ENTALLY HOUSE, TASMANIA:
A REVIEW OF CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

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ENTALLY HOUSE AND ITS SOCIAL HISTORY

Entally Estate has a fairly typical early-colonial history as an extensive wheat and sheep property. Through the mid-to-late-Victorian era it lost most of its pioneer qualities, becoming the residence and showpiece of a country gentleman who modelled himself and the property on English squires and country estates.

How does Entally compare with other historic estates?

Unlike many historic homes, Entally is not an outstanding example of architecture or aesthetic achievement, as is Clarendon, another nearby National Trust property. However, this was not uncommon. Most rural properties in colonial times in Tasmania were designed without access to architects or plans. Most were added-to over the years with variations in style and quality.

Unfortunately, we don't have the neat and fascinating parallel between family history and household/estate development that occurs at some other properties. Although the Reibeys and their relatives lived at Entally for all but ten years of its existence before the government took it over, its sale to outsiders in 1919 meant that all the Reibey archival material and furnishing were removed from the house. Therefore, there are great gaps in our knowledge of the history of the site, presenting problems of interpretation.

The significance of Entally as a historical site has been questioned at times, because the Reibeys, unlike some other landowners, were not notable agriculturalists. Both Thomas Reibey and his son had other major commitments, the elder in trade and his son in church activities, horse-breeding, and politics when he was Colonial Secretary and later Premier of Tasmania.

Entally was probably never a model farm and was too close to Launceston to develop into the virtually self-sufficient village community that developed at some larger and more isolated properties. However, the early development of the estate was fairly typical with a mix of sheep, wheat and cattle. Thomas Reibey junior's passion for horse-breeding, development of a large nursery and his external involvements, all add to the variety of historic and social themes which can legitimately be interpreted at Entally.

Therefore, by comparison with other properties, Entally's significance lies in its role as a representative rather than exceptional colonial property. However, its owners' varied interests serve to broaden the social context in which Entally can be viewed.

Entally Estate was established only nineteen years or so after the first white settlers arrived in Northern Tasmania. At this time, there were only 417 free whites and 335 convicts. Aboriginal bands still roamed the countryside, but were of little threat.

The exact date of building commencement at Entally is uncertain. Reports vary from 1818-1821. The first real evidence we have for use of the buildings by the Reibeys is not until 1823. Early buildings on rural properties in Tasmania were not usually architect-designed but constructed in a simple vernacular style. This generally incorporated some typically-Georgian architectural features of the period such as a symmetrical layout and a hip roof. In addition, buildings often had a verandah and a skillion construction at the back. In Tasmania, houses were usually only one storey.

Transportation problems limited construction materials to locally available products. In the rural North, buildings were usually constructed of wattle and daub or of bricks made on site by the convicts. Such is thought to be the case at Entally.

The 'Governor's Wing' was said to have been built by 1821 and named after a later stay by Governor Arthur. However, the second storey wasn't built until the 1860s. Apart from inconclusive map evidence, the only known archival information on Entally's early outbuildings relates to the chapel. The architect, John Lee Archer, was drawing plans for it in 1835 but there is some contention as to whether it was built then or in the 1850's. Based on known activities at Entally, other outbuildings likely to have existed include: a barn for storing grain and harvest machinery, stables, coach-house and a dairy.

A frequently-mentioned feature of Entally which may prove to be partly myth is the presence of two towers with gun slits in the walls and capped with battlements. These were said to have been torn down in the 1850's and the bricks and stones used to build walls and outbuildings. The many versions of this story are possible based on a sketch by Emma von Steiglitz entitled "Entallay 1835". The accuracy of this picture has been called into question for a number of reasons. Firstly, another contemporary picture shows less impressive towers with quite different features. Secondly, the outbuildings in the sketch don't conform to those which date from the period. Another drawing by Anna Nixon, circa 1847, shows no towers at all. Finally, no articles written about Entally refer to the battlements, yet surely they would have been an outstanding feature.
worthy of some mention. Other explanations for the discrepancies are that the towers were pulled down earlier than 1847, that they were exaggerated by von Steiglitz, that they couldn't be seen from Nixon's vantage point, or simply that the battlements picture has been mis-labelled. Importantly no archaeological survey has been made to help solve this puzzle.

The house appears to have attained it present shape about 1832-37; the main section facing the river, with wings on either side.

