



Drawing of Old Government House, Parramatta, after an 1819 illustration by Louis de Freycinet published in his book, *Voyage Autour du Monde*; Paris 1825. Photo courtesy of Christies, London

# Old Government House

## – a key link in Australia’s convict history

Old Government House, Parramatta, is one of eleven places included in a nomination for inscription on the World Heritage List of a serial group known as the Australian Convict Sites.

The nomination is being compiled by the governments of NSW, Tasmania, Western Australia, Norfolk Island and the Commonwealth, and includes destinations many thousands of kilometres apart\*. The serial nomination is based upon the story of transporting convicts to the British colonies in Australia between 1788 and 1868, and each of the eleven sites illustrates an important chapter of it. **Bruce Baskerville** explains why Old Government House, Parramatta, is a significant link in the story of the whole.

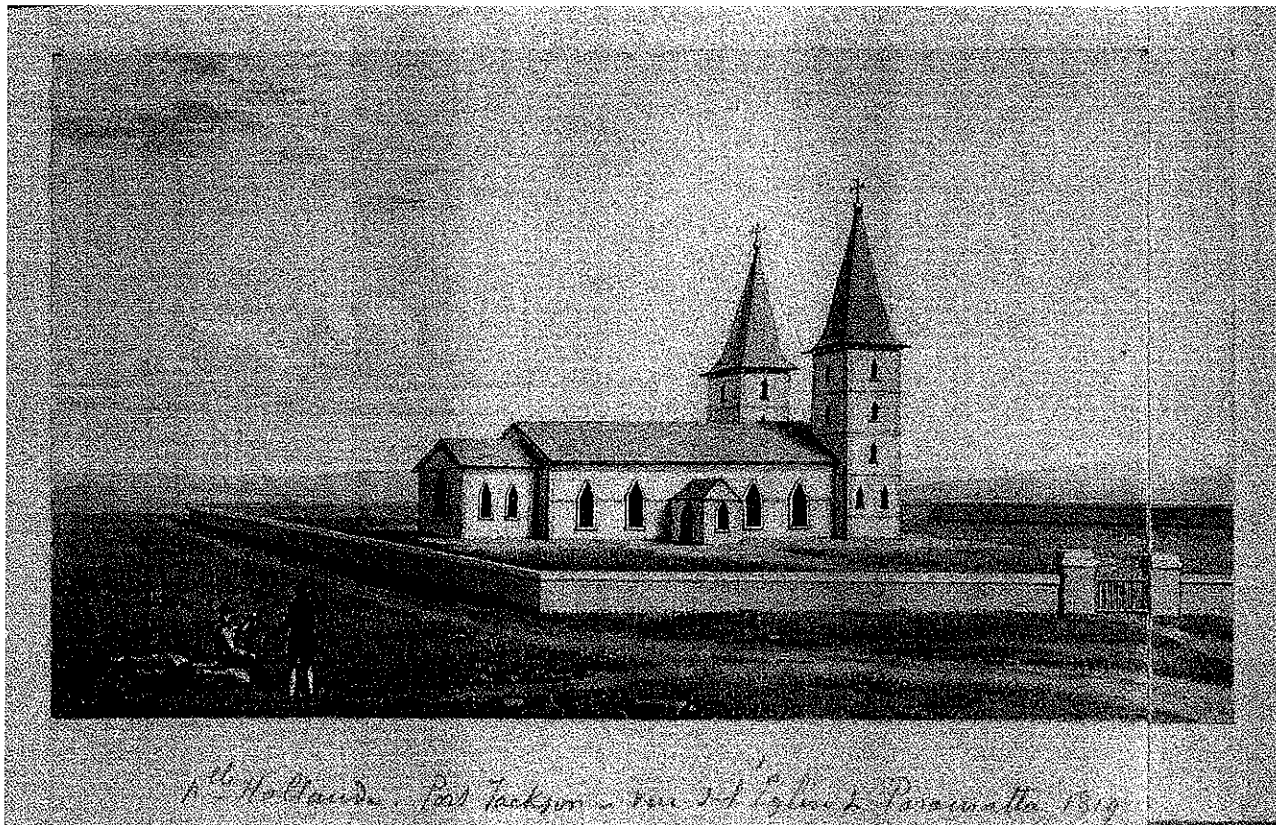
### The power to inspire

The guidelines for an inscription on the World Heritage List state that a place must be of ‘outstanding universal value’. The case for nomination of the Australian Convict Sites is based on two stated criteria: the serial group as a whole must illustrate a significant stage in human history, and be directly associated with events, traditions, ideas or beliefs of outstanding universal significance. Clearly, the stories of convictism in Australia must have something that can inspire a world occupied with wars, climate change and countless other worries. And they do.

Two key themes in the story of convictism in Australia are redemption and punishment. We may all be familiar with the stories of brutality associated with convicts: floggings, the treadmill, solitary confinement, the cat-o-nine tails, the triangle, the clank of ball and chain. But, as with all stories, there is more than one side.

For many convicts, transportation offered a whole new life and a range of new opportunities: to learn trades and skills, to acquire land, to raise families, even in some cases to make a fortune and leave a rich legacy to their descendants. These were opportunities that could never have been realised in the slums of London or Glasgow or Dublin, and are aspects of the convict story that were experienced by far more convict men and women than the horrific tales that often dominate our history books would suggest. Both ends of the spectrum, and all shades in between, in turn reflect the continuing social and political debates in Britain (and in New South Wales) between those who wanted transportation to be harsh and a deterrent to crime, and those who wanted transportation to redeem the fallen and give them a new life as citizens in a new society.

## Old Government House



St John's Church, Parramatta, after an illustration by Louis de Freycinet in his book *Voyage Autour du Monde*, Paris 1825. Photo courtesy of Christies, London

So, why is Old Government House and its Domain at Parramatta one of the eleven sites? Put simply, it has been included to demonstrate the key themes of the initial survival of the first penal station, and the overall command and control aspects of the convict system.

We are all familiar with the stories of the arrival of the First Fleet. Food was in short supply and there was no accommodation waiting for the human cargo, none of whom had been here before. The ships were soon to sail away and leave them isolated; a social order had to be established and maintained, and cordial (or at least workable) relations had to be established with the Aboriginal peoples already living here. Within a few months it was clear that the sandy soils of Sydney Cove could not support the growing number of people who had suddenly been washed upon its shores, and Governor Phillip had initiated a second settlement at Rose Hill. In the alluringly-named Crescent, convict labourers planted, and in time harvested, the first European crops grown in the penal colony.

Within a short time the first town was laid out which soon became known as Parramatta, and some of the earliest substantial buildings were erected – notably including the first in a series of vice-regal residences upon Rose Hill which, in the British tradition was called Government House. While the convict town developed below the Government House, the early farm lands became part of the property's demesne or domain, and over time, especially in 1793 and 1799, the house was substantially rebuilt.

There are direct relationships between the location of Government House and the survival of the colony. Had those first crops failed, planted as they were by convicts on land cleared, nurtured and harvested by convicts before they made it into food – all overseen by a governor who had to divide his time between the Port in Sydney and the breadbasket at Parramatta – the whole convict experiment would have collapsed and Australia would today be a fundamentally different place. Evidence of this earliest phase survives in the archaeology of the House and of its Domain, and can be appreciated on any stroll through the grounds of Parramatta Park.

In time, it became clear that the colony would survive and possibly even prosper,

but shiploads of convicts continued to arrive and attention had to be focused on the main goal: receiving and managing the women and men who had been convicted of criminal offences in Britain and sentenced to transportation.

A system had to be developed and maintained to manage the increasing numbers of convicts – soon to include those whose sentences had expired

The government of the colony rested largely in the hands of the governor. As the population grew and settlement spread, governing became increasingly complex and various officials and departments were created to assist the governor. However, the governor was always at the apex of the system: he was the direct representative of the Crown, appointed by a Royal Warrant, and exercised many of the prerogatives of the King such as granting clemency to convicts reconvicted of other offences in the colony, and granting pardons to convicts for good conduct. The vice-regal offices were within Government House, which was always much more than a residence. Officials and

settlers visited the Governor at Government House on public business as well as to lobby for their various interests, and the vice-regal couple were usually at the centre of the colony's social life.

Government House in Sydney is usually considered the principal vice-regal residence, but during the convict period (1788-c1850) governors either used Government House at Parramatta as a winter or country retreat, or in the case of certain governors, as their principal residence. Notable among these were Governors Phillip and King (to some extent), Macquarie (after 1816), Brisbane and Fitz Roy. While many government offices were located in Sydney, officials such as the Colonial Secretary had to regularly travel to Parramatta to transact official business, much of which directly or indirectly shaped the lives and expectations of the convict population.

The range and impact of these decisions can be gauged from a few examples. In 1803 the colony's Catholics were required to muster at Government House Parramatta, where Governor King informed them that he was licensing a Catholic priest and that they would be tolerated in practising their faith, provided it did not become subversive. In 1820 Governor Macquarie announced in a General Order from the House the death of King George III and the arrangements for public mourning. In 1824 Governor Brisbane reported from the House on the re-opening of Norfolk Island, the establishment of a penal station at Moreton Bay, and the impending closure of the convict station at Port Macquarie, as well as formulating his policy of the extension of the system of places of secondary punishment in advance of the spread of free settlers. He also reported upon the commencement of the building of the Female Factory at Parramatta, and set out his policy regarding the promotion of convict marriages.

Over 1824-1825 Governor Brisbane proclaimed, then repealed, martial law in the Bathurst area from Government House Parramatta in what became known as a major campaign in the 'Frontier Wars' with the eastern Wiradjuri. Between 1824 and 1826 Governors Brisbane and Darling reported from Parramatta on the establishment of far-away settlements at King George's Sound and Melville Island and their potential as convict stations. In contrast to these 'big picture' issues, governors also made decisions regarding personal aspects of individual convict lives, such as granting clemency from the death penalty to three re-convicted convicts in Van Diemen's Land and authorising the baptism of babies at the

Parramatta Female Factory. The Governor's authority spread across the whole convict system from top to bottom and coast to coast.

The prominent location of Government House on Rose Hill allowed the Governor to actually see many of the developments he authorised.

During the earliest period there were views to the first Parramatta Gaol (Prince Alfred Park), the river that was the major connection to Sydney, and convicts labouring in the fields, paddocks and workshops of the Domain, as well as the townsfolk who frequently treated the Domain as their own. As the convict system developed in complexity, so did the convict landscapes around the House. The Parramatta Female Factory, the Roman Catholic Orphan School, the Roman Catholic chapel and school, the second gaol and Lennox Bridge could all be seen or were close by. The House was at the centre of a complex web of control over the lives of the convicts and ex-convicts until the convict system began to be wound up.

The public rooms and vice-regal office at Government House have survived from Macquarie's extensive works that culminated in 1816, and it still remains possible to enter the House in the same way that Reverend Marsden or Colonial Secretary John Campbell would have done, waiting in the same Drawing Room, perhaps idly looking out the windows at the convict gardeners at work, or hearing the sounds of the convict labourers in the lumber yard, until being shown into the Governor's office to discuss some important business and perhaps receive a decision or dispensation. Old Government House at Parramatta demonstrates, in its fabric, landscapes and associated historical records, the key role of vice-regal authority in the convict system. It represents all the Government Houses where similar functions were carried out, whether in Sydney, Hobart or Kingston, and to a lesser degree, Perth.

A world heritage nomination requires comparisons to be made with similar places around the world, and it is worthwhile noting that convict labour in other convict systems was used to construct similar command centres. Notable examples include the government houses in Penang (1807) and Singapore (1869), and the Administration Building (c1858) on Ross Island in the Andaman

Islands (British India convict system); the Director's House (1867) in Ille Royale, French Guiana and the Administration Building (1880) in Noumea, New Caledonia (French convict system); and La Fortaleza (c1765) in San Juan, Puerto Rico (Spanish convict system).

As the convict system was closed down many of its buildings and places were transferred from Imperial to colonial control.

Old Government House and its Domain reflect this transition, as vice-regal functions were reduced with the development of representative and then responsible forms of governance. The House was closed and governors took up permanent residence in the new Government House, Sydney. The Domain was either transferred to other public uses, such as the Lunatic Asylum that gradually sprawled across the Female Factory, or reconstituted as one of the colony's early urban parks, Parramatta Park. The first gaol was demolished and became a park, while the little Catholic chapel and school were gradually replaced by an increasingly bigger church. The idea of the 'convict stain' took hold, and many people tried to simply forget our convict history. Now, over 150 years later, the nomination for World Heritage Listing is asking us to once again look at the convict sites in Australia, and ask questions about their real significance, not only to Australia but to the whole world. The inclusion of Old Government House and its Domain in the eleven nominated sites suggests that it still has many stories to tell.

*\* The eleven sites are Kingston & Arthurs Vale, Norfolk Island; Port Arthur, Darlington Probation Station, Cascades Female Factory, the Coal Mines, and Brickendon & Woolmers Estates, Tasmania; Hyde Park Barracks, Old Great North Road, Old Government House and its Domain, Parramatta, and Cockatoo Island, New South Wales; and Fremantle Prison, Western Australia.*

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