

SUBMISSION to
**Productivity Commission Enquiry into Heritage and the
Historic Environment**

HERITAGE GROUP OF LEICHHARDT DISTRICT

The HERITAGE GROUP OF LEICHHARDT DISTRICT (HGOLD), formerly Leichhardt Local History Group, was formed in 2002. Its aims are:

- * to promote and raise community awareness about local history throughout the Leichhardt Local Government Area
- * to assist in raising funds for local history activities and resources
- * to offer assistance to the community in heritage matters
- * to facilitate networking and liaison between other local history groups, such as the Balmain Association, in the Leichhardt LGA.
- * to compile a comprehensive list of history collections held in the libraries and elsewhere in Leichhardt.

The Group works closely with the Local Studies librarian at Leichhardt Library, who is an *ex-officio* member of the committee and liaises frequently with the Mayor and Council staff. A monthly newsheet contains the minutes of monthly committee meetings, held in the Local Studies room at Leichhardt Library, and advertises forthcoming events. These include talks about the area, local noteworthy historical figures and heritage projects as well as walks and excursions. These events are the main source of fund-raising.

Leichhardt Council has an extensive Conservation Plan and is in the process of revising its Heritage Review. HGOLD lobbies for heritage preservation and enhancement by taking an active role in querying Development Applications, where appropriate, and by actively campaigning over such issues as the retention of Callan Park and inappropriate private development proposals.

There are several issues which concern a community-run heritage group such as this:

- **Importance of Heritage:** Our Group covers one of the oldest and most interesting historical areas of Sydney. This municipality is also becoming an important tourist precinct. Yet Leichhardt Council only employs one archivist, who is solely concerned with Council archives, and the only historian is the Local Studies librarian. This contrasts starkly with our neighbours in Glebe who have recently been moved into the City of Sydney Council area, a council which employs several historians and archivists, the benefits of which are immediately apparent in the functioning of the Glebe Society. This is a group with similar ideals to our own, but with a much larger membership, having been established in 1969, which has established very positive relations with their new council who react promptly and effectively to their concerns.
- **Finance:** The only regular source of funding for HGOLD is that raised by its own events. Two modest grants have been obtained from Leichhardt Council: one to obtain equipment for the Library's Oral History project; the other enabling us to publish two four-page newsletters this year, containing

articles written by members about the history of enterprises, districts and people in the district.

Regular and reliable modest funding from all tiers of government, but most importantly from the local council, would enable the group to carry out more research, publicise our activities and interests, and become more active in preserving our heritage and raising public awareness of the issues. In this context, it is interesting to note that although churches pay no tax, they automatically receive funding from the NSW Heritage Commission.

- **Insurance:** Public Liability Insurance has become an enormous burden for all community voluntary organisations. HGOLD was originally incorporated and covered by insurance through the Royal Australian Historical Society. This became expensive, and beyond its income, so that it was forced to unincorporate so we could take advantage of Council's public liability coverage. Government should urgently address this issue.
- **Private Ownership of Heritage Buildings:** It is difficult if not impossible for a community group to influence private owners without strong state government and council support. HGOLD tried at its formation to obtain the use of part of the top floor of the former Leichhardt Post Office building, a heritage listed but unoccupied building, for office space and to hold local archives, in exchange for obtaining a heritage grant to carry out minor repairs and maintenance. However, it was impossible to convince the agents of the benefits of this and HGOLD was not permitted to contact the owners, so the plan had to be aborted. A system of tax incentives or a similar scheme could be a method of overcoming these and similar difficulties.
- **Volunteer Community:** So far we have a relatively small membership base and the organisation is run by a core committee of about half a dozen members. It is probably inevitable that we are all of the older age group because we have the spare time and the enthusiasm. Younger members are often unable to participate fully because of work commitments. The impetus for newcomers to the district to join is often because of an interest in the history of their own houses. But if we were able to offer workshops and specific programs (eg sorting archival material, targeted research) as well as more social activities as an inducement, we could achieve more and our efforts would become more widely known.

The efforts of local heritage and historical groups is vital in raising awareness of local issues, so that they can then be brought to the attention of state and federal bodies and dealt with appropriately. The Heritage Group of Leichhardt District represents one of the oldest and historically most significant areas of Sydney and is thus of pivotal importance not only to the heritage of the whole country, but to the growth of tourism in the area.

But it must not be forgotten that community groups are volunteers and therefore have little clout in dealing with governments, councils, developers and other interested parties who are usually in receipt of substantial salaries for doing what is their job. It is therefore vital that these groups be given every possible assistance by the public sector for whom, after all, they are providing an essential service.

