Interpreting through events

Camilla McRae

Like many other towns, Inverell, NSW, has something distinctive, different about it. The question is how to identify and interpret this distinctiveness in a way that our place can be seen as unique? Many towns use festivals as a means to create the distinctiveness, as a hook for the tourist. In September each year Inverell hosts the Sapphire City Festival a family festival with a range of events for the whole family. However, these events don’t often tell very much about the place where they are held. They are generally planned around the entertainment of the local community and the draw is the quality of the acts brought in for the event with little opportunity to attract visitors from outside the district.

This is where the Tom Roberts festival is different, because the event itself is the vehicle for the interpretation of the story of Tom Roberts and his significant connection to the Inverell district. The festival program draws out the tales of the history of and sites relating to sites and events that are not readily apparent, mostly on private land, not open to the public and are not interpreted in any permanent way. The festival focuses on Tom Roberts as a way of interpreting the landscape.

Tom Roberts visited Inverell many times in the late nineteenth century and painted there. He was a proponent of the ‘Plein Air’ (or open air) school of painting and led by example; he painted at Box Hill, Sirius Cove, Corowa, Tenterfield, Drake and Inverell. At Yulgilbar, near Inverell, he painted more than a dozen works, including some of Australia’s icons, ‘Bailed Up’, ‘Shearing at Newstead’ and ‘In a corner on the Macintyre’.

The tale of Tom Roberts in Inverell is unique. It belongs to no-one else; the festival celebrates the associations between him and the place, Newstead, the Anderson family, their friendship and their role in Australian history – and the sharing of this tale. The festival, held every five years, tells this tale through ten days of cultural events that interpret the place itself, its fabric, its use, its setting, related places, associations, meanings, records and related objects. It aims to be authentic in its interpretation and inclusive of all sections of the community and it is run completely by volunteers.

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So the tale begins. In the 1890s Duncan Anderson was living at Newstead in Inverell, where he was born. He was educated in England he was a barrister, a world-class boxer and a concert cornetist. He became a friend and confidant to Tom Roberts, providing a place to stay and some magnificent sites, tales and people for him to paint: the house at Newstead, the shearing shed, the garden, the family cemetery and chapel.
ruins, the Oxford Hall and the Macintyre River and the Paradise Road where ‘Bailed Up’ was painted.

To interpret the story during the 1996 festival, the National Trust Branch ran a tour to these places. The National Trust tours catered for 800 people through the sites over six days. It must be emphasised that as these are private sites that are not open to the public with no permanent interpretative installations, temporary information boards are put up at the built sites; all visitors are provided with a tour booklet and are given a verbal outline of the place and sitting on arrival and during the walk through the site. Visitors are also given postcards of the three paintings so that they can compare the painting with the site.

Figure 3 Above, ‘Shearing at Newstead’. (AGNSW)
Below, L to R, Sheridan Burke, Hazel Hawke, Tony Strong, Ros Strong, Peter Marquis Kyle, Peter Watts Jane Gibson and Jack Mundey at the shearing shed. (Anthony Dale)

There are stories of Tom accompanying Duncan Anderson on the tin whistle during his cornet practice, teaching the children to swim in the creek, and after dinner discussions about current events like the shears' strikes which prompted the painting of the major work ‘Shearing at Newstead - the Golden Fleece’, as Roberts' own interpretation of events at the time. The tour to the building where ‘Shearing’ was painted allows the interpretation of its fabric and visitor interpretation in role play or with postcard in hand.

Other events that supported this tour included the Family History Group workshop ‘People in the Paintings’ which allowed discussion of the many local legends of relatives who were models in both this painting and in ‘Bailed Up’. Tom Roberts painted this in 1895 from a platform in a tree overlooking this site on the Paradise Road. He had his mail sent to 'the Perch', Paradise, and sketched himself on the perch in his god-daughter's autograph book, 25 years later. Models for the painting were workers on Anderson's property Newstead, with Anderson himself modelling as the bushranger.

Figure 4 The audience at the community play and re-enactment. (P. Pike)

At the 2001 Festival a community play was developed – a parade of history from Aboriginal times to Federation which was staged on the site of ‘Bailed Up’. In the parade of history the majority of the roles were taken by the descendants of the original 'players'. For example Michael Vivers played William Vivers a squatter, Bob Anderson played Duncan Anderson and Roberts’ grandson Peter played the part of the artist. The play culminated with the spine tingling noise of the coach and horses on the gravel road ... the gunshots and the hold-up ... and for ten minutes, Tom's picture froze on the landscape.

The last site visited in our National Trust tours is that of 'In a corner on the Macintyre', a stunning gorge, where again visitors are asked to find (with a bit of help) the spot where Tom sat to paint this work. The greatest number of visitors to the festival went to the Art Gallery where a major exhibition of Tom Roberts works was held. The paintings were borrowed from everywhere. In the 1996 Festival, the paintings exhibited mostly came from private collections with generous assistance and loans from NERAM in Armidale. In 2001 the Art Gallery of NSW lent nine original Roberts' works and NERAM have always been supportive. Two art competitions were held, one of which was the 9x5 competition which reflected the exhibitions that Roberts and his contemporaries had in the 1890s. Barry Pearce, of the Art Gallery of NSW presented a
The festival organisers set out to involve all members of the community, particularly the Indigenous community, and the Welcome to the Land began the Festival. Aboriginal art exhibitions and sales were set up in a vacant shopfront in the main street, and a visit to the site of the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial was led by Linda Burney. Other events included an Artist in Residence programme; ArtWalk: 'let's paint' with local artists painting in the street; a Quilt Exhibition and a Gala Film Evening, featuring archival footage of 'Thunderbolt' from the Australian Film & Sound Archive. Music was a big part of both Roberts and Anderson's lives and music was a big part of the festival, concerts and performances throughout the festival involved both professionals as well as locals and school performances. This broad range of involvement in festival events has brought about a growing trust between both local and wider community groups as well as an understanding of heritage in all its forms by exposing people to the sites as well as to visitors, who felt that we have a fabulous resource.

Roberts was interested in plants and gardens, collecting botanical specimens for his friends in Sydney. He designed a summer house for Mrs Anderson's garden, and there is a sketch of it in one of his letters to his close friend Pring. It was appropriate, therefore, that we have a gardening event, (including 'How Does Your Garden Grow?' - historic garden workshop and tour 1996). Roberts taught the Anderson boys to swim in the river, and picnicked with them on the site of 'Bailed Up' while he was painting. He was godfather to one of the Hughes children, so we involved the school children in many events during the festival, including a schools 'Wanted' Poster competition; talks at the Pioneer Village; and Cobb & Co coach visits to schools and other local institutions.

Roberts's interest in theatre and particularly Oscar Wilde gave the hook on which the local amateur theatre company could hang a production of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' in the 1996 Festival. In the 2001 Festival Jenny Munday from Charles Sturt University brought the play 'Tom's Women' that she had written for the Tom Roberts Retrospective in Adelaide. We know that Tom Roberts thought little of the folk of Inverell for he wrote to Pring in 1895 that: 'Inverell was such an awful place' that a hangover came as a welcome change to its 'deadly level'. So we took the cue and had a few drinks on Tom at the street party on the last night of the festival.

The festival has been held twice and each time valuable spin offs in skill development for the community have occurred, for example:

- oral history training program for the Family History Group,
- directing workshops for the Theatre Company,
- dance workshops for Aboriginal students

It has also stimulated conservation work on the shearing shed and homestead at Newstead to be undertaken by the owner in 1998/99. Currently Peter Watts of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW is coordinating the Heritage Office, Inverell Shire council. The Bruderhof community – new owners of Newstead – and festival organisers to broker future protection, conservation and interpretation of the sites. The profile of this project has also brought a number of private collections 'out of the woodwork'. Owners of these collections and community volunteers are learning archiving skills with the support of staff from the HHT.
'Family Ties', a relational database is being developed, linking documents, people, sites, objects in private and public collections that relate to Newstead and the Tom Roberts and Anderson connections. This project is funded by the Historic Houses Trust, through and with the University of New England, with involvement of the Inverell and District Family History Group and the Inverell Cultural and Arts Council. The project will also allow for the appropriate archiving and the provision of public access to the collections. It will provide the foundation for the re-interpretation and presentation of the sites and the development of events for the next festival.