Thomas Reibey, the founder of Entally, died in 1842, leaving the estate to his eldest son, Thomas junior. Thomas junior was educated at Longford Hall, Tasmania, and then sent to Trinity College, Oxford, to prepare to enter the Church of England. He became the first native-born Tasmanian Church of England Minister, later Archdeacon of Launceston.

As befitted a squire's estate, Entally's grounds were beautifully kept and reminiscent of England. The main drive-way was shaded by overhanging trees and ended in a circular carriage-drive; ornamental gardens and lawns swept down from the house; a conservatory, a well-stocked orchard and extensive vegetable garden and commercial nursery were all components of the property.

Reibey's sporting interests also had an effect on the use of the grounds at Entally. A cricket pitch was apparently established around 1838 and was used enthusiastically. In the 1840's Reibey began to race his horses; it is likely that the stables formed an important part of Entally's outbuildings.

In 1853 Thomas and his wife returned to England for an extended visit. Before their departure, most of the Entally furnishings were auctioned-off. On their return to Tasmania, re-furnishing would have been necessary, and detailed information on the decorations has been discovered by the project historian. There is evidence that some building was completed as well. Strong evidence suggests that the conservatory was built at this time. It was certainly built by 1859, when a series of stereo protraits were taken inside the structure.

Unsubstantiated reports suggest that the towers were torn down and that the chapel and various outbuildings were built in the 1850's. No definite information can be found until 1860, when tenders were called for additions to Entally. These additions are thought to include the second storey to the Governor's Wing, the Lodge, and the Gate House.

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Thomas died in 1912 and left the estate to his nephew, Thomas Arthur. Few changes were made by him and the subsequent owners when it left the family's hands in 1919. By the time the government purchased Entally to be run as a period house and museum, the buildings were derelict and the grounds neglected and overrun by rabbits.

### SUMMARY OF CONSERVATION REPORTS

In 1988, the conservation staff of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery were asked to submit a conservation report on Entally House for the National Trust. It is valuable to place this report in context to better understand the implications involved.

Historic buildings are usually viewed in a frozen time-frame generally close to the time they were originally built, with the furniture also dated to that time. At Entally, we have a structure which, although built in the early-19th century, underwent a major programme of alteration and expansion in the mid-19th century. This resulted in the concealment of much of the fabric of the original homestead. The original furnishings were auctioned in 1842 when the Reibeys returned to England. Entally underwent a second programme of major alteration in the mid-20th century once again obliterating many of the details of the previous and original structure. Correct dates and sequence of the various buildings during the Reibey family's residence at Entally are not entirely certain and are the subject of further research.

These structural and internal changes reflect not only the changes in Reibey family relationships but also the development of our society's attitude toward the care and conservation of such buildings. No one changes the course of history as much as the historian and indeed our present attitudes to historic buildings reflects our perception of the past as much as the provenance of the buildings in question. "History might even be defined as the study of change over time... We can understand the past only from our own perspective, and as that perspective changes, so does history."

With Entally, it is difficult to determine precisely which specific time-frame should be frozen, not only because of the importance of subsequent developments but also because of the lack of reliable and recorded detail about the appearance and layout of the earlier structures.

Entally has a long standing reputation as a centre of social activity as such, the shortage of useful and reliable detail since the establishment of the homestead is surprising. Much of the present understanding of the development and changes to the site relies on an assemblage of fragmented facts. As a consequence, there is great difficulty in presenting the site as a centre for the interpretation of a specific historic period.

From the time that the property passed out of the family until 1948, maintenance was poor. Legend has it that sheep has access to the main house at one stage. In 1948, the Scenery Preservation Board acquired Entally and 92 acres to develop it as period house and museum. This step is thought to be one of the first of its kind in Australia. The house was in urgent need of repair. Changes were made to tidy-up the site to cater to tourists and staff. Entally was altered to fit in the 1950's/60's stereotype of a pioneer
settler's home. The home was refurnished with period furniture which was either purchased or generously donated. By today's standards, this appears to be a misguided restoration as alterations were completed without record: the attic above the kitchen was developed, the verandah was concreted, stable fittings were removed and destroyed, the chapel was torn down, only to be subsequently rebuilt, a tea room was built and major changes to the Lodge Cottage and East Wing of the attic were completed. However it may well be that the buildings would have been torn down or become derelict without this intervention, unfortunate as many of the changes are.

In 1970, following the Department's establishments, the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service became responsible for the management of Entally. More alterations were undertaken to the coach-house and garden, without detailed records being kept.

With 1980's came the increasing awareness of conservation and as a consequence, a series of reports were commissioned from professionals. Some include:

- 1981 A Conservation Study of the Historic Estate "Entally" (Howroyd & Forward)
- 1982 Conservation of Buildings (England, Newton, Spratt & Murphy)
- 1983 Report on Entally House Grounds (Orme)
- 1983 A Report on Display and Storage Arrangements (QVMAG)
- 1983 Management Plan (NPWS)
- 1985 Archaeological Study of the Gate Cottage (Orme)

In general, these studies become increasingly aware of the aims of the Burra Charter; that is to retain or recover the cultural significance of a site with the least possible intervention, and the importance of the methodology of assessing cultural significance and completing condition reports prior to new work being undertaken.

However, with each succeeding report, the extent of structural problems such as drainage, roofing, rising damp, and collapsing walls became much clearer; the extent of the previous obliteration of historical detail also became more evident. In short there was a general realization that the scale of funding required to ensure the continued existence of Entally was enormous.

While Entally was still the responsibility of Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service, some structural work was done to remove offensive 20th century additions. Dormer windows were removed from the East Wing of the house; the roof over the Governor's Wing was repaired, the north wall of the stable/coach complex was reinforced, and major restoration of the Gate Cottage was completed. The exterior was repainted after being cleaned with high pressure hosing. Again, documentation of this work was erratic.

In 1987, the management of Entally House and the collections house in it were transferred to the National Trust with the guarantee of a specified sum per annum for four years on the condition that a full conservation study of the site be undertaken according to the Burra Charter Guidelines. Hence the role of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.

Rona Hollingsworth completed an overall report of the site emphasising that detailed reports of specific buildings and site locations were further required. The principle objective of her report was to provide as much information as possible about the site management plan and collections management plan could be made. Rona's excellent research dispelled many myths which had developed concerning Entally.

The conservators undertook general reports of the environment and the contents of the house and chapel as a consequence of the specific legal responsibilities the Trust has assumed for the collections regardless of where they were to be exhibited. Specific reports on each and every object were undertaken. Responsibilities for specific tasks were designated and schedules for caretaking activities were drawn up. It should be pointed out that the hostess of Entally was initially less than enthusiastic about yet another report.

We now have a new government in Tasmania; the structure of the National Trust may be reviewed. As a consequence, what decisions had been painfully reached could be forestalled. The 1980's catch-call of productivity and self-reliance has resulted in less government finance for historic buildings in Tasmania.

Entally House holds a particular dilemma for conservators. The main complex is really a hotch-potch of alterations. The costs necessary to return the building to its mid-19th century state would be very high because of the extended neglect during the 20th century. However, it is a historic site that has the potential, in part because of its location, to demonstrate that heritage can make a significant economic contribution to the well-being of the region.

Basic policy decisions regarding the site are necessary before a specific management plan can be prepared and implemented to resolve priorities. These problems are currently being addressed. They are difficult and will require a coordinated approach. In the meantime, the Cultural Conservation Service of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Galley is treating some of the collection housed at Entally because of the specific legal responsibility the Trust has for these objects.

SUMMARY OF CONSERVATION WORK UNDER-TAKEN BY THE QVMAG

In 1987, as part of the arrangement for transfer of management of Entally to the National Trust, the trust received specific funds for use on the house and the collections. A small portion of these funds were allocated for the conser-
vation of objects and works of art on paper. The conserva-
tion work was completed by the staff employed by the 
Cultural Conservation Service which operates within the 
Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston. 
The Cultural Conservation Service, which has a staff of
two, aims to meet the conservation needs of the general
public and other institutions within the state.

The staff working at Entally were excited by the prospect
of work on a practical level finally being initiated. The
information the staff provided was invaluable. What it
highlighted was that any contribution made to the conser-
vation of objects in Entally was totally dependent on the
conversion of a great many other areas of inadequacy.

The lack of a curator within the National Trust or any one
person delegated to oversee Entally made the establish-
ment of priorities a more difficult task in terms of the use
of the collection in Entally’s interpretation. The formula-
tion of the conservation treatment programme was thus
based largely on the objects’ need for conservation given
the legal commitments the Trust had entered into in rela-
tion to the collections.

