

Rotary talk 1 Nov 2017

FELICITY

The Woodford Academy is the oldest surviving complex of colonial buildings in the Blue Mountains and one of 3 National Trust owned properties in the region. The other 2 properties are Everglades in Leura and Norman Lindsay Gallery in Faulconbridge. The Academy however is the only one of these properties, which is solely volunteer managed and operated and does not receive any operational funding from any level of Government or internally from the National Trust organisation.

On a monthly basis the Woodford Academy is open to the public, thanks to the tireless efforts of a dedicated volunteer team, to provide an opportunity for the community both local and from afar to discover the stories held within its walls. On these open days there is always something new to discover about the stories associated with the property and the people who have passed through it, as it is essentially the people who bring meaning to a building.

NOEL

The Woodford Academy was originally built by a former convict in 1834, as a wayside Inn known as 'The Woodman'. Later, during the busy and profitable gold rush years extensive additions were made to the original modest building, and it became colloquially known as 'Buss's Inn' a name that referred to the new owner William Buss – a colourful character who was renowned for jingling gold coins in his red vest as he rushed out onto the highway to meet honoured guests, such as the soldiers tasked with escorting the gold safely back to Sydney.

In 1868, just after the Western rail line was completed, the property was purchased by the Sydney merchant seaman Alfred Fairfax as his 'gentleman's residence' making it the first substantial private dwelling in the Blue Mountains. He renamed his home 'Woodford House'.

Used initially as an exclusive retreat for Fairfax and his friends, this era of the Woodford Academy's history marks a significant change in cultural perceptions of the Blue Mountains. No longer feared as a wild and threatening landscape, the colonials now valued the mountains for the fresh, healthy, cool mountain air, and the scenic landscape of waterfalls and broad vistas. Land grants released in the early 1870s were by the end of that decade taken up by many wealthy Sydney businessmen who built substantial mountain retreats.

Throughout the late 1870s Fairfax invested heavily in a number of failed mining ventures. With his fortune depleting he converted the residence to a guesthouse. The seed of the 1880s tourism boom for the Blue Mountains had been planted. Advertisements in a Sydney newspaper in 1897 promoted the property for its 'superior accommodation & 'change of air & mountain scenery'. This newspaper ad now features on tea towels sold at the museum. (Lib shows tea towel?)

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Fairfax eventually sold the property in the late 1800's. In the early 1900's the property was leased and eventually purchased by distinguished Classics Scholar John McManamey to establish the 'Woodford Academy for Boys'.

In the early twentieth century, small private boarding schools proliferated in the Blue Mountains in the former grand estates established in the 1880s. The appeal to those families wealthy enough to afford the fees was the fresh mountain air and bracing climate that were perceived as beneficial to children's constitutions and academic development.

Over 300 students were educated at the Woodford Academy between 1907 and 1925, the largest enrolment being 37 boys in 1921. McManamey's distinguished academic career in the classics, may well have been the attraction of the school to many of the reputable families who chose to send their sons to the Woodford Academy. The classics (Ancient Greek & Latin) were necessary for university admission at the time. 56 of these students also served in World War 1.

The school eventually closed in 1936 during the depression, but was retained as the McManamey family's residence until John McManamey's sole surviving daughter, Gertrude, bequeathed the property to the National Trust in 1979. For income Gertrude had 'tenant's or 'boarders' in a number of the rooms in the extensive property, including in the mid 1900's - Isobel Bowden - a botanical artist who documented 7000 examples of Blue Mountains flora and was a founding member of the conservation society. Isobel's 3 brothers had also attended the school in the early 1900's. An exhibition of a selection of Isobel's watercolours is currently on display at the Academy open days in May and June.

NOEL

In 2001 the property received a substantial Federal Grant and the near derelict building underwent extensive restoration. The architectural company who undertook the restoration 'Design 5' received a prestigious heritage award for their work, which carefully retained the 'patina' and layers of history that are evident in the historic building.

The property was then reopened as a museum, run by a volunteer management committee. However, like many regional museums and without a full time manager the Academy struggled to attract visitors. Low visitation rates had resulted in a negative impact on the financial viability of the property and consequently it's ability to remain open for visitors to experience and enjoy.

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Around this time the NT suffered a debilitating blow with a change of government policy to no longer provide periodic funding to the organisation, but rather, to in future only fund specific property projects. This lack of fiscal oxygen for the National Trust, combined with 5 years of continual roadworks that significantly inhibited access to the property, resulted in it being placed on a divestment list along with 5 other properties. This was an emergency measure in order to simultaneously lower operating costs and raise operational revenue for the National Trust.

