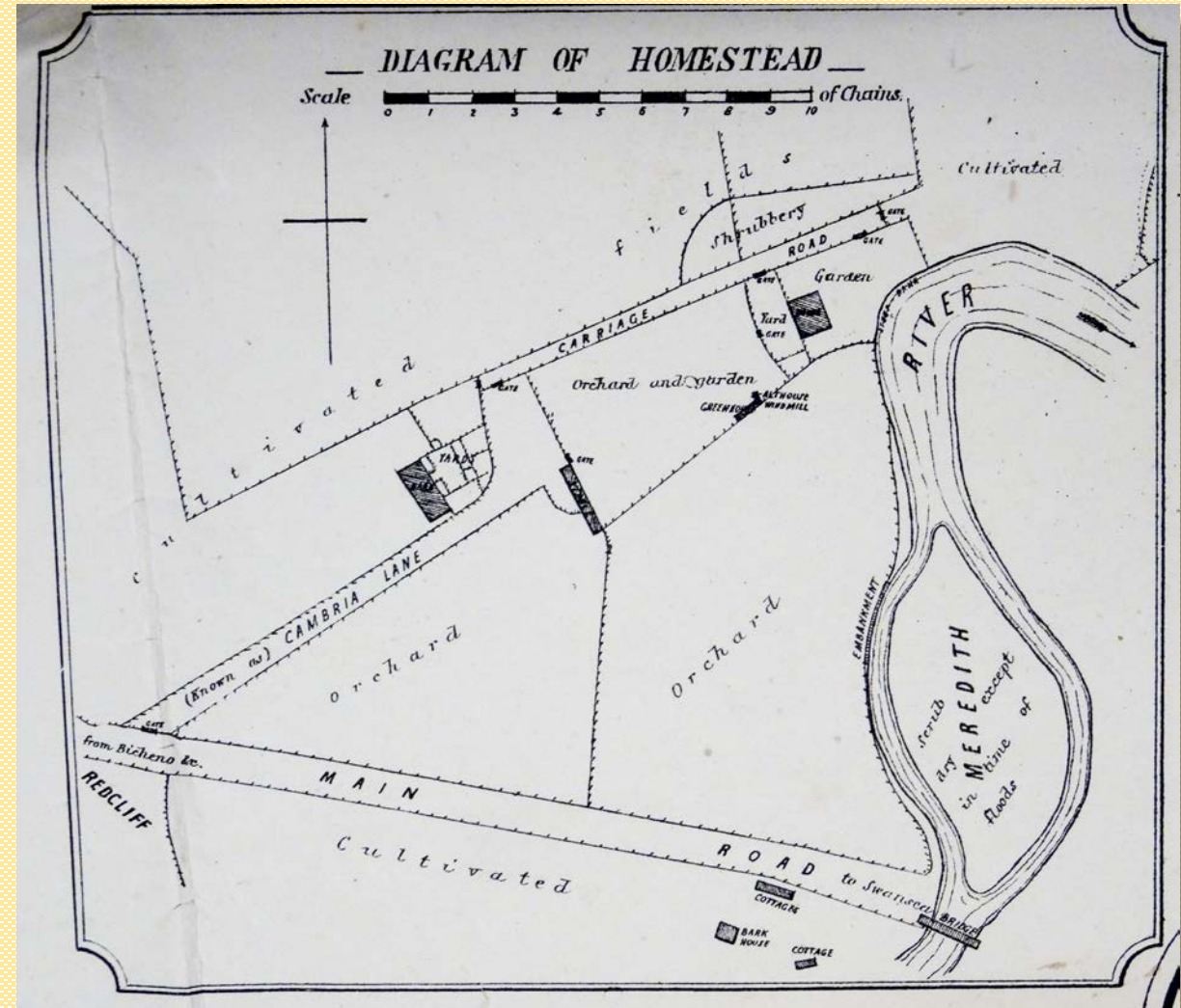


1971

# Cambria – Early plans



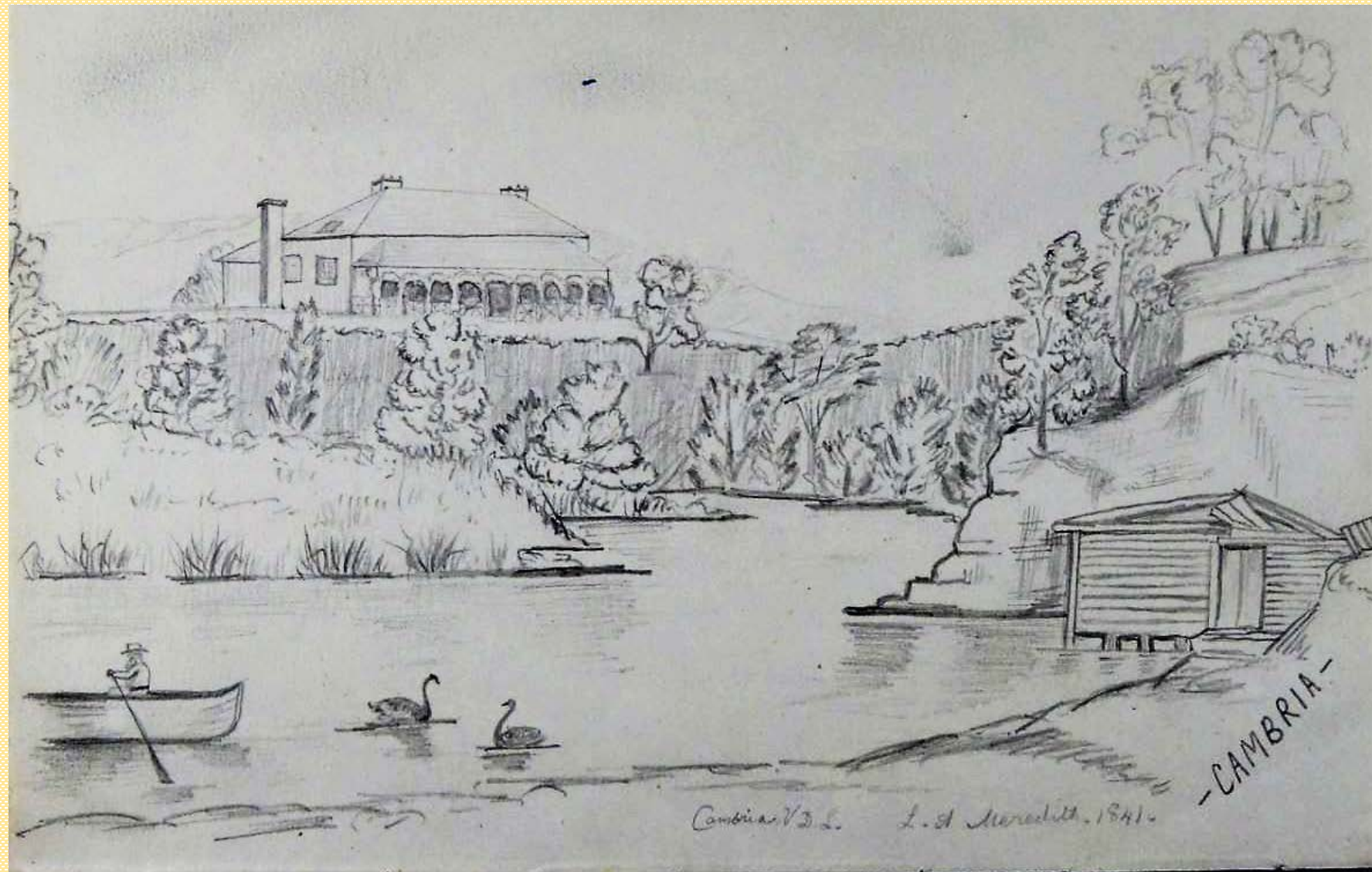
Detail from 1861 plan, NS172/1/7TAHO



Detail from 1888 plan, 993.24B GSBHS



# *Cambria* – Louisa Anne Meredith, 1841



NS123/1/44 TAHO



# *Cambria* – Louisa Anne Meredith, 1841



*Cambria. Great Swan Port. Tasmania. The home of George Meredith.*

AG5587 TMAG



# *Cambria* – Bishop Nixon, 1850s



# George Meredith – *Cambria*

- In 1852 George sent his youngest son to New Zealand with some capital, leaving Charles set to inherit the house and a share (?most?) of *Cambria*. John Meredith had gone to South Australia and was successful
- John visited *Cambria* in 1853 and offered to buy *Cambria*
- George agreed, leaving Charles and Louisa Anne shattered. George later blamed Louisa Anne's attitude to him as one of the reasons he chose John. They never reconciled. Charles and Louisa moved south and he later became a politician and minister in several Tasmanian governments
- George died in 1856 and John and Maria Meredith moved into *Cambria* and raised their family

# *Cambria* – out of the family's hands

- John found the farm difficult. Parts were advertised for sale in 1861 (no result) and in 1871 he went bankrupt. The estate was broken up and sold, but the Merediths retained the 5,000 acre core of *Cambria*
- Probably to fend off further creditors, John placed the property in the hands of trustees in 1876, to be sold after he and Maria had died
- Charles Bayles began renting the land in 1909, the year John died. Maria died in 1912 and from 1920 negotiations began on a sale by the trustees to Bayles
- The sale occurred in 1927 against strong protests from the Meredith family and their offers to buy it



# *Cambria* – out of the family's hands

- Dr Edward Brettingham-Moore purchased *Cambria* from Charles Bayles' son in 1952
- He experimented with pasture improvement, especially in the sandy 'Dolphin Sands' area, but this was unsuccessful
- He began selling off parts of the property in the mid 1950s, including some of 'Dolphin Sands'
- He sold the entire remainder of the property to ND Burbury in 1956
- Most of the 'Dolphin Sands' area was sold in 1969 and then subdivided
- *Cambria* was sold to 'Cambria Green' c2005