

CASTLE HILL HISTORIC SITE

COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

INITIATED BY THE ROTARY CLUB OF CASTLE HILL INC. IN 1989

CHAIRMAN
David Sommerlad, AM

DEPUTY CHAIRMAN
Warren Bowden

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION HISTORIC HERITAGE PLACES INQUIRY

PRESENTATION and SUBMISSION

by the

Castle Hill Historic Site Community Committee

Sydney -- January 31, 2006

The Castle Hill Historic Site Community Committee (HSCC) commends the Productivity Commission on the content and clarity on its Inquiry's Draft Report on the Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places. This provides a sound basis for public comment.

The HSCC believes

- The conservation of Australia's historic heritage is fundamental to the cultural understanding and identity of the current and future generations.
- The preservation and conservation of our historic heritage, in the final analysis, is the responsibility of the three tiers of governments.
- The assessment of cultural and historical significance, while subjective, should be determined on the significance of the item or place in relation to time, use, context, effects, uniqueness, practical or intrinsic value and relevance to society, irrespective of public or private ownership.
- Judgments on financial implications of conservation cannot be made only on viability or on the basis of economic rationality, but on value to the community now and in the future, with historical significance or uniqueness being prime considerations.
- The cost of preparation/preservation/maintenance of our historic heritage should be determined after considering status, significance, location, use and the current or potential perception of historical authorities and the public.
- The costs of conserving government owned or controlled items, except in specific circumstances, should be shared fairly between governments, users and the public in the context of status, viability, capacity to contribute and the level of community involvement and support.
- Private property should not be precluded from government assistance, the extent of which could be agreed in the context of significance, heritage value, location and condition, and possibly in some cases availability to the public.

- Financial transparency and accountability in government financial heritage transactions is an expected process in public affairs and is a useful barometer of public perceptions. An agreed reporting system could be appropriate.
- The Register of the National Estate, State and other heritage registers most definitely should not be phased out. These provide an important reflection of relevant historical significance and should be used in assessing, but not ultimately determining, levels of government support. The RNE is a vital and relevant instrument in the national and international perception of Australia's heritage, even if not particularly used for financial purposes.
- National Trusts have fulfilled an invaluable role for nearly 50 years in the preservation of historically and culturally significant sites, and particularly in heritage promotion and advocacy. Under no circumstances should their role be minimised or compromised. They perform functions governments can't or won't.
- National and state government grant systems are fundamental to the maintenance and continuation of historic heritage conservation. Any change in the system cannot reduce the volume of delivery without drastic, detrimental effects. Cost-effective assessments of potential item or project recipients is reasonable but determination on this basis alone is contrary to the value principle intrinsic to heritage.

With Australia's population growing, cities becoming larger, existing heritage becoming more significant and new places and items joining the ranks with the passage of years, heritage costs will progressively increase and governments at all levels cannot opt out of a basic responsibility. It should be remembered, old countries live on heritage.

Castle Hill experience – an example of problems

Castle Hill's historic site was involved with convicts for 30 years. Governor King established a government penal farm there in 1801 to produce stock feed and a grain reserve from 700 acres farmed. Up to 600 convicts were engaged, hundreds being Irish political prisoners. It is significant in our history as the site of the Castle Hill Rebellion – Australia's largest – on March 4, 1804, when hundreds headed south to capture Parramatta. Confronted by troops the next day, the Vinegar Hill rebel pursuit resulted in 15 killed, seven wounded, nine hanged, others flogged and 30 put in chains. Marshal law was proclaimed, the colony terrorised, and the ramifications affected administration and the military, and religious, cultural and social life was restricted for two decades.

The Castle Hill farm closed after 10 years; the two-storey stone barracks became Australia's first lunatic asylum until 1829; and about 1825, convict chain gangs, based on the farm site, began building the Great North Road (now called the Convict Trail) to the Hawkesbury River and Hunter Valley. This features some of the finest examples in existence of cuttings, embankments and bridges constructed by craftsmen stone masons.

In 1975, the Federal Government reserved 50 acres of the penal farm, still in a natural state, to be acquired by the NSW Government and passed on to the Baulkham Hills Shire Council to be used in perpetuity as a heritage park. Most of this area was placed on the Register of the National Estate (no. 2964) on March 25, 1986; on the National Trust Heritage Conservation Register in 1996; and on the NSW Heritage List in 2001 when the park boundaries were finally determined.

In 1989, what is now titled the Castle Hill Historic Site Community Committee was formed with the express aim of organising the construction of an Exhibition and Education Centre on the site, which only then had been acquired by the NSW Government. We organised a public appeal raising

funds and donations in kind, most of which we still hold. From that time on, our committee has “driven” the project. It was eight years before the Shire Council was given title to the site by the State Government. We then spent four years pressuring the council to buy 2.2ha to provide a frontage and an entrance to the park. This it finally did in 2001 for \$2.3 million without any government assistance.

