Deciding on a heritage in Goulburn

BRUCE PENNAY

Goulburn is the kind of place that one would expect to be heritage-conscious. It was once a large provincial centre. Its comparative lack of growth in post-war years has meant there was no great pressure to renew or replace older buildings, so it is rich in fine buildings that reflect its earlier importance. It sits astride the Hume Highway that takes travellers between Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne and it would profit if the occupants of the 18,000 vehicles which pass through each day were enticed to stop, explore and spend.

Therefore it was not surprising that in 1982 Goulburn City Council initiated a Goulburn Heritage Study, providing funds on a dollar for dollar basis with the Heritage Council of New South Wales. A Canberra firm, Lester Firth Associates Pty. Ltd. (Architects, Urban Planners, Heritage and Environmental Consultants) was commissioned to carry out the study and did so carefully and competently.

But something went wrong. The report of the study did not please Goulburn City Council. The consequent argument and public debates reveal perceptions of heritage held in the community. This paper outlines some of those perceptions, illustrates the difficulties involved in making decisions about a city's heritage, and explores links between history and heritage.

Goulburn today is a sizeable city of about 22,000 people. For most of the latter part of the nineteenth century it was the third largest centre in New South Wales, and was known, locally at least, as 'The Queen City of the South'. In 1891 it was overtaken by Broken Hill, but managed to retain its position as the State's fourth largest centre (after Sydney, Newcastle and Broken Hill) until World War Two. Because Goulburn was a large provincial centre, governments and churches established administrative bases there as a 'half way metropolis'; Impressive public and institutional buildings such as a courthouse, gaol, railway workshop and Anglican and Catholic cathedrals were sited there. These buildings remain today and signify Goulburn's importance as a regional capital.

But that importance has faded. Since 1947 another twelve cities in the state, as well as nearby Queanbeyan and Canberra, have outstripped Goulburn in terms of population growth. Through the 1960s insurance companies moved major offices to Canberra, leaving only sub-branches in Goulburn. Both the Catholic and the Anglican bishops transferred to the more populous Canberra. Slowly but surely the nation's capital has exerted hegemony over the region that had once been Goulburn's. Goulburn remains a major rural distribution centre and regional centre for state government administration. However, the south-eastern region for which Goulburn provides government services is not naturally cohesive.1 In allocating resources and administrative responsibilities, the state government has shifted authority in a variety of directions. Goulburn has become a regional capital cut adrift from its region.

Still the physical evidence of that earlier importance remains. The city's heritage honor roll compiled in the Heritage Study report reads like that of other country towns, except that Goulburn's greater size has added to the diversity and grandeur of its structures. Listed are a town hall, central park, waterworks, fire station, hospital, post office and cast iron post box, a convent, a boys' Catholic college, a high school, several early schools and a technical college, two orphanages, a mechanics' institute and a masonic temple, a railway station house, and the residences of the station master and a railway gatekeeper, some old hotels, an old mill and a disused brewery, a magnificent war memorial and some early cemeteries, several main street commercial buildings and a corner store, the town's oldest dwelling and a scatter of other houses - some grand, some humble - making in all just over 200 items of environmental heritage.

The Heritage Study report acknowledged that there is 'a general awareness within the Goulburn community of the need to retain, protect and restore important buildings', but noted there was no 'wide-spread support for seemingly "lesser" buildings', nor 'an appreciation of an area or precinctual conservation'. One of its stated objectives, therefore, was 'to increase the level of community awareness of the city's cultural heritage and to provide guidelines for public and private actions to help conserve the town's heritage'.2 So the report stood back from individual items to identify precincts, to suggest ways of retaining and improving streetscape...
character, to give examples of compatible and incompatible building developments, and to put forward guidelines for future development. The writers of the report embarked on a form of community education - all in terms of the brief they were given.

Nevertheless, the report was received very coolly indeed by Goulburn City Council. It was noted and placed on exhibition. Nearly a year later the council decided by a narrow margin to implement recommendations in the report, but shortly afterwards, on the casting vote of the mayor, Keith Cole, it changed its mind and opted to defer any implementation. The mayor expressed concern about the large number of properties recommended as items of environmental heritage. Were all 200 to be placed under permanent conservation order? Would the city be nailing restraining orders on doors? Did property owners have to pay a fee and wait some months for permission to dig a garden, repair a leaking roof or chop down a dangerous tree? What would be required of shop owners whose shop fronts had been evaluated as 'unsympathetic'? How was the council to develop its long-dreamed-of new civic centre when in the midst of the parcel of land acquired for that purpose was an old imposing semi-detached pair of town houses or gentleman's villas, known as 'Brackley', that had been listed on the heritage inventory in the study report? There lay the mayor's and council's chief objection to the report: it thwarted council's plans for a civic centre.

The ensuing debate about the heritage value of 'Brackley' followed the familiar lines of tussles over conserving a heritage item that would appear to impede a desired development. The argument before the Commission of Inquiry was about the decision to place the permanent conservation order on 'Brackley'. It was an inquiry into objections to that order, not a consideration of a development proposal. Those who favoured the order had to show cause why the order should be placed.

The historians and architects who appeared before the Commissioner differed over the importance of the building. Claims of its historic importance had been very nebulous at first. All the Heritage Study could muster was the fact that the building had accommodated Goulburn's first mayor, but it agreed with the National Trust that the building had architectural interest. The principal parties at the inquiry pinned the building's historic interest to its association with owners and occupants. Council's local historian paraded a detailed list of owners and occupants, and council argued that these citizens were of local significance only. The Heritage Council of New South Wales maintained that the building was a physical reminder of the contribution town lawyers had made to the life of Goulburn. The careers of at least two solicitor residents reflected the importance professional classes placed on civic responsibilities. Another resident, Edward Twynam, had risen from a minor government office to become the state's Surveyor-General. He had moved not far away to 'Riversdale' which is owned and maintained by the National Trust. The two buildings 'offer a unique opportunity to interpret the ephemeral characteristics of social mobility in colonial Australia...'

The Commissioner was unimpressed with the arguments that matched the importance of the building to the importance of either individual owners and occupants or any grouping of them. He saw a wider cultural context. Goulburn itself was important to the state, because of its age and as the first inland city 'Brackley' had been built around 1847-9 and was one of the few substantial residences in what was then the new township in Goulburn. It illustrated broad and frontier settlement and development. Any other city with less heritage material would have prized 'Brackley' dearly. He accepted that the building was of cultural and architectural significance, and maintained that its conservation would not delay the civic centre or cause the council financial hardships.

Nevertheless, the Minister for Planning and Environment bowed to political pressure and did not proceed to make the permanent conservation order in spite of the Commissioner's findings. 'Brackley' has been demolished. Planning for the new civic centre is now well advanced.

The Minister's decision on 'Brackley' appears to have been well received. Those who help form public opinion in Goulburn were not disconcerted. The Commissioner may have decided 'Brackley' was significant to the state, but the local community had decided it was not significant to Goulburn. An attempt had been made to foist the conservation of 'Brackley' on the Goulburn community. Experts in Sydney seemed to think they knew better than local residents what was best for Goulburn. Goulburn's heritage was for Goulburn to decide.

A number of similar unhappy experiences with heritage managers reinforced this view. For example, an interim conservation order in 1981 had sent the architect of the RSL Club back to the drawing boards to produce a building design that was compatible in size, proportion and style with an otherwise fairly uniform group of buildings in a small street that fronted Belmore Park. The Goulburn Post was intent on remembering the additional cost that the RSL Club had incurred as a result of this decision.
Figure 1: No comment! Goulburn Post, 1 April 1985.

Figure 2: The Goulburn Heritage Study was characterised by careful attention to graphic illustration.
Figure 3: Goulburn in 1888.
Then, for an exceptionally long period the city had been inconvenienced when post office facilities were displaced by renovation of the post office. The result of the renovation was approved; the long time it had taken was not. Renovations of the old Goulburn brewery were delayed for nearly two years while heritage managers gathered and examined reports. A new owner of the Landsdowne property adjacent to the brewery had to spend $13,000 successfully opposing restrictions on his use of the curtilage about the city's oldest dwelling.

Ernie McDermott, the mayor for many years, declared the only way to preserve the city's heritage was to pay for it - as he was from his own pocket. There were too many heritage managers, unhelpful outside experts and Johnnies-come-lately with notions about 'our heritage'.

Central to this claim for local proprietorship was assertion of the authority of local government. Decisions on heritage carried economic implications and therefore were too important to be left to professionals. The best professional advice was needed, but only the elected could be called to account for such decisions. Heritage making was a political activity. Heritage does not drop from the built or natural environment. The Register of the National Estate, Heritage Council listings and local heritage inventories are all honorific devices. The honour is bestowed by one of our three levels of government, and the disgruntled in Goulburn were quite sure which was the most appropriate level of government to be involved once the more obvious items of national significance had been singled out and attention narrowed to the city itself.

The Minister's decision not to proceed with the permanent conservation order would appear to confirm that stance. From the Minister's office at about the same time came a direction that all local councils were to incorporate heritage conservation provisions into local environmental plans. It pointed out that:

> Whilst government authorities such as the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Heritage Council of New South Wales have specific conservation responsibilities conferred by their Acts, the main responsibility for ensuring conservation rests with local councils. (emphasis added).

A heritage study was a town planning instrument. Local councils were to retain full discretion over the development application process. The aim of introducing heritage provisions in the local environmental plans was to ensure balanced consideration was given to heritage items. Heritage conservation was a local responsibility.

Dell Upton, an architectural historian, in the United States Heritage, has argued along similar lines. Heritage making is not only a political activity in that it is done within political structures, but because it has a political outcome. For him the Goulburn Heritage Study Report would have been a 'compilation of an official public history which will stand as a social judgement about the relative importance of whole groups of people and their achievements, that is, about which aspects of our many pasts are important and which are not'.

As far as Goulburn was concerned, however, nobody seemed to question the general drift of the history that was being conserved. Responses to the study were more concerned with what had been included rather than what had been excluded. Humble as well as grand dwellings had been admitted to the inventory but, perhaps, as the 'Brackley' experience indicated, they were in some eyes peripheral, and, therefore, still vulnerable. The thematic history touched on the transients of the depression years, the short-lived migrant hostel and the coming of Goulburn's principal housing developer - the New South Wales Housing Commission - but no physical reminders were identified in the heritage inventory. The railway workshop and the war-time clothing factories did not make the list. Nor did the Greek Orthodox Church, but that was probably because, being a 1972 building, it was too recent to be considered heritage. Little was made of black heritage, but then what evidence there is of aboriginal occupation is within the custodianship of the National Parks and Wildlife Service rather than Goulburn City Council. The study area had been confined to the municipal boundary. Hence much of the properties where the gentry resided, the lime kilns, slate quarry and rural hinterland were in the surrounding Mulwaree Shire beyond the purview of the client council.

The Heritage Study, however, was prepared for two clients - the Goulburn City Council and the Heritage Council of New South Wales. It was presumably the latter's responsibility to check and advise on the representativeness of that which was presented, and to see that Council was not perpetuating a comfortable local image that ignored minorities and the powerless. The Heritage Council was to see that the official history did not simply reflect the predilections of those who currently held municipal office.

It is also likely that no part of Goulburn's...
physical fabric is appropriately designated as representative of some aspects of its history. It would be a strange place indeed where the mental furniture of the inhabitants was fully represented in its street furniture. So, for example, it is difficult to light on a physical reminder of an event of national significance that took place in July 1962 in Goulburn. For a week Goulburn's Catholic schools closed and nearly 2000 Catholic school children were re-directed to local state schools as a protest against the lack of state aid for Catholic education. Various political implications including Menzies' offer of a form of state aid in 1963 and the fall of the state Labor government in 1965 were attributed to it. No-one suggests, however, that we commemorate the inadequate toilet facilities at Our Lady of Mercy Preparatory School which had sparked the confrontation. Instead it is the old Cathedral Church of St Peter and Paul and the other Catholic institutional buildings that bear the burden of representing the strength of Catholicism in Goulburn. The event itself, even though it be of national significance, goes literally unmarked.

Heritage is a demonstrable form of history. It is a tangible representation of the past. It appeals to those who prefer to deal with things as well as those who seek to deduce the cultural statements behind the material culture. Art historian, Bernard Smith has said:

In order to appreciate the emergence of historical man in Australia we must, it seems to me, take account of the difference of history for the historian and of history for the man in the street. For the historian, history is a picture of the past which he fashions in a personal struggle with words and documents. But for the man in the street, history is something that he can see, here and now in the present, something which has happened to survive from the past. It is a kind of perception, an ability to see the past as one of the qualities of presently existing things. This historical perception, as distinct from book history, often begins with an awakened respect for the fabric of old buildings.

For the historian, heritage is evidence and is to be approached as such. As with any other evidence, the historian will seek out purpose. Why were the elements of the evidence constructed? Why have they survived? How has the evidence been ordered? What values guided those responsible for it? A heritage listing will serve the historian as it does the town planner - as an indicator of something of potential interest. Nothing short of the whole built environment, of all the physical evidence, whether listed or not, will satisfy historians engaged on a close study of a city's development. For them the built environment is a set of historical data representing a whole lot of answers waiting to be questioned.

Bernard Smith implies that historians could be satisfied with written evidence. For them there might be no need to retain buildings that are well documented. There stands at the corner of Bradley and Cowper Streets, for instance, a grand old well-respected mansion called 'Carrawarra'. It currently houses the State Emergency Services. Its original owner, William Davies, was declared bankrupt in 1887 and a newspaper auction notice appeared listing 645 items of his 'valuable household furniture and other effects' room by room. For the historian who wants to ponder the lifestyle or domestic arrangements of the Davies' household here is a very rich documentary source, more helpful than the actual building which has undergone several adaptations in its lifetime. The historian can enter the vestibule with its two Fiji mats, telescope, globe, map of Europe and waterproof game bag, he can search around the paraphernalia of the kitchen, or ponder the bareness of the coachman's room or the rugged simplicity of the laundry. Since the Davies family left, the building has been used as a private school, soldier's club, hostel, a women's technical college and for state government offices. There is consequently but a faint echo of its original use.

