

Heritage Office Enquiry Submission
From Christine Stewart, Proprietor, Collits'Inn, Hartley Vale, NSW 2790

Experience with the Heritage Office of NSW

We purchased Collits Inn on 1st May, 1998 and worked with the Heritage Office for 6 years.

Is it a good idea to have a Heritage office to oversee projects?

In principal, we think it is. We, and I think most of the community that we have talked to about this subject, think it is vital that our heritage is preserved. It is very important to have bodies such as the National Trust and the Heritage Office to oversee this. Too much of our history has already gone and we feel people should be encouraged and helped to take on such projects.

However, having said that, our experience was that this could work much better than it does. Our experience was that it is almost impossible to work within the guidelines and restrictions of the Heritage Office of NSW. For this reason, we have heard that many people dread having their properties listed or having to work with the Heritage Office. The restrictions add enormously to the expense and the frustration experienced is enormous.

What were the problems in working with the Heritage Office of NSW?

1. Insufficient knowledge of our history.

Some of the Heritage Office people we spoke to had not even heard of Collits' Inn and had no knowledge of its significance. Some amazing remarks were made such as "*It was only an old farmhouse and scarcely worth preserving*" and "*Why not turn the front verandah room into a bedroom*" This was the historic Post Office of the Inn.

And so on. They expressed amazement that the Heritage Office of Australia had given us such a large grant and said that they thought we should only have had \$10,000 instead of the highest grant given in NSW \$165,000.

2. Poor management skills

I finished writing the CMP and History in July 1999 and gave it in to the Heritage office. I received at least 3 calls left at 5 pm on my answering machine asking me come at 9 am the very next day – no possibility of ringing back if one was not there. I asked several times that I be given some days notice and so this time was left a message at 3 pm the day before – but as I was not there until after 5, I did not receive it until too late to ring back. So this time, I just drove out to Parramatta and turned up at 9 am only to be told that my history was too long and they had not read it. This was now September – three months after I had first handed it in!! Why not tell me that immediately? And why not be organised enough to ring people and set up an appointment for a time that suited them?

I asked what I should do about it being too long and was told they had no suggestions. So a Heritage consultant friend of a friend advised me. She told me the history was very valuable and should be put towards the back and I should just write a two page executive summary in front of the CMP to make it simpler as that would probably be all that was read.

I did this and handed it in again in November 1999. Even though it was sitting in the Heritage Office from November, 1999 it missed the January 2000 meeting and was finally passed in March, 2000. I was amazed that the Landscape Officer rang me on the day after it was passed and knew nothing of it. There appeared to have been no communication within the office.

3. Extreme difficulty in having to wait too long for decisions

The policy of the Heritage Office is that any changes required a S60 application, a payment of \$60 and a delay of 40 days. When one is working with a heritage building there are many decisions that cannot be made at the beginning as one needs to tread so carefully with the fabric during restoration and discoveries happen all the time that necessitate changes. When there is an expensive team of builders there, one cannot just send them away for 40 days if a change needs to be made. Sometimes we just had to go ahead, as we knew we were doing what the Heritage office was told us they wanted, and could not send the builders away whilst we waited. We incurred extreme displeasure from the Heritage Office for doing this, but there was really no choice.

4. Unawareness of the limited means of proprietors and unreasonable demands

If one is to take on a heritage building and comply with all the provisions, one needs very deep pockets indeed. We had a grant of \$165,000 which was one of the most generous in Australia and the most generous in NSW but this was only a fraction of the final cost of well over \$1m. One of the things that adds immeasurably to the cost, is that so many conversations have to be had by the restorers to work out what it is best to do – when 5 men are involved in the conversation that is a large expense for the owners. We found the most unreasonable demand of all concerned the archaeology.. Even to obtain an archaeologist's report, which told us nothing at all, as it was all based on the history that I myself had written, cost us \$2,500 for one page and a lot of padding. It said, reading between the padding, that nothing could be found until we had dug into the ground.

5. Dogmatic approach of the staff

As required, we employed a specialist engineer to advise us on aspects of the work. This man was furious because his recommendations were being over-ridden by the Heritage Office, and we suspected that the person over-riding him did not have equally skilled training.

6. Suspicious attitude towards the public

We were very well and generously treated by the Heritage Office of Australia in Canberra but never once did we receive any congratulations, thanks or expressions of pleasure from the Heritage Office of NSW for what we had done – which had been at enormous expense and effort by ourselves. In fact, on the contrary, we were treated with suspicion and almost as though we were criminals. It was a very negative experience indeed. Even when one of the officers attended the opening there was not a single positive word from her, despite the fact that the National Trust of NSW thought so highly of the restoration that they awarded

us the prize for Best Individual Restoration. On the other hand, one of the officers from Canberra was very warm and generous in her congratulations.

We were even treated as liars as we had had permission to take out three of the four pine trees which stood in front of the Inn, as they were dead or dying. When the landscaping was about to begin, the fourth tree was severely struck by lightning. Our tenant witnessed the strike, which was dramatic, and we took photos of the damage to the trunk. We were advised to wait for several months to see if it would die, which we did. A tree surgeon said he would not waste our money by coming out but advised that if the branches began to die off, then the tree could not be kept. We contacted the Heritage Office to advise them of this but, as the landscaping was about to begin and the opening of the Inn was approaching, we could not wait the 40 days required and we had to remove the tree – at considerable expense to ourselves. We sent photos to the Heritage Office to show them what had happened and said that we had done this as we already had permission to take out any trees that were dead or dying but they appeared not to believe us and told us that these photos could be of any tree. We thought this was very offensive when we had given so many years of our life to this project and felt they should have trusted us to do what was right.

How could these systems improve?

Personally I think it would be very simple to improve these systems and would also give the Heritage Office far less detailed work.

I would suggest the following as something that would work efficiently for owners and for the Heritage Office:

1. First, the owners or a paid historian should research the history and the Heritage office should let owners know that it is necessary to give a two page Executive Summary at the front of the CMP. I personally would suggest that owners research the history themselves with guidance from the heritage architect. It is very expensive to have a historian do it and one can do a much more thorough job if one has the time, without the constraints of finance, to do so. It is also very interesting. For instance, I spent almost a year researching the Archives, The Mitchell Library and interviewing people who had spent time at the Inn. We could only have afforded 3 weeks at the very most with a professional historian who often would not have time to check back to original documents. For instance, I found many mistakes which came from using an erroneous document to base further history on e.g. a postcard put out by State Rail was shown to me by several proud descendants. It said “Collits’ Inn at Hartley Vale”. As it was a two storey building, which Collits’ Inn is not, I checked back with State Rail photos and found that it actually should have said “The Victoria Inn at the bottom of Victoria Pass”! It was a sharp lesson in the necessity of checking back to original documents.
2. Once the history is done, have an initial interview with the client and the heritage architect to explore the approach based on the heritage potential of the project.
3. When plans are prepared, the client and perhaps the architect, could have a further meeting at the H.O. to discuss any controversial aspects.
4. Once this is done, leave any changes to be decided between the client and the architect. If the architect is a trained heritage professional, then he should be aware

- of doing the right thing. This would avoid the 40 day wait, the Section 60 applications and all the additional expense and waiting involved.
5. Archaeology is a very difficult area – it is obviously important but at what cost? To find a few pins at \$1,000 expense to the client would not be worth it for instance.. We were expected to have a professional sitting there each day that we disturbed the ground. This was impossible at \$500 per day, so we agreed that we would contact an archaeologist if we saw anything of interest. It is impossible for many people to pay that sort of money when the whole project is far more expensive than a non-heritage building. We also were disturbed that metal detectors could not be used as history would be being lost because small items such as coins or military buttons would not be seen or found any other way and much of the ground had to be disturbed. The only other way to find them would be by digging and sifting, obviously prohibitively expensive so could not be done. Most of the history of Australia lies lightly on the ground and most of it in that area lies in coins and military buttons as there were so many soldiers in the various stockades in the area.
 6. I would also encourage the Heritage Office to be aware that people who take on these things are often doing it for the love of it and they need to be encouraged, trusted, congratulated (if they have done a good job) and thanked as much as possible for what they are doing.

I thoroughly support the concept of a Heritage Office and am sorry these remarks are so negative, but the truth can only be helpful I think.

Christine Stewart 21st July, 2005