



The Mint Restoration

By Clive Lucas

One of the earliest battles fought by the National Trust, following its establishment in 1945, was to save the Mint building.

In March 1946, the Lord Mayor, Reginald Bartley, proclaimed that the Mint and the Barracks should be demolished, 'to make way for modern structures'. A deputation to the Premier, (Sir) William McKell, gave the young Trust little hope that the Mint would survive and on 2 July 1946 the Sydney Morning Herald reported that the building was doomed.

The building on which the Trust was focused was the building seen from Macquarie Street, the block built by Macquarie as the southern wing of the Rum Hospital. It had been built as a pair of semi-detached houses for the surgeons attached to Sydney Hospital, but since the foundation of the Sydney Branch of the Royal Mint in 1855, had served as offices (northern house) and residence for the Deputy Mint Master (southern house).

It is interesting that neither the Trust nor anyone else really took any interest

in the quite remarkable coining factory behind. This is the building which has, this year, been recognised by both the Sulman and Greenway Architectural Awards for its transformation into the headquarters of the Historic Houses Trust.

After the Mint closed in 1926, the factory was used by various government organisations: the GIO, the Housing Commission and from 1928 to 1965, in the northern half, the Ministerial Motor Depot. The Housing Commission built hideous fibro additions and occupied the premises from 1944 to 1957. After 1954 it was gradually pushed out by the construction of two District Courts in the southern half of the factory building.

Of course it was even more complex than this and there were many layers of government occupation. When the Motor Depot closed in 1965 the northern half was demolished. It was said to be in a ruinous state.

All this was going on while the National Trust continued to argue for the retention and proper use of the Rum Hospital building. The Trust featured the

Mint in its exhibition *No Time to Spare* in 1961 and further attention was drawn to the condition of the front building in architect Don Gazzard's *Outrage* exhibition in 1966.

Meanwhile at the back, the factory building was partially demolished and continued to have various violations until the 1980s.

The front building was restored in 1980-82 for a museum branch of the Powerhouse and later, in 1995, was refitted as a Gold Museum. But the rear factory building, still partially occupied by Law Courts, was seen as little more than somewhere for storage and to hide plant rooms for the museum's use. The Gold Museum failed and was closed in 1997. The fate of the building changed in 1998 with the transfer of the entire complex, the Rum Hospital building and factory, to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales for use as their headquarters.

In September 2001, **fjmt** (then Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp Architects) were appointed architects with



ourselves, Clive Lucas Stapleton & Partners, to carry out the heritage component of the project. At this stage the building was almost unrecognisable. The site of the northern wing was covered with a thicket of seeded olives (the site of the melting house, crushing room and rolling room). The engine room and coining factory were lined out with 1950s false walls and ceilings to provide courtrooms, judges' chambers and lavatories. The factory workshop had been converted to a plant room and staff lavatories as part of the 1980s museum fitout. A Housing Commission second storey fibro addition was still partially over the coining room. Only the two-storeyed Superintendent's office showed something of the site's extraordinary history.

As we are taught to do, we prepared measured drawings and a detailed physical analysis of the building and the Historic Houses Trust did exhaustive research into its history. This collected an extraordinary amount of visual

material, which all came together in a conservation and management plan.

It is true to say that understanding the strong geometry of the complex led to the result you see today.

Historical analysis revealed the strong balanced plan. The original design was prepared in England by (Sir) Edward Ward R E (1823-1890), who had been appointed 'Master of the Mint to be established in Sydney.' It was the first overseas branch of the Royal Mint and he was referred to as the Deputy Master.

In the manner of military engineering of the early Victorian period, Ward's scheme was entirely symmetrical about a large central courtyard. The Mint offices were across the front, the coining department across the back, the melting house on one side and the workshop on the other. The main office front was conceived in a smart Italian

palazzo form, complete with palisaded forecourt and balancing lodges.

Ward had been an official at the 1851 Great Exhibition and this no doubt put him in touch with prefabrication and the products of the early industrial age. Except for the stone for the walls, everything was to be sent prefabricated from England; cast iron columns, girders, trusses, corrugated iron, cast iron windows, cast iron flooring plates, slates, timber flooring, patent asphalt roofing etc.

Ward appointed civil engineer, Joseph Trickett as Clerk of Works to get the building built and he arrived, with his family, in Sydney in March 1854. Ward did not arrive until October. Trickett found that the allocated site in north Macquarie Street (behind the Treasury), now the site of the Intercontinental Hotel, was unsuitable and chose the present site, deciding to make use of the Rum Hospital building, then in use as military offices. Trickett's plans of April 1854 are labelled 'plans showing

OPPOSITE: The central courtyard centred on the two-storeyed Superintendent's Office. The new building is on the site of the northern range demolished in 1965. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Looking from the Auditorium across the courtyard; The entrance is between the new Auditorium and the original Superintendent's Office; The prefabricated ceiling of the Coining Room has been reconstructed to its original length, but in a modern way; The new building sits on the footprint of the original Melting House and Rolling Room. Photographs: John Gollings



proposed conversion of the Staff Offices into Mint Offices and the New Buildings for the manufactory etc’.

While the office block was given up, the complex otherwise was carried out very much as Ward had conceived it in England. The Sydney Mint was officially opened by Governor Sir William Denison on 14 May 1855. Denison, also a Royal Engineer, had taken great interest in the Mint. It had been built in extraordinarily short time.

In 2001, little of the prefabrication was apparent and the decision was taken to carefully strip the building out, to remove all the false linings, floors and ceilings.

This not only revealed many of the prefabricated elements sent from England 150 years before, but also the ghosts of rolling mills, presses, steam engines, boilers, drive shafts and all the panoply of the early industrial age. That such a place still existed in Sydney seemed extraordinary.

What survived was very, very precious.

It was clear the new building should fit on the footprint of the missing section and Ward’s formal courtyard should be

returned to its original proportions. Even the garden could be the same size as it had been. The entry to the complex would, as it always had been, be through the northern entrance to the Rum Hospital building. This, as it happened, provided a secondary axis where new and old joined and could become a logical entry to the factory building.

The most precious interior, the two-storeyed Superintendent’s Office, with its extraordinary intact iron structure, surviving ‘strong hold for coin’ and fire proof ceiling would become the most public part of the complex, the library. The beautiful trussed ceiling of the coining room and engine house would be left as found, as would all the stone walls, left to tell their tale for those with the knowledge to read them. Nothing of the original building was demolished: its torn walls, its mutilations, the apertures cut by all those Government uses were left as found, even the paint finishes. The new would lightly meet the old and battered. This **fjmt** achieved with great aplomb.

In the courtyard, all the apertures in the stone walls, were restored to their original size, but the layerings of joinery were left and modern joinery

fitted to the restored openings. The strong geometry of Ward and Trickett and indeed the whole early Victorian spirit of neo classical Royal Engineers’ buildings, was revealed. This is the sort of thing sappers built throughout the British Empire. Removal of the fibro addition allowed the roof of the coining room to be reconstructed to its original length, but in a modern way.

Although, half of it is now a beautiful modern building, the strong geometry of this Royal Engineering complex has survived with its amazing prefabricated structure intact. It is perhaps the only such early industrial monument surviving in the Antipodes.

The Mint as headquarters of the Historic Houses Trust was opened by the then Premier of New South Wales, the Hon R J Carr MP on 25 October 2004.

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This is the seventh time the firm has won the RAIA Greenway Award for Conservation.

FROM LEFT: The courtyard wall of the Auditorium opens up to provide a verandah; The wonderful early industrial interior of the Superintendent’s Office is now the Caroline Simpson Library.