

HISTORY HOUSE

FINDING AND KEEPING A 'HOME OF ITS OWN'

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Finding and keeping 'a home of its own': the Society and its premises over the twentieth century

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FOR the first forty years of its existence, the Royal Australian Historical Society lived in rented premises. Its tenancies were of varying duration, though by far the longest was in the 1912 head office of the New South Wales Department of Education. Like a traditional married couple, however, the Society once established, began saving for 'a home of its own',¹ which it finally bought in 1940 with funds raised in large measure by its Women's Auxiliary. The first 'History House' in Young Street was a modest home, with structural faults, but like all well-chosen real estate, it had 'position, position, position'. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Society used this position to bargain for a better and more fitting home, the present 'History House' in Macquarie Street. In its centenary year, the RAHS also celebrates thirty years at this site. It celebrates in style, with plans to renovate the nineteenth century facade and interior. As every property owner knows, maintenance is part of keeping 'a first class house',² in Macquarie Street or anywhere else.

During its first fifteen years, the Society was nomadic, meeting at the School of Arts in Pitt Street, at the premises of the Royal Society and at the former Norwich House. In 1915 Karl Kramp (afterwards Cramp), examiner in History in the Chief Inspector's Branch of the New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, became honorary secretary of the Society. He secured the rent of a small office in the newly-opened building of his department in Bridge Street and there the Society remained for twenty-five years. This arrangement undoubtedly suited Cramp who in the 1920s and 1930s derived much prestige from his association with the Society. Others, however, complained of being '*cabin'd, cribbed, confined* at the Department of Education' for so many years.³

In 1916, at the time the Bridge Street office was first rented, the Society opened a fund to purchase a home of its own. Its membership was then 246. In 1918 it became a 'Royal' Society and its membership increased dramatically, to 642 in 1920.⁴ One difficulty in finding suitable premises arose from the notion of the Society opening

an historical museum of its own or accepting government funding to run such a museum. Public funding involved questions of management. Such sites as Vacluse House, Elizabeth Bay House and the former subscription library in Macquarie Street were suggested but never secured. In February 1938, as part of the celebrations of the sesqui-centenary of white settlement, Cramp assembled an historical exhibition, set up in the basement of the Commonwealth Bank Building in Martin Place. It was so successful that Cramp revived the idea of a permanent museum in the Hyde Park Barracks, with one floor of that building housing the offices of the RAHS.⁵

The outbreak of war in 1939 caused an almost immediate slump in the value of city real estate. An unpretentious wool store of three storeys with an attic at 8 Young Street, owned by the Primary Producers Wool & Produce Selling Co. Ltd, came on the market and the Society bought it for £12,200, the sum total of its building fund. The Women's Auxiliary met the cost of refurbishing this 1890s warehouse and the building re-opened on 7 February 1941 as 'History House'.⁶ The Council of the Society believed that its historic site, close to Sydney Cove and well served by public transport (ferries and trams), was a great asset.

Council could not have envisaged in 1941, however, the changes that would occur in Sydney's central business district after the war. In the years of prosperity following Federation, the major banks and insurance houses had built imposing granite and sandstone headquarters in Pitt and George Streets and Martin Place, near the General Post Office. These buildings look as if they were intended to remain forever, though they survive today with other occupants, including international fashion houses with Italian names. The area between Circular Quay and Hunter Street, on the other hand, dominated by the Royal Exchange (1885) and the Customs House, was relatively run down by the 1950s. It was occupied by assorted public houses, some sections of Sydney's bohemian community, including the offices of the *Bulletin*, and late nineteenth century three- and four-storey warehouses and bond stores, owned by produce merchants and woolbrokers.

What happened in the economic boom of the 1950s was a shift northward of Sydney's financial heartland. Finance houses, mining companies and stock broking firms bought up cheaper sites in the dockland district for corporate headquarters. Sydney's skyline changed forever. The shift was led by the Australian Mutual Provident Society (AMP). Its nineteenth century head office at 87–89 Pitt Street was replaced in 1962 by what was then Australia's tallest skyscraper, a twenty-nine-storey modern building of glass and reinforced concrete in Alfred Street, facing across Sydney Cove. To build it, the AMP knocked down the former wool stores of Goldsbrough, Mort and Co., which in the 1930s had been acquired by the Farmers and Graziers Co-operative Ltd.

The AMP had plans, since realised, to redevelop the entire block bounded by Albert, Young, Bridge and Phillip Streets. 'History House', with its frontage of 38' 8" (11.8 m) to Young Street, was a hindrance. On 22 October 1957, the AMP made its first bid to acquire the Society's premises, for £70,000 with an option eventually to rent space in its new skyscraper.⁷ This bid, and two subsequent ones in 1958–59,

bitterly divided the Society. With hindsight, it is perhaps fairer to conclude that it was not the sale of 'History House' that divided the Society so much as the personalities of the leaders of the two factions on Council, Dr C. H. Currey, president in 1955–59 who wanted to sell, and Dr George Mackaness, president in 1948–49, who opposed a sale at any price. Eventually, at an extraordinary general meeting held on 21 April 1959, the Society voted for the third time to sit tight.⁸ David, it might be said, had defeated Goliath.

In the 1960s, the RAHS operated from Young Street under increasing difficulties. The auditorium accommodated the monthly lecture series (very comfortably, as I recall, for its theatre-style seats induced drowsiness) and the library and museum, consisting of historic artifacts, costumes and paintings, were well housed. Plans for two more storeys were discussed, for a 'Museum of Social History', a 'Folk Museum' or even an 'Historians' Club', similar to the Australasian Pioneers' Club. The Australian Society of Genealogists moved into the third floor as tenants. But there were problems, beyond those caused by the AMP's adjoining building works. The corrugated iron roof leaked; the lift was expensive to maintain; items were continually getting lost; there was no sound insulation or ventilation in a former warehouse so old that its walls were not of cavity construction; and the attic accumulated dirt, debris and unwanted printed matter.

The AMP, meantime, was determined to pursue what it called its 'Sydney Cove Development'.⁹ Early in 1967 it engaged two firms of real estate agents to 'make a confidential survey of the city' to find an alternative home for the RAHS. In October 1967 the firm of L. J. Hooker advised the AMP that 'Wickham House', 133 Macquarie Street, was likely to come up for sale.¹⁰ What appealed to the RAHS executive was the historic site of 'Wickham House', part of the original domain of the first Government House, and its improvements, a fine Victorian town house, occupied for most of its century of existence as a gentlemen's club and a medical practitioners' residence and medical consulting rooms. It was in more or less original condition, with joinery, fireplaces and parquet flooring characteristic of the best architecture of the 1870s.

In 1968 'Wickham House' was owned by a consortium of medical specialists who had set a figure of over half a million dollars, in order to forestall demolition for home units. The AMP, however, balked at so high a price and even hinted that if its plans were further thwarted, it would move to Melbourne.¹¹ At this point, the premier of New South Wales, R. W. Askin, offered to mediate to stop the AMP moving interstate. The senior vice-president of the RAHS, Justice Rae Else-Mitchell, proposed that if all else failed 'Wickham House' might be compulsorily acquired under an act administered by the Land and Valuation Court, of which he was a judge.¹² As events unfolded, no such measures were needed. A price of \$350,000 was agreed. Many of the medical specialists in the consortium were honoraries at St Vincent's Hospital, on whose board Else-Mitchell served. They accepted his assurance that the building would not be demolished but would instead be faithfully preserved. An Extraordinary General Meeting of the Society on Armistice Day, 1968



The Society's premises at 8 Young Street, Sydney.

approved the sale of the Young Street building and the purchase of 133 Macquarie Street.¹³ The Society made a separate agreement with the AMP for the renovation of 'Wickham Terrace' and the addition of an auditorium and extra library space at the rear. 'History House', the one we know today, was occupied by the Society early in 1971.¹⁴ In the days before the formation of the New South Wales Heritage Council, the Society had implemented a policy it had long advocated publicly. It had saved from demolition one of the last remaining Victorian town houses in Macquarie Street. At the same time it had acquired a particularly suitable 'home of its own'.

In the 1970s, with its move to more conspicuous premises, the activities of the Society expanded. Special interest groups like the Maritime History and Architecture and Historical Sites Groups were formed. The lecture series became open to the public, research seminars were inaugurated and an augmented excursions programme undertaken. In the early 1980s, before divisions on Council again featured in the public press, the membership of the Society was at its peak, at over 3,000.¹⁵

The past decade has been one of strict economy for the Society. Increased rental income from the upper floors and basement of 'History House' has helped maintain the building, though a leaking roof and lift repairs have been continual headaches. The tired appearance of the facade and reception rooms and the need for more library and research space have prompted the Society to undertake a complete refurbishment of the building as part of its centenary celebrations. No house is ever ideal, despite what real estate agents say about 'dream homes', but History House, with its heritage significance and central city site has served the Society well. With the advice of the Society's consultant heritage architects, Design 5 and the New South Wales Heritage Council, we plan to restore the building to an aspect as near as possible to that it enjoyed in its hey-day as a gentlemen's club a century ago. I hope it will then serve the Society for many more years.

Notes

This article is based on one by the same author, entitled 'Finding and keeping "a home of its own": The search by the Royal Australian Historical Society for a permanent abode', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society (JRAHS)*, vol. 82 (2), 1996, pp. 210–227.

1 *Annual Report (AR)* for 1922, *JRAHS*, vol. VIII, p. 449.

2 Description used in the drawing of the front elevation by G.A. Mansfield, architect, December 1871, in the possession of the Institute of Architects (NSW Chapter) and the RAHS.

3 Draft open letter by Dr George Mackaness, past president, to members of the Society in 1958. Papers of Dr George Mackaness, Mitchell Library (ML), mss 2835, K22193, file labelled 'History House'.

4 Marjorie Jacobs, "'Students of a like hobby': the Society, 1900–1954". *JRAHS*, vol. 73 (4), 1988, pp. 256–59.

5 *AR* for 1938, *JRAHS*, vol. 24 (7), pp. 505–506.

6 *AR* for 1940, *JRAHS*, vol. 26 (7), p. 537; *RAHS Newsletter*, January 1958, p. 3.

7 *RAHS Newsletter*, January 1958, pp. 3–4.

8 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 April 1959. The vote was 136 in favour, 95 against.

- 9 Memorandum by Dr H.F. Bell of the AMP, 2 June 1980. File of papers relating to dealings with the RAHS, held in the Library of the AMP Society and graciously made available by the AMP archivist.
- 10 Memorandum by Bell, 26 October 1967, AMP file.
- 11 Information supplied by the Hon. Mr Justice Rae Else-Mitchell, Deakin, ACT.
- 12 Papers of Justice Rae Else-Mitchell. ML, mss 2684, Y 4973, 'Purchase of 133 Macquarie St'. This file includes details of negotiations between the AMP, the RAHS, Askin and the Hon. W. Davis Hughes, Minister for Public Works.
- 13 Draft AR for 1968. RAHS Council Minute Book.
- 14 RAHS Council Minutes, 27 November 1970.
- 15 Hazel King, 'Growth and Change: the Society, 1955–1985', *JRAHS*, vol. 73 (4), 1988, pp. 274–275.



The Society's premises at 133 Macquarie Street, Sydney.