Historians, however, are not only concerned with original functions. They have a capacity for putting evidence to different uses and for troubling it for less obvious meanings. The questions posed by the evidence of 'Carrawarra' may focus on its architect, its later uses, those whose work related to 'Carrawarra' as well as those who lived there, or on the neighborhood as well as the house. A fairly tight constellation of the well-to-do lived in the immediate neighborhood for many years. What kind of uses were acceptable for an abandoned over-large residence without adversely affecting a genteel neighbourhood? When it comes to evidence historians can be omnivorous. In Australia their more usual fare has been land titles, rate books, electoral rolls and auction notices. However, even for historians unskilled in the close analysis of material culture, the physical fabric answers and prompts questions. It invites them to read between buildings as they read between lines.

In reviewing a number of common affinities between material culture research and social history, T J Schlereth reviewed six topics of common interest - residential spaces,
domestic life, women and children, working and workers, life experiences and community landcape. Artifacts are a data base for historians too, he says, and he points to several North American historians who have posed questions of the built environment. However, he finds differences between historians and scholars concerned primarily with artefactual evidence. Each presents differently to different audiences. Academic historians tend to write for other specialists, whereas those concerned with a three-dimensional evidence address a more general audience and present material by way of exhibition or display. Consequently the latter will value the physical fabric of 'Carrawarra' more highly as evidence because it is needed to substantiate a case in terms of the methodology of a discipline that relates directly to material culture investigation. 'Carrawarra' is needed to demonstrate that case to a wider audience than the historian might usually address.

In Goulburn there was no questioning of the purposes that heritage was to serve. It seems to have been accepted that heritage status would protect places dear to the long-term resident, that heritage interpretation would familiarise newcomers with the traditions of the place, and that the heritage items themselves would allow visitors to make a cursory appraisal of what was important in the city's development. Those seeking to promote the Heritage Study Report had referred to its possible economic benefits. Goulburn was reminded of the success enjoyed by the towns of Carcoar and Berrima in celebrating their heritage, and of Goulburn's own success in tapping government grants through the Heritage Conservation Fund. Such reminders were not always necessary. An attempt to associate the Goulburn Brewery with Francis Greenway on tenuous evidence could be interpreted as an endeavour to increase the building's attraction to tourists. However, it would be fair to conclude that in the main heritage was seen as valuable because it represented the city's history, being a representation that could be enjoyed by most people.

Heritage is an official history intended for a wide popular audience. Those who commission reports on it reserve the rights of all who commission histories to debate inclusions and exclusions, publication or implementation. Historians who practise heritage history have to muster their knowledge, imagination and powers of persuasion to convince not only fellow professionals such as architects, Heritage Council officers and town planners, but also citizens and more particularly aldermen or local councillors.

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REFERENCES

1. The study was published as Lester Firth Associates Pty. Ltd., Goulburn Heritage Study, Goulburn City Council/Department of Environment and Planning, October 1983.

2. D N Jeans, An Historical Geography of N.S.W. to 1901, Reed Education Sydney, 1972, p.128 and 131.

3. Report of the South Coast Region Joint Steering Committee to the Minister for Planning and Environment and the Minister for the Australian Capital Territory, 1976.


5. Goulburn Post, 14 February; 13 and 14 April; 1, 2 and 17 May, 1984.

6. The buildings were classified by the National Trust in 1978. They were described as

'A...symmetrically designed pair of semi-detached Georgian cottages... Built c.1850 they retain much of their original detail and outbuildings including stables. Walls are of stone and stuccoed brick, lined to represent ashlar... The joinery of the house is particularly fine... At the inquiry of the National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.) argued the buildings had 'many intact details... and example of relatively rare building type in Goulburn... (they) demonstrate clear evidence of mid 19th century building techniques'.

'Brackley', 184-186 Bourke Street, Goulburn, an inquiry pursuant to Section 41 of the Heritage Act, 1977, reported to the Hon. Bob Carr, Minister for Housing and Environment, September 1985, p.2 and p.31-32.

7. ibid., p.20-21.

8. ibid., p.47.

9. ibid., p.18 and p.45.


12. R I Pincini, Secretary, Department of Environment and Planning, to all City, Municipal and Shire Councils, Circular No. 84, Direction under Section 117(2) of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, 1975, 16 August 1985.


14. Council received 50 written responses when it placed the Heritage Study Report on exhibition. Forty supported the study and its findings, seven were from owners of properties listed seeking removal of their property from the heritage inventory.


17. For the approach to historical data see Michael Drake, Historical Data and the Social Sciences, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1974.


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