Another three years later, the heritage park was officially opened, simply with a small parking area, paved paths, signage and a small covered area with seats, tables and a children’s playground. But it still doesn’t have a toilet! Apart from small grants from the Natural Heritage Trust, the only Federal assistance secured has been two grants totalling about \$240,000, most of this for archaeological investigations still intermittently continuing.

A plan of management for the park was prepared and a management committee appointed, on which the historic site committee has three representatives. A second phase of ground works is now imminent but the approved convict education and interpretive centre – which our committee originally set out 16 years ago to have constructed, has still not yet been designed

During this time, the HSCC has been fighting pre-emptive or rear-guard actions against developers and/or the council regarding what be consider to be inappropriate developments at the entrance to the park and on most sides of the now virtually enclosed site. Practically all of these have been unsuccessful. But there are more battles to come as we keep fighting on. Unless more progress is made, most of the committee will be in the grave before its goal is achieved!

THE LESSONS from this saga are manifold and **have implications for this Heritage Inquiry**. We have learned

Despite the delays and problems, the Burra Charter, administered by the NSW Heritage Office, has preserved the heritage integrity of the site, and will continue to do so.

The proposed Convict Education and Interpretive Centre cannot be built without the Federal, State and Local Governments and the public jointly co-operating to provide the finance required. **This is why a three-tier government structure needs to continue**. A project such as ours can’t happen locally.

An education and interpretive centre is fundamental to justify the Australian Government’s virtual “gift”, in 1975, of the historic site to the people as a national historic reserve and also to **fulfil the obligation the shire council has** to foster and promote public understanding of such a heritage site in the context of colonial development 200 years ago.

Our plan to interpret, not merely Castle Hill happenings, but **the convict farm way of life** similar at all government, penal, agricultural settlements in the Sydney region during the early colonial era, as a perceived need expressed by NSW Tourism, is designed to demonstrate for the public the farm practices, customs and land use of the pioneering years of the 19th century.

Because of the international connection between Castle Hill and Ireland’s Vinegar Hill site at Enniscorthy (site of the English victory in 1798 which produced the convict flow to Australia) – Baulkham Hills Shire and Wexford County are “sister-cities” – it is imperative that Castle Hill education centre be constructed as a goodwill gesture to Ireland with its National Memorial at Enniscorthy. It is important to note that that 50 Irish visitors (including a group of Wexford Senators) visited Castle Hill for the Heritage Park opening in March 2004 and another group of 50 will arrive for the 202nd anniversary commemoration of the Castle Hill Rebellion at Castle Hill in March.

This emphasises the national and international significance of Castle Hill’s historic site.

Descendants of Castle Hill convicts and others involved during the penal years have a cultural, emotional and spiritual connection with the site. Their forebears will be honoured by name in a memorial wall and the current generation are among visitors and keen, practical supporters to advance our project.

As Castle Hill has an abundance of retired people willing and able to become involved in voluntary activities, and with a rapidly growing population in the north-west of the shire, our committee is confident community interest in this exciting cultural and historical project will mount to provide practical assistance in the proposed education centre to limit paid labour and ensure the facility is, at least, virtually viable, with council maintenance an accepted responsibility.

The political colour of governments change and councils become factionalised, as we have found to our immense frustration. The site is located in a liberal-voting electorate and in a large developmental shire with constantly growing infrastructure needs the NSW Government is loath to assist in meeting. Thus heritage support –nil.

If the three-tier system is abolished and no funding is available from federal sources (we barely receive any anyway), with the state government disinterested and the council unwilling at this stage to endorse education centre construction, even with public support, the prospects of completing the Castle Hill project in the committee's lifetime is bleak, to put it mildly. **This is why availability of funding support from all tiers of government is absolutely essential.**

Finally, the Eureka Stockade stand-off for a few days in 1854 in the Ballarat community of 35,000 people, promoted as the birth of democracy in Australia, attracted three-tier financial grants totalling around \$4 million to build the Eureka Centre for the 150th anniversary in 2004. We seriously contend that the provision of a Convict Education and Interpretive Centre on the Castle penal site to commemorate the **1804 Rebellion** that produced the birth-pangs of democracy with the rebels chanting "Death or Liberty"; the aftermath that rocked the fledgling Sydney colony of a mere 6,000 emigrant inhabitants 50 years earlier; and 30 years of convict occupation, is equally deserving of tri-government and public support.

How will this be fitted into an amended system of government involvement which possibly could change radically government involvement in supporting deserving community historic heritage initiatives?

David Sommerlad, AM
for and on behalf of the Castle Hill Historic Site Community Committee.

