

HISTORY HOUSE

*ARCHITECT AND CLIENT-
GEORGE ALLEN
MANSFIELD AND HIS
UNCLE GEORGE OAKES*

RUTH FRAPPELL
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History House

No. 133 Macquarie Street, Sydney, the home of the Royal Australian Historical Society and now known as History House was designed in 1871 by the architect George Allen Mansfield for his uncle, George Oakes. November this year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of History House.

The area in which History House is located was once a part of the Governor's Domain, the extensive grounds associated with First Government House in Bridge Street which was occupied by successive Governors of New South Wales from 1788 until 1845. These grounds were subdivided into building allotments in the late 1840s, after the First Government House had been demolished. The land changed hands three times before George Oakes finally bought one of the allotments in 1857.

Plans were drawn up for a house on the site by architect George Allen Mansfield. As originally built, the house which Mansfield designed for Oakes was a typical Victorian upper middle-class town house – a gentleman's family residence. On the ground floor were a fine entrance hall, drawing room and dining room, the public parts of the house. On the first and second floors were a study, bedrooms and dressing rooms. The front verandah and balconies commanded a view over the Botanic Gardens.

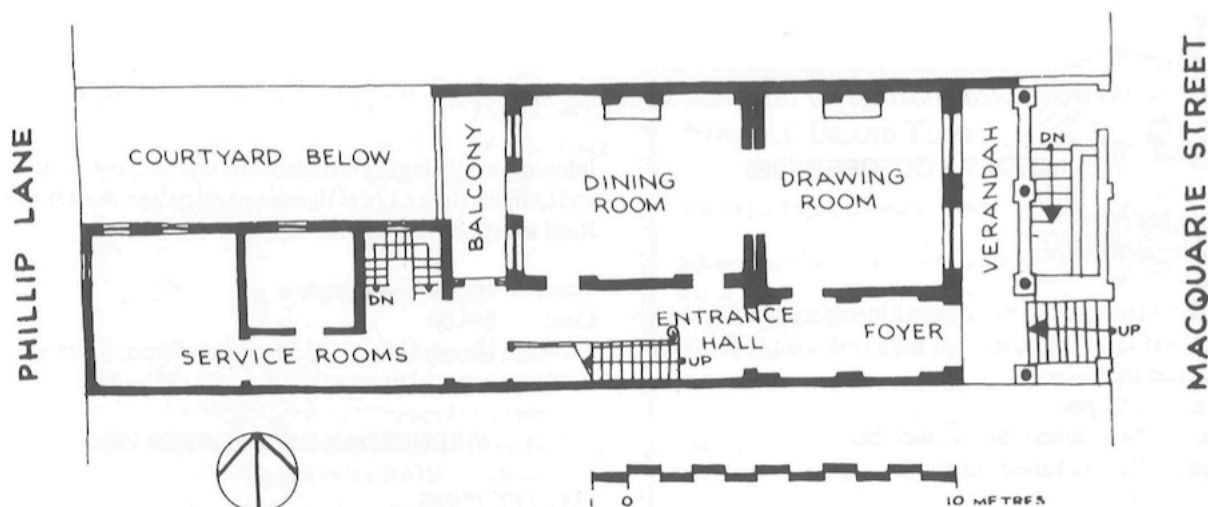
Use of the house as a private residence was short-lived. By 1879, when Oakes was appointed to the Legislative Council, his house had become the premises of the Reform Club of which Oakes was a founder member. After his death ownership passed to Oakes' son Arthur, a medical practitioner and the house was let, first to the Hon. William Broadribb MLA and then to the Warrigal Club. From 1892 until 1922 the house was used as a boarding house and in 1922 it was purchased by Dr George Armstrong and used as doctors' consulting rooms.

In 1927 the distinguished surgeon, Dr George Bell, purchased the house and used it both as his residence and as consulting rooms. For many years this part of the city remained

comparatively peaceful but by 1952 this had changed and while Dr Bell continued to use the house for consulting rooms he and his wife no longer resided there. By 1969 when the Royal Australian Historical Society acquired the house it was occupied by a syndicate of doctors, including Dr Bell, and was called 'Wickham House'.



Entrance hall and stairway, History House



In 1901 when the Royal Australian Historical Society was founded it had neither the funds nor the ambition to own a home of its own. Instead the Society met in a number of different venues and was eventually provided with rooms in the Department of Education building in Bridge Street. In 1941, forty years after its foundation, the Society acquired its own premises in a former wool store in Young Street. By 1957 it was apparent that the site would eventually be required for a large scale redevelopment plan proposed by the AMP Society. 'Wickham House' was available for purchase and was acquired for the RAHS by the AMP Society, substantially on an exchange basis for the Young Street premises.

The Society moved in to its new home in 1970 and the house was renamed 'History House'. It was officially opened by His Excellency the Governor-General of Australia, Sir Paul Hasluck, Patron of the Society, on 12 November 1971.

Since its acquisition the Society has carried out work to maintain and enhance this important and now rare example of the town houses which once graced much of Macquarie Street. The external fabric has been repaired and the drawing room and dining room, once again used as public rooms, have been redecorated and furnished in a manner appropriate to the period. Original paint colour schemes were discovered and restored. Much of the beauty of the house lies in its fine joinery with its cedar staircase, doors and carved door cases. The entrance hall is floored with a parquetry design made from a dozen different species of timber. The drawing and dining rooms have elaborate moulded plaster cornices and fine marble chimney pieces, all of which survive in excellent condition. The Macquarie Street elevation of the building remains substantially unaltered from the 1870s except for the basement area which now accommodates a restaurant.

History House is protected by a Permanent Conservation Order under the New South Wales Heritage Act, is classified by the National Trust and is listed by the Australian Heritage Commission on the Register of the National Estate.



Above: The ground floor plan of History House in the late 1850s. The lower floor of the west wing contained the kitchen and scullery. (Photo courtesy of Reed Books Australia.)

Far left: Detail of the fine carved Australian cedar joinery in a door lintel.

Left: Carved embellishment on one of four sandstone capitals from which the ground floor window and doorway arches spring. Window detail in background.

(Photographs in this article by Mari Metzke)