

OUR HISTORY

(THOSE FINE OLD BUILDINGS WHICH HAVE SURVIVED A CENTURY OR MORE)

UNDER FIRE

(THOSE FUNERAL PYRES LIT BY DEMOLISHERS TO BURN MONUMENTS)

Will somebody sponsor a bill to protect our remaining historical beauty? ROBIN BOYD wants it preserved, like St. Matthew's, right, and the Customs House at Robe, below

If we were a nation given to consecrating national shrines this would be one of the most revered: the breathtakingly beautiful building designed by the terrible-tempered, red-headed convict, Francis Greenway. It is St Matthew's Church at Windsor, NSW.

It is classified A by the National Trust, as well it might be, for it is suffused with beauty and nostalgia. It grows out of the very roots of Australian history. And although we are not as a people inclined to set up shrines at least we have saved this landmark for posterity.

"We in this case means a dedicated committee of citizens who committed themselves to raising no less than £41,559 to pay for essential works of restoration.

St. Matthew's was started nearly 150 years ago and was completed in 1822. It was one of three churches built by Greenway, and though quite small is in some ways his greatest building.

Greatest is not too strong a word. It is great because it has beautiful materials strongly used; because it is a three-dimensional, sculptural thing not a facade; and because it has one man's personal style written on it as clearly as if he had signed it in paint.

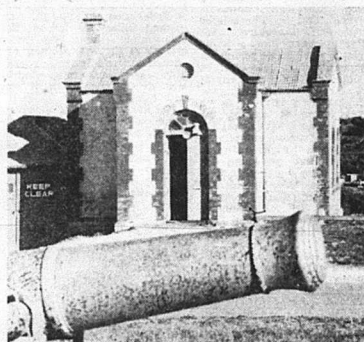
Collapse

In 1962 it was in sad disrepair, on the edge of collapse. A National Trust committee organised an appeal in July, 1963, but decay would not wait for them and they had to start work when little more than half the needed money had been raised.

The work, controlled by R. H. Farmer, Government architect, is probably the most elaborate restorative job ever done in Australia. It included a new bellry structure, some 23,000 new bricks, new frames to every one of the 13 windows, and a new floor.

On October 31, at 11 am a thanksgiving service will be conducted at the building by the Archbishop of Sydney.

Another cockle-warming ceremony took place last Sunday when the Governor of Victoria officially opened a restored



pioneer cottage built a century ago of rubble stone and tree-trunk veranda posts, in Deep Creek Road at Mitcham.

The house was nearly in ruins recently when the Housing Commission condemned it to demolition. The rescue and restoration were done in this case by the local council, Nunawading, which deserves the highest commendation.

The council has fitted it out with period furniture and opens it to public view at weekends.

Yet while these two significant steps in the cause of national historical preservation were being taken forward, simultaneously in three states three steps were being taken backwards.

In Sydney, Tresco House, of Elizabeth Bay, classified "highly significant" by the National Trust, was threatened by plans to demolish it and build a block of flats.

In South Australia, one of Australia's most charmingly unimpressive towns, Robe, was legally embattled as some citizens clashed with the council over plans to pull down colonial architecture which has managed somehow to last more than a century.

And in Victoria last week black smoke from a funeral pyre to one phase of Austral-American relations rose into the sky above South Yarra.

The trouble at Robe centres on the old Customs House, a

quaint little brick pavilion beside Lake Butler, dating back to Robe's great days as a port. It was built 102 years ago.

Last year the Robe Council, which had been using the building as a council chamber, decided to demolish it to build new offices on the site. Representatives of the South Australian branch of the National Trust went down from Adelaide to remonstrate with the council.

Perhaps this building was not an architectural masterpiece, they argued; maybe there are no great buildings in Robe. However, the combination of all the little century-old cottages, pubs and public buildings give the town an historic atmosphere that is unique in Australia.

On a corner near the Customs House facing the sea is a row of stone cottages known as the Ormerod Cottages. They were built about 1857 for professional people, and later used by the Governor's staff, but they had fallen into disrepair and the council ordered their demolition.

Action

Despite this, a few months ago they were bought by a keen member of the Adelaide National Trust with the intention of restoring them. The new owner asked the council what must be done to get the demolition order rescinded and was told in so many words that the order would stand whatever was done.

