A scrupulous approach to the restoration process

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PROJECT Black Rock House, 34 Ebden Avenue, Black Rock
CLIENT City of Sandringham
ARCHITECTS Dr. Miles Lewis (historian)
Peter S. Staughton (restoration)

The distinctive features of the restoration of Black Rock House have been the length and staging of the process, and the continuing operation in parallel of the investigator and the architect for the restoration. These characteristics have only been possible because of the stance of the client, the City of Sandringham, which from the earliest phases in 1974-5 was anxious to take a scrupulous approach to the restoration process and to achieve the best possible results. Had the complexity of the path ahead been understood even a client as enlightened as this might have wavered, but in the event, despite an almost complete turnover of elected councillors and of officers over the years, the council's resolve has remained more or less firm.

The first report by the writer was completed in June 1975, and its overall historical conclusions have not been significantly modified by data subsequently discovered. However the interpretation of the physical data on site has been developed enormously on the basis of specific probing, of evidence uncovered during the course of work, and simply of the increased level of general knowledge and specialist study in some areas (such as nineteenth century wallpapers) during the ensuing decade. It is important to understand how different has been this process from most restoration projects in other states of Australia. Elsewhere there is commonly no separate phase of investigation but a sort of quasi-intuitive boots-and-all jump in by the restoration architect. Where investigation is done it is not written up and presented in a form available for public scrutiny, correction, or subsequent updating. Even where a separate investigation is carried out and documented (and there have been some exemplary investigations by practitioners like Dr. Jim Kerr in Sydney and Richard Allom in Brisbane), the investigator's role has ceased at this point. At Black Rock House new historical and physical evidence has, and continues to be, unearthed. This is continually welded into the overall picture, the significance of the place is reappraised, and, more particularly, the details of the conservation approach are adjusted.

In 1975 (at a time before Australian ICOMOS was conceived) a preservation policy was proposed in which 'conjectural restoration of any substantial nature should be avoided, even at the risk of leaving the appearance bare or incomplete' and in which any unavoidable work would be clearly distinguished. Among a number of other points it was proposed to minimise the intrusion of nearby development, and it is pleasing to report that not
only has this been done with some success, but that Sandringham Council has actually bought an adjoining block of flats so that in future they may be demolished. But other aspects of this policy have in fact been modified. It was then proposed that 'subject to further and most careful examination' the covered way linking the two parts of the complex should be removed. This was not done: the careful examination suggested that there was early material in the covered way, and the remains were left, but it was only eight years later that there came to light old photographs confirming its existence and its form. Even then it was not felt the evidence was sufficient to reconstruct it, but this may be possible in the future. In a more conventionally organised project the remains of the covered way would have been eliminated at an early stage.

It is necessary to explain that the two parts linked by the covered way comprise a house, made principally of timber, on a sort of short-armed T-plan with brick walls at the gable ends of the stem and arms. At a distance is a stable courtyard with very high battlemented walls of ferruginous sandstone quarried from the nearby beach, within which were skillions of timber construction along each side. One of these probably contained stalls and loose boxes, and has been long gone, the other probably contained the kitchen and servants' rooms, but was converted into a flat in the twentieth century. At the end of the courtyard were great stone piers and massive timber gates, and at the opposite end a blind wall, but with another row of skillion rooms in this case on the opposite side or outside the walls. It seems that this may have been for animals and other more or less farming purposes, whereas the inside of the court was reserved for the blockstock in which the owner, C.H. Ebden, took considerable pride.

The stone-walled stable court is linked to the brick and wood house by a further length of battlemented stone wall, along one side of which ran the covered way to which I have referred. At the outset it was not known whether the house or the much more substantial stable court was the earlier structure, or whether either could be dated definitely to the time of the colourful squatter and politician, C.H. Ebden, who owned the property in 1850s. It was an unusual source, an admiralty chart of 1862, which confirmed the early existence of both parts, for, albeit at a very small scale, a solid block linked to a hollow block could be discerned, together with surrounding enclosures and planting now obliterated by later subdivision. Although the grounds have been subjected to some archaeological investigation, and there has also been some detailed physical examination and probing of the stable complex, it is upon the house that most restoration work has been done, and here that the most distinctive features have been discovered.

