WILLUNGA: PLACE, TIME AND IMAGE

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Introduction
The Adelaide metropolitan fringe township of Willunga is coming under increasing development pressure. This is primarily due to the obvious outward sprawl of Adelaide, apparently an inexorable force in these gentle southern coastal plains, despite some well meaning diversionary metropolitan planning strategies. No matter what comes out of the South Australian government's current review of the State's planning system, the still somewhat sleepy town of Willunga is bound to experience a combination of impacts which will change its character. Inevitable, natural and, of course, not necessarily a bad thing. A drive down the High Street will serve to confirm that here is a semi-rural town, not particularly well endowed in the municipal sense, a place ready for some more public and private expenditure.

Perhaps what is most fragile in Willunga is the cultural landscape of the place. At present this is legible to those with a basic knowledge of the history of the town and its environs. The local branch of the National Trust has, over the years, made good efforts at interpretation. Most helpful for the visitor is the Trust's walking map showing the town's significant buildings. The Old Court House is used by the National Trust as a local history museum and as a focus for cultural tourism. The historical importance of Willunga is being recorded. It is one of South Australia's oldest country towns. It was a wheat growing district and slate mining centre from the very early years of the colony, and the location of some regionally significant early buildings.

For a good part of the South Australian sesquicentennial year of 1986 I became a regular visitor to Willunga as I helped with the 'restoration' of the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station. During this process I came to meet a number of local people, as private individuals and business people as well as, in some cases, in their roles with the National Trust or local government. Tourists who came upon the buildings we were working on would stop by for a chat. People who had some family association with the buildings got in touch to see what was going on. Much advice and information was volunteered from all sides. Most of this was helpful. In particular, it served to focus my mind on a number of issues relating to Willunga's future as the varying needs and aspirations of its users, the residents and visitors, came to be better understood.

Making some reference to those aspects of heritage, cultural tourism and local experience that the process of 'restoring' the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station made me particularly aware of, this paper looks at what I suggest are pressing issues of image and conservation management for Willunga. Other places may have similar issues to confront.

The place
In our conference this paper is being presented in the session titled: 'Conservation and Development of Traditional Cultural Sites'. I find this a comfortable framework for the ideas I would like to explore because my experience with the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station at Willunga became more of a 'site' or 'place' experience the longer I was with the project. Not that I would seek to disagree with Michel Parent when he writes: 'Buildings are the chief catalyst of collective historical identity because they seem intrinsic to their surroundings and outlast most other relics'. It was indeed the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station, which, along with the nearby Old Court House, had helped keep the significance of the original government reserve at Willunga alive in memory. In late 1987 the Australian Heritage Commission nominated the property as a highlighted place within the Willunga Conservation Area. In part, the statement of significance says: (the building) 'has landmark qualities in the townscape because of its prominent situation on high ground where the Adelaide road joins the route to the south coast and because it is part of a complex of government buildings erected on the original government reserve'.

I could devote much space to a description of the original government reserve and the activities which were centred upon it. It was, for instance, the location of the police station and the court house, the centre for Aboriginal 'welfare', the postal service and later the telegraphic service, as well as the stopping point of travellers to the south after a day's journey from Adelaide. In recent times the Victor Harbor road has bypassed the township of Willunga. Today's travellers to the south speed past leaving the Willunga High Street as a rather over-scaled blaze through the town.

For the township as a whole the pattern of buildings identified by the National Trust in their 'Willunga Walk' leaflet lead the walker through the town plan in a satisfactory way. Taking the 'Walk' the tourist can obtain a feeling for the scale and character of the township beyond the strip of the High Street, getting a measure of the greater place in its entirety. Within this whole the completeness of the government reserve
land as an identifiable place has been rather diluted over the years by the sale of sections of this land and the substantial High Street roadworks. What remains is the strong sense of continuity felt by Willunga’s present community through its understanding of its social and family history in relation to this place. This is positively reinforced by the continuing physical presence of the Old Court House and the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station as focal points for historical association in the cultural landscape.

The time

Last year (1989) marked 150 years of settlement for Willunga. The local community recognized the occasion with quiet pride in the same fashion that had occurred three years earlier at the time of the State’s sesquicentennial celebrations. I was not able to be at Willunga for last year’s events, but I’m sure that, amongst other things, the people dressed up to look like their great-grandparents might have done. In celebrating they would have gathered together at the Old Court House and in other places, complementing the look of the town’s older buildings. This happened to great effect in 1986 and was very enjoyable for those who were there. Even in this generation many Willunga people are descendants of early settlers with a strong sense of belonging to the place.

Every year, around the end of July, Willunga folk turn out for a street parade, showground games, and then a week of other activities to mark the almond blossom time. This again is very much a local celebration of the passing of another year and the coming of spring. Cars from out of town are seen cruising around for a weekend or so and the almond blossom is very lovely to look at in the context of the folded hills and Southern Vales. But one year I saw a large bus of Japanese tourists being driven by during the street procession. I wondered if the person who had managed the good timing of this tourism promotion had realized just how much cultural impact was being achieved. The Japanese visitors were staring in polite amazement at the variegated street display, which may have given them even greater enjoyment as a cultural experience than being taken to see the almond blossom.

Much of what I see as Willunga’s present developmental uncertainty might be due to a certain element of the town being ‘out of time’ and even ‘out of place’. The Southern Vales, to which Willunga doesn’t quite belong, have an established place in South Australian tourism because of their wineries. The ephemeral almond blossom, the long-past slate quarrying industry and the scatter of heritage buildings are not presented effectively enough to capture Willunga’s significant tourist potential.

The image

The past several years have been difficult for the District Council of Willunga in so far as much energy has been devoted to questions of growth and development. Subdivision pressures and the likely redistribution of the district’s population which future development might bring have dominated the Council’s deliberations, and in particular the matter of a substantial marina development and related subdivision at nearby Sellicks Beach. For many of the local decision-makers issues related to Willunga’s part in an Adelaide metropolitan future have, probably quite properly, dominated the present. An image of the District Council of Willunga as a rate-rich southern metropolitan power is perhaps going a bit too far, particularly as many ratepayers seem to have found that model difficult to accept. The State government has ruled that the marina development cannot proceed, but, of course, development pressures will continue. In a relatively short time the generation which inherited rural land in Willunga or those who moved to the town because of its sleepy rural charm will largely have been replaced by Adelaide commuters.

Beyond the town there will be almond growers and other small-holding farms, but it is likely that many of these will be part-time ventures. As well as the residents, the elected representatives and officers of local government, the South Australian Planning Commission will be developing an image of the future Willunga. This is likely to be concerned with the district’s form and function within the Adelaide metropolitan area as a whole and with the town’s physical definition in its setting. I would hope this means a concern for the edges of the built up area and the form of the place in this still quite beautiful rural setting.

The image of Willunga and its district held in the mind by many caring Adelaideans is probably the image of rolling hills and halcyon rural days captured by artists whose work is seen in many Australian galleries. These pictures are mostly images from the 1950s and earlier. And perhaps when these well educated Adelaide people go for a drive south at almond blossom time this image is to a reasonable degree congruent with what they believe they see.

The local branch of the National Trust is active and has done well in its explorations of local history and in identifying and highlighting Willunga buildings. The Star of Greece shipwreck off the nearby coastline has attracted recent attention and documentation. Such activities have heightened local pride in the past and given impetus to a local community supportive of the maintenance of perceived heritage. However, if the projection of a contemporary market-effective tourist image for Willunga is to be a goal there is the need for some sharper analysis of what aspects of the town’s heritage can be successfully interpreted for visitors of all socio-economic types.

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Learning from the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station

In the introduction to this paper I reported how the ‘restoration’ of the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station brought me in touch with people at Willunga. This exposure to local opinion, taken together with comments from visitors to the town, focused my attention on a number of issues of image and conservation management for Willunga in the context of cultural tourism.

In the spring of South Australia’s sesquicentennial year a re-enactment of the mail coach run from Adelaide’s southern suburbs to Willunga was held. This fortunately happened to coincide with the completion of work on the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station, as this government building had been the termination point for the mail coach. The National Trust took all matters of organization under control and those of us who had made sure that the building at the end of the coach journey would be ready on the day joined in the fun. This was an occasion which made me understand something of the importance of identity and continuity to the people of a place. There was much fancy dress in evidence and certain roles from the days of the mail coach were portrayed. The day was quickly over and I pondered the possibility of the building looking more or less as it does now for its moment of glory again in the year 2036, when I assume a bicentennial mail coach re-enactment will take place.

After much deliberation and enquiry we had chosen to set up (I’d rather not say ‘restore’) the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station more or less as it would have looked in its most active working years in the 1880s or 1890s. The documentation available to us to do this was quite good, and this programme seemed to make the best use of the remaining original fabric of the buildings. There are two buildings cheek-by-jowl: the Post Office dating form the mid 1850s and the purpose built Telegraph Station dating from 1865.

When the buildings in question had passed from government ownership into private hands in 1936 the new owner had undertaken a comprehensive recycling programme which resulted in an unusual house of character. A rich cement render was applied to the stone walls of the property, some new windows were added, and in a masterful expression of the buildings’ new residential character, an upper storey verandah was built on two sides. It is intriguing to wonder whether the proprietor at this time stopped to congratulate himself on celebrating the State’s centenary with this project. In any event, a couple of generations of residential occupation followed, mostly by one family, but during this time very little maintenance was done. By the mid 1970s the result was an idiosyncratic building exuding a great deal of pleasing decay.

At this time the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station was considered something of a lost cause in terms of a retrievable structure by many local people who, nevertheless, were keen that it remain extant. However, professional opinion was that the property was eminently restorable and there was the hope that it might become the responsibility of the National Trust, to be administered in conjunction with the Old Courthouse situated opposite. This did not transpire and late in 1983 it passed to a new private owner. When work began on the building towards the end of 1985 it was on a very modest budget which turned out to be about the best way to proceed. Effort was channelled into careful and cost effective decision making which resulted in the least disturbance of the original fabric, much of which was now exposed under its 1936 layers of cement render.

Local reaction was noted as this work proceeded at an economical pace, from remedial site works and stabilization, to the more obvious changes in the building’s appearance. It was not surprising to learn that the building was perceived as it had appeared in its 1930s ‘recycled’ form. The two-storied verandah and a wishing well were very much in the minds of people who had been children when those features were new. Consequently, our ‘restoration’ programme to an ‘unknown’ earlier state needed some explanation, which was given, and accepted. Local people were impressed with the building’s added cultural richness when the process was seen to expose the evidence of a more substantive past in terms of the original fabric revealed, complete with the extensive graffiti that the public building had attracted during its active years. Our purpose had become clear and was appreciated. The final imprimatur of local acceptance came at the mail coach re-enactment when, in a ceremony contrived by the National Trust and the local Apex Club, the Mayor of the District Council of Willunga opened the buildings, which she declared were now ‘fully restored’.

Since that time occupants of the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station have included a physiotherapist, using part of the building as a consulting room and an art gallery where the tenant lived on the premises. Currently a local arts group is using one room as an office, with a local youth/arts worker in residence. All these uses have been adequately housed in the modest accommodation of the original building with only mild interventions. Maybe a Chinese restaurant would pay more rent. At the same time such a use would be very likely to make a dramatic change to the character of these essentially simple buildings, and also to the character of the special place they do much to help identify.

Issues of image and of conservation management

The National Trust’s Willunga Walk leaflet claims that the Kaurna tribe ‘called this beautiful place
“Willa – unga” meaning “place of green trees”. So possibly this was the image of the district adopted by the first settlers. Earlier in this paper I have made some suggestions as to how Willunga is perceived today. The current uncertainties of metropolitan residential growth and the recent experience that the local Council has had in respect of the aborted Sellicks Beach project do nothing to clarify the image of the town.

In its regional setting, an urban fringe community with a rural hinterland, Willunga is not likely to develop as a major service centre or even a major secondary centre such as nearby McLaren Vale. Similarly, in terms of tourism, Willunga is placed at the fringe of the Southern Vales circuit of wineries and is now by-passed by the fast road to Victor Harbor. Willunga’s attractions for tourists are of a fairly sophisticated middle class nature, such as the National Trust’s walking tour and local history museum, visiting the slate quarry sites and admiring the local architecture. Then there is the short term almond blossom season and its associated annual week long festival, of much significance locally but hardly the basis for commercial tourism.

There is no doubt about Willunga’s significance as a repository of South Australian agricultural, mining, and social heritage. It is also significant for its buildings and the part it played in transport and communications. The question is what orientation should the development of an image and a management plan for Willunga take, assuming that some programme for cultural tourism is relevant to the town’s future? Having had the experience of the Old Post Office and Telegraph Station project, I believe that the challenge for all concerned will be to find a process which accommodates the passage of time and absorbs the inevitable impacts of change. No matter what these impacts may turn out to be, it will be important to identify and to interpret the place for future generations.

Conclusion

A complex orchestration is required from the various actors. For instance, there are the government heritage bodies, the local council and agencies such as the National Trust. There are also private organizations, firms and individuals, and to achieve success, they all need to work together. What happens in Willunga will depend to a great extent on the degree of harmony that can be achieved in both the intent and the process. The more significant the locality, the more important will be the degree of consensus required between these various interest groups. There is a hierarchy of perceived heritage importance between places and this has already been acknowledged in the procedures of the Australian Heritage Commission.

There will need to be a clearer understanding of the hierarchy of responsibility for heritage places in the public realm as well as a high degree of harmonious collaboration in ongoing conservation management strategies. The integrity of the place must be maintained and guarded with the appropriate degree of attention and with whatever application of Commonwealth and State resources the place is acknowledged to warrant in any interpretation programme.

For the street, the place, and individual buildings the need exists to work in practice through a hierarchy of conservation management strategies from the lowest order, where recording is merited before demolition, up the scale through degrees of adaptive re-use. This order of significance might stop with those buildings where originality in form and fabric is so complete and important that any intervention greater than that required to achieve stabilization would be ruled out. Such a degree of restriction on development would imply appropriate financial compensation or incentives. But the importance of our heritage buildings and places surely justifies this.

Any suggestions as to how Willunga might present itself as a desirable destination for the tourist should take account of its relative integrity. By contrast, there is the commercially manipulated nostalgic environment of Hahndorf. Of course, Hahndorf is largely ‘successful’ in its own terms. Within the current perceptions of successful tourism ventures, it may take a good deal of boldness to avoid the Hahndorf-like solution in other towns with a marketable past.

Yet Hahndorf may give the clue in that it is the issue of Main Street management which sets the scene and establishes the style for the place. The Willunga High Street is certainly in need of ‘leadership’ in finding for itself a style and character which suitably enhances the place and its potential, both in tourism terms and for the enjoyment of the local people.

A Main Street programme of the sort being sponsored by the National Trust, the Australian Heritage Commission or the Australia Council might prove the starting point for Willunga. Indeed, my timing was not good when I set up an Australia Council application for the District Council of Willunga as its attentions were focused on the Sellicks Beach development. Perhaps it is time to try again. But any Main Street improvement scheme needs to take into account the special qualities of the street, the places that make it and the entity that is the town itself.

Willunga is ready for a townscape improvement programme which attends to parking, planting, lighting, signage, and in general, addresses the question of design guidelines for the High Street. The District Council of Willunga should take the lead in an integrated community effort. This could readily accommodate, complement, or extend the efforts of
The road to Port Elliot and Goolwa. Court House and Police Station on the left, Telegraph Station on the right, Post Office behind Telegraph Station.

The National Trust and would take due notice of the work done by both Commonwealth and State heritage bodies.

My experience with the various actors concerned with heritage issues at Willunga suggests that there is a growing sensitivity to issues of place. With many of our traditional cultural sites the selection the first settlers made of a place to stop, to pitch a tent or to build a homestead was often informed by a first-comers' acute awareness of locality, of an intuitive or an intrinsic 'sense of place'. Time has added much more. Today there is the realization that the 'furnishings' of a place, the buildings, the landscape(ing), the ground surface and other visible infrastructure will often of necessity have changed, and will need to change, over time. In the case of the places we will want to keep as part of our cultural heritage a strong community sense of continuity will prevail. Managing the dynamics of change, of conservation, of interpretation and of appreciation is possibly one of the greatest challenges for professionals in this field.
1936  The Willunga Post Office and Telegraph Station as a recycled building – a private house.

1986  The Old Post Office and Telegraph Station – re-exposed.
Endnotes


3 For the purposes of this paper I am concentrating on issues of 'Place' reflected in this building, rather than on those more intrinsic aspects of the building which are of considerable interest in themselves, but which might become a diversion on this occasion.


6 Helpful advice was given by members of the State Heritage Branch at that time, notably Barry Rowney and Bruce Harry, and by David Young of the Department of Mines and Energy.

7 That the past is marketable is in no way to be doubted. For a sharp discussion of this in the British context see Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry*, Methuen, London, 1987.