

Heritage jewel preserved for future generations

In June 2006, 10 awards were presented under the Chief of the Defence Force – Secretary Environment and Heritage Award scheme, recognising and promoting excellence in environmental and heritage management in Defence. Susan Elekessy reports.

One of this year's awards was presented to Mr Tony Spurling, Director Geospatial Analysis Centre Review Implementation, for his work in protecting the heritage value of Fortuna Villa in Bendigo.

The villa and its gardens are now on the Commonwealth Heritage List and are greatly valued by Defence members serving at the site, as well as the local community.

This grand, sprawling mansion has a history as rich as its luxuriously appointed bedrooms. From humble beginnings in 1861, the house grew with the fortune of its owner 'quartz king' George Lansell, with

extensions continuing from the time he bought it in 1871 until 1924.

In 1906 George Lansell passed away at the ripe age of 82, and the magnificent home stayed in the family until 1934, when George's second wife, Edith Lansell, died. It was sold at the depression price of £2400, and its lavish furnishings were auctioned at a sale lasting five days.

In 1938 Fortuna was slated for demolition but was luckily purchased at auction to become a reception house. During this time it fell into considerable disrepair until the the Army acquired it in 1942.

Until 1995 the villa became home to the Australian Army Survey Regiment and is now part of the Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation (DIGO). DIGO has been an attentive custodian of the home's beauty and history. Much of the credit for that goes to Tony Spurling, who, in his 30 years at the villa, has led a committee dedicated to its restoration and preservation.

Tony came to the villa in 1975 and took an early, active interest in its history and conservation. Over the past 10 years he has recommended improvements and maintenance of the facility, which includes the grand Fortuna Villa, while ensuring that he has balanced operational requirements with conservation management plan recommendations.

Tony managed a major security upgrade while balancing a wide range of restoration projects, including external building works, replacement of recent modifications that were inconsistent with the style of the original features, and even sustainable garden improvements.

Tony has invested his own time in conducting heritage tours and, with other Defence staff, produced a booklet on the villa, putting the money raised towards further restoration works. Tony's strong relationship with the local historical community has seen the villa enhanced with historic works of art on loan from the Bendigo Regional Gallery.

It is a testament to Tony's three decades of inspired leadership and commitment that he has successfully blended the rich history of Defence with that of the villa. At the same time he has maintained an important operational Defence facility. Tony's work has enhanced the rich heritage of the site, and ensured that Fortuna Villa will be around for many years to come for Australia's future generations to enjoy.

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The beautiful gardens and historic grandeur of Fortuna Villa.