Janet S. Klein (Klein: 1989) details a list of problems en-
countered by a small community-based-conservation or-
ganisation. The list serves to emphasize the complexity of
the issues facing the National Trust. The community
group listed their problems as including: "board, budget,
marketing, staff, museum interaction, fund-raising, resto-
ration, conservation, community involvement, major re-
pairs, ongoing maintenance, sales shop, volunteer co-ordi-
nation" and concluded with "need help arranging priori-
ties". Obviously the problems experienced at Entally
House are similar to those encountered world-wide in the
management of historic properties.

Initially, our problems were primarily the result of lack of
communication and co-ordination which stemmed in at
large part from an absence of any existing management
plan or cohesive history of the site. The dichotomy be-
tween philosophy and practicality was also apparent.
The National Trust, whilst adhering to the edicts of the
Burra Charter, must generate the funds necessary for the
maintenance of the properties within its care. This con-
sideration must be taken into account in decision-making.
The National Trust’s desire to establish a work programme
was also hampered by the need to work within a frame-
work which is often influenced by other concerned organi-
sations.

The Tasmanian Division of the Australian Institute for the
Conservation of Cultural Materials, recently visited a
property called “Woolnorth” in an isolated far-north-
western area of Tasmania where conservation work is
currently being undertaken by Mike Chambers on a small
cottage. The work is diverse and of a high standard. Mike
works on a private contract basis and has direct and
immediate feedback from his employers. It is obviously an
ideal situation for a conservator and serves to contrast the
problems inherent in working within a body where pro-
gress is often slow.

As well as these issues faced by all the trustees of historic
homes, each property will also have its own unique prob-
lems dictated by location, style, construction and history.
The many alterations of Entally and the limited number of
descriptive records available have made decisions on the
focus of interpretation to be presented at Entally, a com-
plex issue. Much rests on this being resolved.

At this point in time, Entally appears as a pleasant home
with an interesting collections of furnishings and attractive
grounds. It has the potential to be much more.

Some large-scale problems had to be tackled. In the
1950’s, asbestos tiles replaced the tin roof which in turn
had replaced the original shingles. Over recent years, these
asbestos tiles have deteriorated and have been covered
with moss which soaks up water and feeds it back under the
roof during a downpour. This has caused extensive dam-
aged to the lathe and plaster ceilings throughout the main
building.

Salt efflorescence and rising damp predominate in the
currently-disused rear wings and are the results of a number
of problems. When the exterior of the building was
cleaned with high-pressure hosing, water was absorbed
into the bricks and the addition of a new paint layer trapped
it there. This, coupled with inadequate and deteriorated
drainage around the house, has caused a pool of permanent
water to build up in the cellars. The National Trust must
somehow resolve these serious structural problems.

We experienced a problem with the degree of involvement
in our work at Entally. It was difficult to walk in, treat an
object, and then walk out ignoring the buckets catching the
drips and side stepping the collapsing floorboards. This
led to a concerted effort on our part to establish communi-
cation links with the administration of the National Trust.

The conservation report prepared by the staff of the Queen
Victoria Museum and Art Galley began at a grass-roots
level and many of the initial recommendations were able
to be implemented without decisions by the administra-
tion. Tasks were defined, responsibilities for those tasks
were allocated, and schedules provided.

In objects, the first priority was to arrest the progress of
damage by borer infestation by locating and treating the
infected areas. In some cases, the damage was so extensive
that the items had to be isolated. The priority in the paper
conservation area was the removal of paintings and prints
from the walls suffering rising damp. These were then
transported to the laboratory for treatment. The library
backed-onto one of the disused wings suffering rising
damp. The books were removed, examined and individu-
ally cleaned.

Materials receiving conservation treatment to date in-
elude: wood, copper, brass, pewter, ceramic, leather and small domestic machinery. Many works on paper await treatment. At present, we are faced with the prospect of returning the treated items to the same environment which originally caused the problems.

This is the first time the Cultural Conservation Service has been invited to be involved in the restoration of a National Trust property and despite the teething problems encountered on both sides, we are more than optimistic that it will be a stimulating and productive association.

REFERENCES


Unpublished Reports: