

# PIECES IN THE PUZZLE

Janet Knight uncovers an Irish gentleman convict and a NSW fast bowler among the characters linked to the history of family homes

Being an archivist, I have a natural curiosity about history. So, when I recently purchased my first home in Vaucluse, Sydney, my first response (after I recovered from the shock of the purchase price) was 'I have to find out about its history'. As my husband's sister and parents live in the same suburb I, somewhat bravely, decided to trace all three houses together to create Christmas presents with a difference. I embarked on my detective investigations with complete ignorance and some trepidation...

The first piece in the puzzle was obtained from the Building Applications and Development Applications at Woollahra Council. In these files I discovered applications for buildings, garages, fences, alterations and additions to structures. I learnt of quarrels unfolding between neighbours, of some shoddy and some remarkable workmanship, of unauthorised building works and stringent inspectors. In the plans I found the owners' lofty dreams for their homes, some of which were never realised or altered significantly. For our home, built in 1936, I even obtained specifications that detailed the original colour schemes.

My hunt continued at the Woollahra Local History Centre. I delved into their collection of Rate Books and Valuation Books from the now defunct Vaucluse Council.

These revealed ownership changes and the addition of buildings (evident through sudden surges in value). They also contained important sentimental information: the names of the properties, 'Glenelg', 'Birdswood' and 'Ons Hoop' (a Dutch expression meaning 'Our Hope').

The Building Registers, maps and secondary sources at the Local History Centre all provided vital clues, and revealed how this area developed from ownership by William Charles Wentworth into an affluent, populated suburb.

Armed with the volume and folio numbers from the contract for each home, I headed to Land and Property Information (formerly the Land Titles Office, Land Information Centre and the Valuer General's Office). The Historical Officer patiently explained the intricacies of the new and old system titles, and revealed to me the secrets contained in primary application packets, grant books, subdivision plans and other sources. The more I fumbled my way through these fascinating documents, the more my respect increased for those brave researchers and staff who tackle these systems daily.

My search then moved to State Records where I scoured the Colonial Secretary's correspondence and convict, shipping, land and court records, in which I discovered



REPRODUCED COURTESY OF HORDERN HOUSE RARE BOOKS, SYDNEY

personal details about the early landowners. For example, I found that one land occupant, Sir Henry Brown Hayes, was an Irish gentleman convict transported on the *Atlas* in 1802 for kidnapping the daughter of a wealthy merchant and forcing her to marry him. Sir Henry had an exciting life, with five secondary convictions, mainly due to disobedience and insolence. He spent time on Norfolk Island, Port Macquarie and Newcastle before obtaining a free pardon. He was also the man who named Vaucluse (after the village in Provence, Fontaine de Vaucluse. It is from the Latin *vallis clausa* meaning enclosed valley). He was the original builder of Vaucluse House, although he did not actually own the land!

Another interesting landowner, Thomas Dennett, was Captain of 'the hell ship', the *Brittania II*. Dennett subjected the convicts on board to inhumane treatment, and he and the Ship's Surgeon were hauled back to England to face trial. State Records holds copies of witness statements that reveal the degree of Dennett's sadism. The court found that he contributed to the deaths of six convicts but he was never punished.

For later periods, Deceased Estate Files, also held by State Records, brought some interesting revelations. They showed occupations, relatives, land and buildings

owned at death and inheritors of the land. I learnt, for example, that in the 1880s there was a hut on my land, called 'Nulla Nulla', far earlier than the submission of any building application. For another property, I obtained a list of all the furniture and possessions that had furnished the house in 1950.

After this exhaustive search of primary sources, I found that even the Google site on the Internet helped to add facts to the story. I discovered there that Oswald Hoddle Lewis, an owner of our property, was a fast bowler who played for NSW from 1856–61 (this delighted my husband, who is a cricket fan). I also learnt all about the career of another famous resident: Dulcie Holland, the musician and composer, whose compositions for beginners will be well-known to those who play the piano.

Tired but satisfied now my search was complete, I compiled the information collected about the properties and their owners and wrapped them for the Christmas tree.

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*The view from Vaucluse: The City and Harbour of Sydney by George Edwards Peacock, NSW, 1860; chromolithograph, Day & Son, 1861*