

HISTORY HOUSE

*A HOME OF ITS OWN:
HISTORY HOUSE, THE
1970S, AND THE RAHS*

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A Home of its Own: History House, the 1970s, and the RAHS

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In 1971, Hunter's Hill residents joined with the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) to halt progress on a controversial construction project in nearby Kelly's Bush, an untouched, eight-acre tract of bushland along the Parramatta River. In doing so, they enacted the world's very first 'green ban'. Over the next five years, the ensuing social, political, and environmental green bans movement disrupted development projects in the Sydney metropolitan area valued at more than \$4 billion Australian dollars.¹

Not only did the green bans seek to defend the city's open spaces from development, they also worked to protect existing housing stock from demolition, and to preserve some of Sydney's oldest heritage sites from that same fate. Led by BLF figurehead Jack Munday, the green bans managed to salvage 'Sydney's only intact and irreplaceable post-colonial townscape', The Rocks, from its planned annihilation.² Their lasting legacy came in the form of several pieces of key environmental legislation enacted in 1979, including the *Environment Planning and Assessment Act* and the *Land and Environment Court Act*. Owing to the bans and unionists like Munday, both environmental protection and heritage preservation were enshrined into Australian law. Fifty years on, the country owes them a great deal.³

Occurring around the same time as the green bans was the preservation of another piece of Sydney's iconic sandstone heritage, one intimately tied to the history of the Royal Australian Historical Society itself: the acquisition of History House at 133 Macquarie Street as the permanent home of the RAHS.

Formed in 1901 as the Australian Historical Society and granted the 'Royal' prefix in 1918, the RAHS began its life as a primarily 'nomadic' organisation.⁴ A Building Fund was soon established for the purchase of a permanent address, increasing in increments from the 1920s and reaching just over £13,000 in 1940. Armed with the money and aided by a wartime drop in real estate prices, the Society purchased an old wool store on Young Street in 1941. This building became known as the first History House.⁵

A fixed address offered the RAHS the opportunity to bolster membership and increase their activities, as well as host their collection onsite. By the late 1950s, however, property development in Sydney had hit its stride. The Australian Mutual Provident (AMP) Society wanted the Young Street History House – and its surrounding buildings – as the site for a new office block. The RAHS refused to sell, but in the years that followed felt the effects of neighbouring construction all the same, in the form of cracks in the building's masonry and a leaking roof. It became very clear, very quickly, that their tenure at 8 Young Street was at an end.⁶

But the question remained: where to go from there?

On nearby Macquarie Street, Number 133 – a building with a long and eclectic history – was being used as doctors' consulting rooms. The sandstone terrace was one of the last original townhouses still standing on Macquarie Street, and certainly one of the grandest surviving Victorian townhouses in all of New South Wales.⁷

Designed and built by architect George Allen Mansfield in the early 1870s for his uncle, politician and pastoralist George Oakes, Number 133 was the last gentleman's townhouse to be constructed on that section of Macquarie Street. Mansfield is best known for designing such iconic pieces of the Sydney cityscape as the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, the Pitt Street Uniting Church, the now demolished Australia Hotel, and a number of heritage-listed public schools. The Macquarie Street residence was done in the Victorian Italianate style with a regional filigree flair, known as the 'Boom Style' in Victoria and influenced by sixteenth-century Renaissance architecture and the European 'Grand Tour'. Mansfield may have used the design in his application to join the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), of which he was the first Australian to be elected a Fellow.⁸

The house was a private residence only briefly. While owned by Oakes before his untimely death in a tram accident, then by his son Dr Arthur William Oakes, Number 133 was used as a gentlemen's club. Between 1892 and 1922 it then operated as a boarding house until purchased by Dr George Armstrong. By this time



History House, c.1970s [RAHS Collection]

Macquarie Street had become the city's medical hub and Number 133 was no exception, in use as consulting rooms for a number of doctors and dentists until 1969, when the building was purchased by AMP for the RAHS in exchange for the Young Street property.

The syndicate of doctors who owned and operated Number 133, then known as Wickham House, were originally reluctant to sell, afraid the building would be demolished by its new owners like so many other historic sites across the city. This was two years prior to the start of the green bans, and heritage Sydney remained under constant threat. Upon learning who the new owners would be, however, the doctors felt reassured. Their agent lowered the asking price into AMP's agreed-upon range, for who could be better at preserving history than a society dedicated to that very cause?⁹

And what home could be better suited for an historical society than a house steeped in such rich history?

Renovations had to be made, of course. In an *Australian Women's Weekly* article penned in 1970, Gloria Newton noted how Mansfield's townhouse had been 'cut up into doctors' surgeries, its patterned parquet floors hidden from sight by antiseptic linoleum, white-painted partitions criss-crossing its lofty-ceilinged, spacious rooms'.¹⁰ These subdivisions were removed that same year, the French doors to the

dining room relocated, and a lift and fire stairs installed. The service wing, once built at right angles to the main house, was demolished to make room for an auditorium on the ground floor and an additional room above, now part of the RAHS library. Further restoration work was carried out in 1985 to match History House as close as possible to its original style.¹¹

As Newton concluded in her article: 'Those times can never come back, but coming back is an appreciation and a loving care for its old, carefully fashioned rooms and a knowledge that it will be there for many, many more years'.¹²

In his first Presidential Address in the Society's new home, the Honourable Rae Else-Mitchell mourned how property developers had changed 'the whole appearance and character' of Sydney over the last two decades, obliterating 'well-nigh every building of historic significance between Circular Quay and Central Railway Station, Macquarie Street and Clarence Street, other than those owned by public authorities'. Apart from efforts by the RAHS to place 'on permanent record ... the rapidly disappearing landmarks of Old Sydney', 'little or nothing' had been done to prevent 'this irreparable injury to the historic environment' of the city.¹³

Else-Mitchell gave this address on 23 February 1971. Later that year, the green bans would kick off at Kelly's Bush, and for the next five years the city of Sydney would feel the same passion for preserving its history that the RAHS has always maintained since its inception.

Today, Number 133 is one of only two original townhouses still standing on Macquarie Street. Set back from the modern street alignment and dwarfed by its neighbours, the little sandstone terrace is a tangible piece of Sydney's, and indeed Australia's, history – much like the historic precinct of The Rocks that Jack Munday and his fellow activists fought so vehemently to protect.

Fifty years on from the green bans, from the RAHS finally finding a home of its own at Number 133, development in the city is once again on the rise. The warm Pyrmont sandstone that characterised the city's Victorian architecture now exists only in pockets. Pockets that must be protected from 'the demolisher and the developer' for another hundred years and beyond.¹⁴

About the Author

Elizabeth Heffernan is an Australian cultural historian and member of the Professional Historians Association (NSW & ACT), specialising in World War I, religion, and the environment. She has a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History from the University of Sydney and has been a volunteer and intern with the RAHS since 2019. In 2022 she worked with Mediality as Project Historian for *Australian War Stories*.



History House interior, c.1970s [Photo: Keith Johnson, RAHS Collection]

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¹² Newton, 'New Life for Historic Wickham House'.

¹³ Else-Mitchell, 'The New History House', pp. 282-283.

¹⁴ Else-Mitchell, 'The New History House', p. 283.