After much worry and work by the preservationists of Robe there are signs now that the council may be yielding and might even choose another site for its new building and leave the Customs House unmolesated.

But even now this is not certain. Anyway, what weird streak is there in our national character that makes such battles necessary? With empty lots galore and shabby nothing buildings positively begging to be bulldozed over, why are so many developers, public and private, drawn so often like hunters to prey on our oldest and most interesting buildings?

The funeral pyre in South Yarra, Melbourne, burnt in the front lawn of a house called Avoca Lodge, in Avoca Street, high on a fashionable hill much covered by flat builders. Avoca Lodge was a timber house classified B by the National Trust ("to be preserved").

It takes a page in Lady



Casey's book of 1953, Early Melbourne Architecture. It was, she related, designed by Andrew Hayward Newell, from Boston, an American merchant.

He brought it out on the brig Windimere in 1858, in sections. For many years last century, while it was still almost alone on this hill above the Yarra, the Stars and Stripes flew above its high gabled slate roof.

Carving

Until last week the house stood back from the street behind a luxuriant garden; two storeys of white-painted Gothic-like verandas and clapboards and delicately carved windows and gables.

Splintered up, the American cedar carvings and other timbers burnt well in the wrecker's fire as the house went under the axe. This was one of the quickest wrecking jobs on record. The building split into bits even more quickly than it had been put together from the prefabricated parts 107 years ago.

This delightful house surely deserved a better fate. Even if it was a bit too old for domestic service, one can imagine that it might have made an ideally situated and symbolic head-

quarters for the Australian-American Association or other society with ties to the U.S.

But suppose any such association were interested, how would they have known that the house was available until they saw the fire of its remains? This is the central problem of historical preservation — the lack of warning before the axe falls — and it is a key to the solution.

With notable exceptions, such as Nunawading, the task of preserving the historic relics of Australia is left to volunteers and amateurs. We are about the last country in the world to leave the problem at that level.

In the United Kingdom, of course, preservation is official government work. The Ancient Monuments Acts and provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act record buildings of special architectural or historic interest and protect them with all the Queen's men.

France, which was in 1840 the first country in Europe to protect historic buildings, still today has the most extensive legislation. In Belgium the Government acted first in 1831. In Holland the laws began in 1903, and the latest one of 1961 protects some 18,000 buildings.

In Scandinavian countries government protection began about 1920. Austria lists 3,000 privately occupied buildings for protection.

In communist countries the preservation is almost overdone: anything historic is likely to receive more money or maintenance than a new building gets for plumbing.

In Italy, as one might expect, historic buildings are of such interest to the whole of civilisation that the State has the right to acquire any building designated by the Minister of Education as a national monument.

In all these cases in the old world the pattern is similar. The government recognises its responsibility; it calls experts to draw up a list of important buildings, then it protects the listed buildings in various ways.

Money

The ways are generally characteristic of the country concerned. Most of them take some money, and this is not a quality likely to recommend any of them to Australian governments.

The solution to the problem which might be more applicable here is the comparatively

painless one adopted some years ago in California.

The Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board is a governmental instrumentally and a clever device which costs the Government virtually nothing. As in the European cases, the scheme operates on the basis of a list of historic monuments.

Public and private buildings, sculptures, even specific trees can be designated as monuments by the board. Its protection takes the form of delay.

No building or other thing on the list may be altered or replaced until twelve months after the intention to demolish has been announced. This means that interested people do not learn first of the intention to demolish by seeing the smoke rising from a wrecker's pile of split mantelpieces.

They see a statutory advertisement. Then they have a year's grace in which they can rally support, or collect donations, or find some person or society interested in buying and using the threatened building.

If they cannot raise the necessary support within a year, then the developer is free to bring in the wrecker. Fair enough.

Interest

The democratic implication is that the building really was not of sufficient general interest to warrant preservation.

In Australia, still the last continent, the lists of monuments are prepared by national trusts, but they are unofficial. There is no real government support for any of this sort of work.

The trusts in every State are private, voluntary groups fighting almost alone. The Federal Government grants tax deduction to their donations. That is all. Big deal!

Is there not one party, not a political group, not a single man in any Australian parliament, Federal or State, prepared to take now the move that must come eventually — though perhaps too late?

Is no one prepared to sponsor now a bill that will in some way, maybe on the Los Angeles model, bring our few remaining monuments under government protection, and cause the thoughtless powers of destruction to pause?