

"Captain Cook's Cottage" An Experiment in Modern Museology¹



Captain Cook's Cottage, 1939, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Purchasing the Cottage

In June 1933, Russell Grimwade read in the *Melbourne Herald* that a cottage to which 'Captain Cook always went in the intervals between his voyages to the South Seas,'² was up for sale at Great Ayton, Middlesbrough, in England. Grimwade, a Melbourne businessman, scientist and cultural connoisseur,³ had the question of Australia's historical heroes at the front of his mind. Over the next two years, Melbourne and Victoria would celebrate their founding centenaries, and Grimwade, a member of the Executive of the Centenary Celebrations Council and Chairman of its Historical Committee, had a major role in shaping the celebrations. Grimwade informed the Premier of Victoria, Sir Stanley Argyle, of his interest in the Cottage; the Premier, in turn, notified Richard Linton, Victoria's Agent-General in London, who then inquired about it on Grimwade's behalf.

The auctioneers advertised the Cottage as 'renowned as the home of Captain Cook's early days,' and that this offered the chance to buy 'history'.⁴ The auction flyer in Russell Grimwade's files contains hand-written annotations on the back-most probably by Richard

Linton—that the value of the Cottage from an historical point-of-view was 'problematical'. Notwithstanding, two weeks after its notice of sale, Russell Grimwade purchased the Cottage for Victoria.

Was Australia 'Sold a Pup'?

With its sale, Great Ayton locals became aggravated that the Cottage was to be removed to Australia. The local Parish Council issued a statement that questioned the Cottage's authenticity:

'The weight of evidence that Captain Cook lived at this cottage seems to be so small that it is doubtful whether he ever visited the cottage during his parents' residence there.'

James Cook and his parents moved from Marton to Great Ayton in 1736, when Cook was eight years old. The Cottage was most probably built in 1755. This is deduced from the date etched in the stone entrance, along with the initials 'G,' 'J' and 'C,' presumed to represent the initials of the first names of Grace and James Cook, James Cook's parents.⁵ 1755 was also the year that the 27 year-old James Cook enlisted in the navy, and therein

lies the problem. It was not (and is not) clear where the Cooks lived in Great Ayton between 1736 and 1755.

The doubt about the Cottage created a public furore in England and Australia. The Agent-General for Victoria, who defended the claims in England, located three documents to prove that Cook had at least visited the Cottage during his naval leave. The documents included a copy of a letter from Cook requesting leave to visit his sick father, Cook's letter in Whitby Museum that gave details of his journeyings during his leave, and from which it was thought reasonable to assume he stayed at the Cottage, and quotes from a catalogue produced during the bicentenary of Cook's birth in 1928, which stated that he had visited his sick father at Great Ayton. The documents, however, failed to prove absolutely that James Cook had stepped inside the Cottage.

Eventually, the debate died down, at which point Grimwade privately expressed his tiredness with the controversy.⁶ Grimwade, and indeed other ardent imperialists involved in the project, saw themselves carrying out a larger project of imperial sentiment. Cook and the Cottage became metaphors for imperial bonds rather than literal narratives, so the accuracy of Cook's physical connections with the Cottage mattered less, especially as it was a public success anyhow. Grimwade wrote to a well-wisher:

'It was to introduce some solid reminder of the old world to this young country that first stimulated me to bring out the Cottage and to endeavour to foster national traditions that must necessarily be absent in so young a country as our own.' Grimwade – a man of 56 with very strong family links with England⁷ – sensed the tenuousness of traditional

imperial links.⁸ The purchase of the Cottage was on the cusp of substantial shifts from traditional imperial to newer allegiances. For some the Cottage was, ultimately, a shrine⁹ to Australia's British lineage. Such enshrinement required an epic, not necessarily encumbered by facts. Seven years after the opening of the Cottage the Historical Society of Victoria suggested that a series of explanatory notes be erected around the Cottage. Even though a member of the Society himself, Grimwade dismissed the idea as 'distracting and prosaic.'

'In Cook's time': Re-constructing and filling the Cottage

Notwithstanding, Grimwade remained sensitive to the claims of the Cottage's authenticity, and he used other methods to authenticate it. Located in the Fitzroy Gardens in inner Melbourne, the Cottage was re-constructed 'exactly as it stood when it was first occupied by Captain Cook's parents in 1755, and doubtless as it existed when Capt. Cook himself visited them.' Later additions were taken away. Each brick was separated and numbered, shipped to Melbourne in 253 separate cases, and re-built with accuracy 'to the last detail'. Even the slight lean of the roof was retained. The ivy attached to the Cottage was uprooted, transported to Australia and replanted on the site. All materials needed to re-construct the Cottage in Melbourne were imported from England.