The house was surrounded by a verandah all around but for the north face, at the end of the stem of the T, and here laundry and other additions had been built on in the twentieth century. There was no real question that these were original, significant or even compatible with the restoration project, and they were removed without any qualms, but the treatment of the face now exposed presented some problems. The brickwork was severely affected near ground level by rising damp and exfoliation caused by crypto-efflorescence.

It was decided to replace the friable hand-made bricks in this location with hand-pressed modern bricks. Peter Staughton, as architect, was satisfied that this was technically necessary and that the new bricks were
Fig. 1 View of Black Rock House from the south-east, by J.P. Lind, photographer, of Carlton, c1880. This photograph, which came to light only in 1984, has confirmed the correctness of restoration work to date.
so different that they could never in a future examination be confused with the original. He did not wish, however, to emphasise this distinction by maintaining the very different size of the modern bricks, which would be visually disruptive and indeed very difficult to accommodate within the existing pattern of the wall. Consequently each replacement brick had to be laboriously and expensively sawn down to match the original size.

Two other problems with the newly exposed north face were to do with the disposal of the rainwater from the valley which terminated at the centre of the elevation, and the design of the portico over the back doorway directly beneath. The rainwater could not be taken in a downpipe straight across the door opening, and, after some debate over how it should be carried to one side, Peter Staughton resolved to place a rain head at the end of the valley and a raking pipe from this across to the right hand side. Soon after this decision it was discovered from a most unlikely source, a set of the early twentieth century published picturesque sketches by Herbert Moore, that this was the actual solution, at least as it existed in Moore's time. Moore's sketch (Fig.2) published in his Links with other Days (1927) shows no rainhead and in place of a pipe a more solid element which, on the basis of the further evidence of an early postcard which came to light only in 1982, (Fig. 5) seems to be a large rectangular box gutter. None of the available illustrations, however, shows any portico over the doorway and this must have been removed much earlier, the only evidence being the sawn off ends, in the brickwork, of what are taken to be cantilever beams. In the face of this paucity of evidence no reconstruction of the portico has been attempted nor will be.

Around the verandahs of the building survived a proportion of the original paving in red square sandstone blocks, such as we now know to survive at about half a dozen other locations in Victoria dating from the 1850s and early 1860s. Sandstone paving is known to have been imported at the time from York, Caithness and Arbroath, but the York stone is brown and this must be the Scottish type, probably that of Arbroath. It has proved impossible to obtain more, and the missing sections of paving have instead been replaced in a reddish coloured slate in pieces which are of the same size and a compatible colour, but of quite a different texture, and therefore visually distinct without being at all obtrusive.

The exterior of the house was about to be painted in the cream colour which had been discovered by means of paint-scrapes, and the contract for this had been let, when various threads of evidence came together to suggest a very different and most unusual finish. Some external scrapes revealed at base a resinous material which, it appeared, could have been actual resin weeping from the pine boards, or traces of varnish from a subsequently stripped varnished or artificially grained finish - which could not be determined on the scanty evidence. Meanwhile grains of beach sand were found clogging the grooves of vertical timber mouldings at the corners of house. Thirdly, when a sleepout which had been built under the verandah was removed, a vertical strip of brickwork was exposed (where a partition had butted in) which was unpainted, but coated in sand. Finally, workmen on the site drew out of the middle of the timber wall a broken-off piece of weatherboard which contained, underneath layers of paint, more beach sand. The picture that emerged from this was that the whole of the walls, both brick and timber, had been coated with glue and sand. At a later date conscientious painters had stripped this leaving only traces of glue on the woodwork, and of sand in the grooves and under the partition. We now know...
Fig. 2 South elevation, drawn by Peter Staughton.
- as we did not at the time - of other examples of sand finish in nineteenth century Australia and America (as opposed to sanded paints, which were relatively much more common). Because the sand was from the local beach, and because the grain size could be determined from the sample on the weatherboard, the restitution of the finish was principally a matter of the architect satisfying himself as to an appropriate adhesive (the original being probably an animal glue). A suitable epoxy was found and tested, and in due course the whole finish was restored.

Decorative finishes are the most interesting aspect of the interior work. The interior was lined with fairly rough boarding over which had been stretched calico, and this papered. At a later date, in most rooms, the calico and paper had been removed and the wall entirely re-lined and re-decorated. However, as the calico had not run right to the edges in the original work, the first layer of wallpaper had in places overlapped onto the boards themselves, and hence small fragments of paper were found just above skirting level, adjoining architraves, and in one or two other locations where the calico could not conveniently be stretched. In the hall and back passage were two masonry papers, one highly formal with marble blocks and, it seems, panels with equestrian scenes; the other extremely crude and primitive. In these cases the overall designs can only be surmised.

Of the papers which are now understood more fully, the first was an intricate pattern of shades of grey with some elements of pink, which survived in only extremely small fragments in what was probably a bedroom (room 6). A tentative hypothesis that this represented a draped grey lace with floral sprigs attached was dramatically confirmed when the paper was identified as one illustrated in monochrome in Brenda Graysmith's Wallpaper (Macmillan, New York 1976, p.100) as an anonymous French paper of the decade 1850-1860 held in the Musee des Arts Decoratifs in Paris. In the next room (room 4), a skirting had been temporarily removed during the building work, revealing that the paper had been continued right down to floor level before the skirting was installed. Peter Lovell, casually inspecting this on a visit at the time, noticed the diamond registration mark (the only one found anywhere in the house) showing the paper to be an English one of the 1850s. The overall design is in this case still not known, though it appears to be a fairly subdued grey and white pattern sprinkled with rosebuds.

The most dramatic paper was one which survived (below subsequent layers) in large sections in room 5. Because of the amount which survived and because of its highly pictorial content it was taken at first to be of the twentieth century. Only when it was recognised that the scenes showed black and white people in varied but occasionally luxurious surroundings, was it deduced firstly that the setting was the American Deep South, and then that the scenes were six episodes from Uncle Tom's Cabin. Such papers with scenes from stories were fairly common for nurseries, and while the paper may well be American it may equally well be British (for the book was more popular in Britain than in the United States). What is so remarkable about this paper is that the story it represents was an important product of the anti-slavery movement: its presence in the house of a Victorian politician of South African birth is significant in understanding his attitudes.

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Fig. 3 Schematic plan

KEY

1, 2  Principal rooms
3, 4, 5, 6  Bedrooms
7  Entrance
8  Cellar (under)
9  Castellated walls
10  Boundary of site
11  Courtyard
Fig. 4 View from north-east by Herbert Moore, from Links with Other Days, 1927.

Fig. 5 View from north-east in a Rose Series postcard, undated, made available by Mr. Alan Grant in 1982.
Fig. 6 Red flock wall-paper by Victor Potorlet, Paris, circa 1845-50. A fragment of this paper was found behind the chimney breast extension of room 2.
None of these papers has yet been restored, but the question of having some reprinted is being pursued. One on the presumed dining room (room 2) has only very recently been traced to its source, the French manufacturer Victor Potorlet, through Phyllis Murphy's investigation, and quotations are being sought for reproducing it. This is a daunting prospect for the design (Fig. 6) uses multiple shades of brown combined with red flock, and very few firms have any prospect of being able to reproduce it. The delays involved in such work try the patience of the consultants and of the clients, and still more that of the fund-raising auxiliary, Friends of Black Rock House. But they are worth it. The longer the project is prolonged, it seems, the more interesting and accurate our information becomes. Only recently there has been discovered the only known nineteenth century illustration so far, a photograph from the south-east which can be dated (on the grounds of the photographer's name and address) to the period 1877-83. (Fig. 1) It shows a lookout platform on the roof of which we were previously totally unaware, but it seems fairly certain that this was an ephemeral structure dating from after the time of Ebden, and not a candidate for reconstruction. In other respects - to the relief of all concerned - the illustration confirms and vindicates the restoration programme to date.