

**Submission by Hornsby Shire Historical Society
To
The Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the
Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places**

Hornsby Shire sits on the northern edge of Metropolitan Sydney, its northern boundary being the Hawkesbury River from Brooklyn to Wisemans Ferry, and part of its southern boundary is the F3 Freeway. All north bound traffic, both rail and road, passes through the shire. The North Shore railway line, the Main North railway line and the line from Gosford and Newcastle meet in Hornsby.

Originally the area now covered by the Shire was probably part of the land occupied by both the Ku-ring-gai and Dharug tribes.

The earliest European occupants were timber getters, and they were followed by small farmers, mainly orchardists. With the coming of the railway lines the orchards were progressively subdivided for housing on standard building blocks. In some areas, these houses have been replaced by both medium and high-density development. The valleys that created the headwaters of the Lane Cove River and Berowra Creek split the shire in two. The ridge between the two halves of the Shire carries road and rail arteries. Much of the Shire is bushland, National Park or State recreational areas.

Currently there are areas of high-rise, high density, medium density and free standing houses, as well as rural lifestyle blocks dispersed between the few remaining orchards and working farms.

Hornsby Shire was one of the first councils to develop a local heritage list, which has been regularly updated. The list currently contains 884 items as diverse as, fences, trees, sections of bushland, street trees, roads, bridges, wharves, boatsheds, parks and railway stations, as well as many houses and buildings.

The current residents of Hornsby Shire reflect the full socio-economic and ethnic spectrum of Australia.

The main objective of Hornsby Shire Historical Society is the protection and promotion of the heritage of Hornsby Shire.

In a Shire as diverse as Hornsby there are many pressures on the conservation of heritage places.

Many of the residents of the shire were not born in Australia and thus do not identify with the history of Australia or cultural evolution that made Australia the place in which they have chosen to live.

Many of the residents who live in the medium and high-density housing are transient residents, who treat their housing as a dormitory and have little interest in the area where they live except as users of services.

As much of the housing stock in Hornsby Shire is fairly old and of modest proportions, on quite large blocks of land, close to public transport, it is therefore popular with developers. They buy, demolish, subdivide the land and cover with wall to wall large housing with paved gardens, then sell and move elsewhere. Increased housing density is encouraged by the State government in response to Federal Government policies, or lack of policies, with no apparent thought for the effects this has on the culture of an area, and thus the conservation of the heritage places of the area.

It is a very rare occurrence for people who sell their house, see it replaced by multiple dwellings and then live in one of those new dwellings. They and the builders will take their profits and move away, leaving the remaining residents to cope with the negative changes caused by this profit taking activity.

The heritage of a suburban area is not just in the few buildings that are heritage listed. The heritage includes the streetscapes, the streets of single story houses, the trees, the spaces around the dwellings, the gardens, garages and car ports set under, beside or behind the houses, the connectiveness between the house and the garden and the street. The lack of, or low profile front fences, the 'sense of community' and 'feelings of safety' that this engenders is part of the heritage of suburban residential areas. This connectiveness and sense of community is being lost with the current trend of building high front fences and/or large, dominant garages that hide the dwelling.

Many years ago some new sub-divisions had what were called covenants on them, which restricted the owner's building options. For instance, if you bought land in that area you had to build a house of brick or house of a certain value. Many of our developed residential areas now need a similar, but different protection today. To protect established suburban areas today there needs to be restrictions on the height of domestic buildings, the percentage of a block that may be covered with hard surface (house, swimming pool and paved area), and the height of front fences. Restrictions should be in place to stop single story housing with front and back lawns and low front fences being replaced with a fortified 'Macmansion', surrounded by hard paving. Restrictions should give people choices, such that, if you want to live in a 'Macmansion' you go to an area where other people choose to so live. If you have had the benefits of living in an established suburban area, then your choice to sell your dwelling should not negatively affect the neighborhood with some new owner who decides to demolish and build an inappropriate 'Macmansion'. In established, dominantly single story suburban areas, if old housing stock is replaced, the replacement buildings should be of similar footprint size and height to the other dwellings in the street. This sort of protection would be a level down for the current heritage precincts. It would not restrict the type of building, just the height and percentage of ground cover. The increase in the density of dwellings and the trend to covering all ground with hard paving is increasing storm water flows and will affect the ground water table. It also adds further stress to our living heritage of native flora and fauna.

In old established areas, where twenty or thirty houses are replaced with over a couple of thousand home units, there are very severe strains on all the established infrastructure such as parks, schools, sewerage pipes etc.

Across the State heritage protection can be very patchy and it is dependent upon the Local Council to nominate and then protect the heritage of an area. This can vary, as an examination of the numbers of listed heritage items in adjoining council areas will show. Hornsby Shire Council has 884 listed items, but two of its neighbouring local government areas each have less than 170 items. Hornsby Shire Council has a dedicated Heritage Officer on its staff. The two neighbouring councils have a staff member who has heritage as part of their responsibilities. Even in councils that appear to take heritage seriously, the person with the responsibility for heritage does

not have a high level management position. This can be a problem when higher level managers in other departments see heritage as standing in the way of what they perceive as their job. This problem is further exacerbated if these managers are on performance based contracts.

In the past, Hornsby Shire Historical Society has had to present arguments to Hornsby Shire Council, urging the Council to follow the advice of its Heritage Committee. The Society petitioned the Council to conform to its own policies regarding property it owned, and to refrain from following the conflicting advice from a senior council staff member, who wanted the Council to ignore its own policies regarding heritage.

Despite these problems, in many ways Hornsby Shire Council is an exemplary council. It has a large list of diverse heritage items, and in general, the planning staff are good at ensuring all development applications affecting a heritage item are referred to the Heritage Committee.

Council staff, voluntary community representatives and councillors comprise the membership of the Heritage Committee, which examines all the DAs that may affect listed heritage items and make recommendations to Council. Generally these recommendations are followed. The Historical Society has a representative on this committee who reports back to the Historical Society. The other members of the Historical Society usually only become involved in lobbying Council, and speaking on items in the general public forum when they become aware of negative influences towards Council. For example lobbying against the decisions of the Heritage Committee, or dissenting reports from other Council staff, or in the case of controversial issues, the Society thinks there is a need to be present.

At both State and Local government level, heritage is very under funded with paid staff carrying very large workloads. And as I write this at midnight I am reminded to say a great deal of the work in protecting Australia's heritage is done voluntarily. The protection of Australia's heritage takes a lot of passion, drive and energy. Many professional heritage practitioners are also voluntary heritage workers in their spare time.

One of the basic tools in local historical research is land titles certificates. In NSW many certificates are no longer available on open access. Recently the cost of obtaining a copy of a certificate went from \$4.00 per copy to \$10.00 per copy. This has severely impacted on the ability of voluntary groups to research historical heritage places.

A great deal of the research that professional heritage practitioners use when writing heritage impact statements exists because of the voluntary work of historical societies who collect, index, research and publish information about their local area. When they publish, it is generally done on shoe-string budgets with scant grants. Without grants many societies would not be able to publish.

There is a need for educating the general public through heritage conservation policies and programs. It is vital that the wider population is educated about the importance of the conservation of our historic heritage and to make the protection and conservation of Australia's historic places everyone's business.

The most unlikely people will become heritage advocates if they can make connections to, and are given ownership of, that heritage.