A few years after the Cottage was re-established, Grimwade suggested that the City of Melbourne Parks and Gardens Committee, which cared for the Cottage, had 'mutilated' it by adding a wall which 'callously disregarded [its] antiquarian value.' 'I spared neither pains nor expense to rebuild the Cottage here with complete historical accuracy,' Grimwade wrote to the Premier, at which point he (temporarily) dissociated himself from it.

The things inside it were to properly represent 'Cook's time'. A York Antique dealer was commissioned to select 'various pieces of furniture of the correct period', defined as between 1700 and 1750. A table, panel back seat, desk, six spindle chairs, two arm chairs and a small dresser and back were procured for the Cottage, while the antique dealer also 'kindly included a gift...of a child's chair of the period'. These objects had no association with Cook, but were seen as important to the integrity of the initiative.

Winning 'Popular Fancy': Public Consumption of the Cottage

Grimwade wrote to his colleague that the Cottage 'seems to have won popular fancy judging by the hundreds of letters and expressions that have come my way'. In 1936 it was estimated that the Cottage received 600 visitors per day. Why was the Cottage successful? Perhaps the public's desire to believe in Cook's association with the Cottage

was stronger than their concern about the 'authenticity' of the claims. They may have also patronised the Cottage for reasons of curiosity, nostalgia, sentiment and aesthetics, reflecting a generalised modern public relationship with the past per se.¹⁰

The Cottage may have let them into a fascinating space 'about the social history of British working-class village life in the second half of the eighteenth century,'¹¹ even though its portrayal of this scenario was also questionable. Its success was probably due to all these reasons, rather than the exact realisation of the history-makers' ideals in the public's patronage of the Cottage.

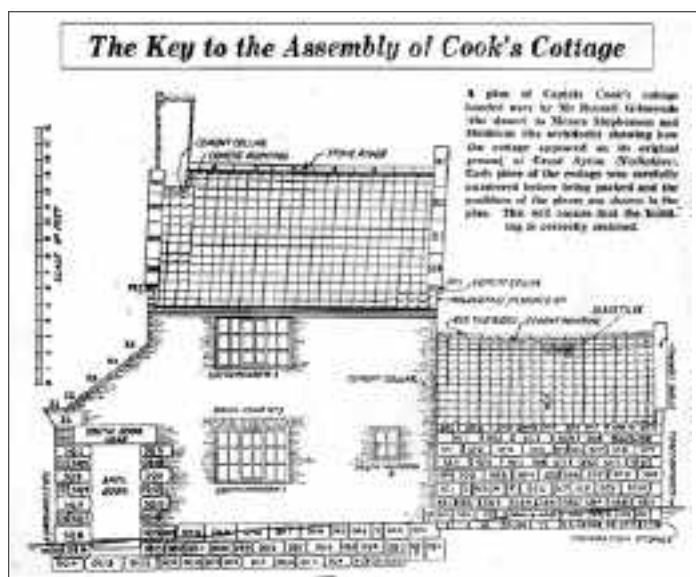
Conclusion

In pursuing the Cottage project, Russell Grimwade was attempting to redress generational and political concerns he held for his own times. Grimwade desired a return to a simpler relationship between social memory and history, where the juncture between sentiment and fact was less problematic and less subject to modern demands for and methodologies of proof. He wanted history to return to epic, seamless nation-making narrative—a resurrection of history's 'romance'-of which Cook had long been imperial history-makers' chief subject. The fact that various elements of the Cottage project came up for question merely confirmed for Grimwade the troubling times he lived in.

The Cottage's backers found the modern demands of public history-making burdensome to their monumental intentions, and felt their way in response to the modern history-making conventions implied in the Cottage's form. They deployed antiquarian methodologies—the 'science' of dating, exact reconstruction and a purist approach to the use of materials, and its establishment in a floral setting of English provenance—to place the Cottage's 'accuracy' and 'authenticity' beyond dispute, foretelling of the hallmarks of the modern heritage movement that emerged in Australia after WWII.