NOEL

In order to remain available to the public it was evident that the Academy needed to once again be 'repurposed' to remain relevant to current cultural and social priorities to become independently financially viable. This has become the new model for the National Trust.

Which is when the new management committee was formed.

The threat of imminent closure by the National Trust, motivated members of the community organically and whole-heartedly responded to the need to ensure this 'community asset' was not lost. A struggling dedicated committee of 3 was replenished with new volunteer energy. The new 'chair', retired solicitor Ian Harman's first job was to successfully negotiate with the National Trust, a 3 year reprieve for the property to prove it could become financially viable.

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The new volunteers came from a range of backgrounds and professions and as such brought to the committee a new range of skills including HR, education, research, design, marketing, event management, technology, an understanding of the arts, small business practise, catering and much more. A business plan was formed derived from the available expertise of the volunteers and matched to the strengths of the property, acknowledging and avoiding its inherent constraints, such as limited opening hours.

The committee's business plan took its lead from the '2001 Conservation Management Plan' and identified a range of revised and new visitor programs, events, community building activities, marketing initiatives, merchandise items and leasing opportunities. It was acknowledged that the success of this Business Plan required the commitment and skills of the new management committee, a strong volunteer base, and the ongoing support and reputation of the National Trust (NT) as well as support from the Woodford and wider Mountains community - to realise the potential of the property.

To facilitate the expansion of activities at the Academy, the WAMC identified key roles to manage and facilitate the new suite of designated activities, based on the expertise of the committee members. It was intended that new activities would be tested, refined and then established, to achieve the fiscal sustainability within 3 years of the published date of the business plan.

NOEL

In the formation of the business plan it was identified that key to the survival of the property was Diversification and Community involvement - to bring about a sense of community ownership and most critically, the need to coordinate multiple uses to regenerate the Woodford Academy as a living museum, a community asset and a place of learning and understanding.

The primary identity and income generating activity of the Woodford Academy was to remain as a museum. However it was acknowledged that even with marketing and improvements to the exhibits and the overall presentation of the museum, this function alone would not meet the financial targets required to be sustainable.

Therefore a number of additional, compatible income generating programs were also identified.

In brief these programs were

HOUSE MUSEUM

Guided Tours / Updated Interpretative Displays

Open Day Attractor Events

Merchandising – which were amongst the first MTNS MADE branded products – a ‘Blue Mountains Economic Enterprise’ Initiative

Specialist Interpretive Programs

National Curriculum School Programs

Bus Tours

Niche Interest Tours and bookings

EVENTS

Ghost Tours, Dinners, Halloween Events

Woodford and Hazelbrook Garden Festival

Joint Ventures with other mountains cultural and community organisations (such as the Leura Harvest Festival!)

VENUE HIRE

Meetings, Weddings, Dinners, Lunches, Community Meetings, Seminars etc

LEASEABLE SPACES

The School Wing

The committee identified that the accommodation of the School Wing (the first floor eastern wing) of the Academy would suit lease(s) for small low impact business activities such as consultants, creative industries and community groups with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities. Leasing these spaces as multiple tenancies was seen as essential to build the property’s financial resilience and increase the profile and social connectivity of the Academy to the wider community. Short stay accommodation or ‘artist in residency’ programs was also foreseen as a suitable possibility. The committee recognised that the condition and configuration of these spaces would not suit long term residential accommodation, although this is what the National Trust initially insisted upon, but this use was short lived after a couple of trial runs.

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MARKETING INITIATIVES

The WAMC developed a brand identity for the Woodford Academy to position and market the building as a community, tourist and learning destination. The brand identity includes a logo that references the original Academy School logo (an open book), and a series of 'tag lines' to position the museum and appeal to different demographics and markets; *'The Blue Mountains Oldest Building'*; *'Make your Mark in History'*; & *my personal favourite - Seriously 'Old School'*. The logo and 'tag lines' are now incorporated in both digital and print marketing material and merchandise items to provide a strong, legible identity for the Woodford Academy.

The Academy capitalised on existing tourism and community promotional networks such as the National Trust magazine and website, Blue Mountains City of The Arts Newsletter, Blue Mountains National Trust properties (Norman Lindsay Gallery & Everglades) and social media to cost effectively promote the Academy open days and events.

For the monthly open day events, the Woodford Academy Management Committee (WAMC) intuited that the wealth of creative talent that resides in the Blue Mountains could be the critical catalyst for the museum's reinvigoration.

In November 2013 select Blue Mountains artists were invited via an expression of interest process to produce unique, site specific works that interpreted, explored or revealed aspects of the historic building and grounds for the museum's monthly open days. The brief sought to ensure works contributed an educational and/or interpretative component to the understanding of the many layers of usage and occupation of this historic building.

The response from the local creative community was overwhelming positive. The calibre of work showcased from 2014 at the Woodford Academy is a testament to talents of the Blue Mountains artists. Highly successful and embraced by locals and tourists alike, the first year of 'Art at the Academy' forged a reputation for the Woodford Academy as an important developing, creative and cultural hub in the Central Blue Mountains. Importantly, and to our ongoing delight, the artworks, installation and performances have added intriguing, beautiful and inspiring new layers of meaning and social relevance to this historic building, engaging a broad new audience. The implementation of this business plan received the Judges commendation award at the 2017 NSW NT state heritage awards.

Jacqueline Spedding kindly initiated this wonderful publication 'Art at the Academy' that beautifully documents the first year of art events at the museum. The book is just \$25 and is also available at the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, at the Academy on our monthly open days and online through the National Trust website. The second book went to the press today and will be available as the perfect xmas gift from the next open day on Nov 18.

NOEL

The 2014/2015 Woodford Academy monthly open day events significantly contributed to a 600 per cent increase in visitation in the first year and produced the first balanced budget for the property ever. In fact the first year generated profit, which wasn't even part of the plan within 3 years and brought forward restoration projects and exhibition development which in 2013 were thought to be distant goals.

The Academy's growing reputation as a creative hub, combined with strategic targeted marketing from supportive local real estate agent Catriona Swan, also assisted the committee in leasing the 3 'Artist in Residence' tenancies that had been identified in the business plan.

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Samantha Cole states in her recent article "HOW A GROWN-UP FIELD TRIP TO A MUSEUM CAN IMPROVE YOUR WORK (AND LIFE)" that "cultural centres have their place in public health: reducing social isolation, providing positive distraction, teaching new skills, and increasing a sense of community and belonging". The same can be said for volunteering.

With the café volunteers, there is a huge sense of pride that the funds raised by their activities are being reinvested into the amenity of the property. The café alone has provided a platform for informal retraining opportunities and an entry point for members of the community to test the waters in a friendly environment, including teenagers who might otherwise feel intimidated due to their lack of work experience.

Other long standing urgent maintenance jobs have also now been attended to, including repairs to the verandah, the sandstone chimney, the completion of the fence to the Hwy and paths to the toilets. Seeing the property conserved and maintained is perhaps the greatest reward for our volunteers.

The National Trust also provides opportunities for further training in conservation as well as access to grants. We have found that our volunteers who are recent retirees relish the opportunity for further professional training in areas such as conservation, as well as the opportunity to share their life experience and knowledge -such as our educators who have established the first National Trust national curriculum compliant school program at the Academy.

But the new social connections formed are also a key reason for volunteer motivation. Volunteer sustainability is something we often ponder, along with 'why we do it' and what motivates us. The incredible team of volunteers is a big part of what make this experience so rewarding for us all, but also seeing the results of our efforts acknowledged, such as through the National Trust heritage award we won last year for one of our exhibits.

We are always looking for more volunteers.

If you would like to join our dynamic community – we would love to hear from you!

NOEL

The Academy has for now, established stable financial sustainability, but to ensure it remains open for visitors to experience and enjoy there is much more to be done in terms of re connecting the Academy to it's grounds, the Woodford Reserve. The Woodford Reserve is currently council community land, which is maintained by an informal band of volunteers who live around the reserve. It is filled with colonial history, which connects with first cohabitation with the Aboriginal community of the region and yet is overgrown with weeds and has no amenity for safe and informative visitation and exploration. The Vale Rd reserve is currently the only parking area available for visitors to the Academy and volunteers setup marshalling bollards and signage and retrieve them every time the property is open to the public and rely on the goodwill of the neighbourhood volunteers to ensure a path is mown from this adjacent street to the rear of the Academy. Without formalised parking, the ongoing sustainability of the Academy is at risk and more significantly the much more significant story of the Reserve in connection of with the Academy is not being be told. A complex process of assessment and masterplanning is being lead by WAMC to bring together the council, the NT and NPWS to yield an agreed Heritage Interpretation plan to identifying the heritage value of this broader precinct and provide safe, sustainable and heritage sensitive access for visitors to the precinct. Once this plan is established, capital funding will be required to implement this plan which will be much greater than the volunteers will be able to raise through their activities. A call for assistance to raise this additional funding will need to be made from the wider community and all levels of government.

So to experience what this looks and feels like, for a modest \$6 museum entry fee you can invest in our local heritage by attending the open days, events and activities put on by the the committee and the 'Artists in residence.

The final open day for 2017 is on Sat Nov 18 10am-4pm

Thank you – any questions