— Maryanne McCubbin, Head, Strategic Collection & Information Management, Museum Victoria

This article is adapted from a presentation delivered at the Museums Australia National conference in Adelaide on 21 March 2002



The Key to the Assembly of Captain Cook's Cottage, 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

¹ The author's interpretation of elements of the Cottage project covered in this article has been especially influenced by the writings of Graeme Davison, and particularly his article, 'The Use and Abuse of Australian History' in Making the Bicentenary, A special issue of Australian Historical Studies, Susan Janson and Stuart Macintyre, Editors. Vol.23, No. 91., October 1988. passim.

² National Trust of Australia, Victorian Branch, Cooks' Cottage: Melbourne. Melbourne: National Trust of Australia, Victorian Branch, c.1979. p.27.

³ Poynter, John, entry on the Grimwade family in Australian Dictionary of Biography, Bede Nairn, Geoffrey Serle and Christopher Cuneen, General Editors. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, Volume 9, 1983. pp.126-28.

⁴ All references to primary material throughout this article are derived from the following archival collection: The University of Melbourne Archives, Grimwade Papers, Third Accession, Cook's Cottage Papers. More specific citation details for each direct reference are available from the author.

⁵ National Trust of Australia, Victorian Branch, op.cit. p.4.

⁶ In the late 1970s, the National Trust made a conscious decision to promote the Cottage as Cooks' Cottage, with the apostrophe placed after the 's', rather than Captain Cook's Cottage.

⁷ Poynter, John, loc.cit. pp.126-28.

⁸ See, for example Thomas, Julian, 'Heroic History and Public Spectacle: Sydney 1938'. PhD, ANU, October 1991. esp. pp.59,67-73. He argues that the economic depression in particular had triggered intense questioning of imperial links, which were all but shattered during World War Two; and Griffiths, Tom, Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia. Melbourne: Cambridge Press, 1996. pp.151-7. He argues that extreme forms of nationalism reached their peak in the 1930s, with the imperial element of such nationalism becoming increasingly problematical.

⁹ Davison, Graeme, 'What Makes a Building Historic?' in A Heritage Handbook, Graeme Davison and Chris McConville, Editors. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991. pp.69-71.

¹⁰ Lowenthal, David, The Past is a Foreign Country. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. esp. pp.35-124.

¹¹ Walden, Imara, 'Cook's Cottage: National Treasure or Cultural Oddity' in Public History Review, Vol.3, 1994, p.228.

COSTUME SIG: A binding passion

The Costume SIG was established after Chris Cranston (Barry) ran a survey in 1997 seeking to compile a database of costume collections in Victoria. The results indicated that there were pockets of excellent collections scattered around the state with dedicated people working in isolation, both geographically and professionally. What they had in common was a passion for costume, and it seemed a 'good cause' to try and put them in touch with each other so they could share their enjoyment, experience and expertise.

Additionally, the creation of a professional body was seen as a potential means of lobbying to raise the profile of costume both within and outside the museum industry. For example, the National Museum of Australia was considering selling off its collection and the Costume SIG may have been able to petition against such an outcome. The group also sought to work towards the establishment of a Costume Museum in Victoria.

The SIG was ratified in 1998 and commenced operating with the objectives of: promoting the importance and an understanding of costume; providing a

network for both city and country members to discuss issues relating to collection theory and practice, and establishing a database to identify costume collections.

Five years on

Since the group's launch, we have aimed to meet our objectives through a regular newsletter, seminars, collection visits and by building closer relationships with industry bodies. As the number of costume collections housed within Australian museums is relatively small, very few members have the opportunity to solely curate costume collections and our membership is drawn from a broader base of curators, researchers, private collectors, educational institutions, conservators and historians.

This broad-based membership encourages networking and facilitates open dialogue between members - which is one of the SIG's greatest strengths. The museum industry is able to gain information about and access to important collections and other activities that they may not otherwise be aware of, whilst other groups and individuals are exposed to and can access best practice in relation to all aspects of costume collections.

In the last year, the SIG's growth has been impeded somewhat by the mechanics of servicing a mixed group within the MA structure and a low ebb was reached when frustrations sent the group to a vote as to whether to stay with MA.

It is a passion for costume that binds the SIG together however and the experience has made us realise how important it is not to lose sight of the fundamental tenets of our existence. SIGs, like all organisations, must evolve and we are currently re-evaluating our role and services and looking for new ways in which to meet our objectives and the expectations of our membership.

Chris Cranston (Founding Convenor), Annette Shiell (Current Convenor)



'History Under the Hammer,' 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives