

Challenges and surprises in restoring the 1823 Collits' Inn Christine Stewart

Christine Stewart gave us a fascinating account of the historical background of Pierce Collits and the Inn he constructed in 1823 at Hartley Vale, at the base of the precipitous and dangerous Cox's Pass, the first road built in 1815 down the western side of the Blue Mountains.

Her extensive research concluded that Pierce Collits was a Huguenot from France although he had said he was born in Ireland. He came to London, married Mary Hardwick, but was convicted of theft and transported in 1801 to NSW. He was permitted to work as his wife's servant on the 70 acres granted to her on the Nepean River. He became a responsible citizen: Chief of Nepean, Inspector of Cattle and served on juries. In 1821 he took cattle west of the mountains, then wrote to Governor Macquarie saying he had found a site for an inn and was granted 200 acres to build it at Hartley Vale.

As Cox's Pass was so dangerous, Lawson's Long Alley was built in 1824 to the Inn providing an easier route down Mt York for horses and bullock drays. Lockyer's Pass was begun but never completed. Collits' Inn was very successful in the early years, enabling Pierce to set up all his children in inns or farms of their own. It was used as a post office from 1830 to 1833. However in 1832, Victoria Pass opened providing the relatively easier route (still in use by the highway today) taking all the traffic to Bathurst, bypassing the Inn, which lost its core trade of serving the travellers. Pierce was granted 320 acres as compensation, including a 3 acre inn site below Mt. Victoria and the rest where the town of Canowindra is now built. After that, Collits Inn closed trading and became Mt. York Farm.

The farm was sold out of the Collits family in 1875. Various owners then took it over, but spurred by publicity from the popular operetta of the same name, Collits Inn had a renaissance as a popular guest house for family holidays. Michael Baume attended the meeting, telling us that he had family holidays there in the early 1940s.

The operetta "Collits Inn" was based on a story of the Collits youngest daughter falling in love with a bushranger, who was shot by the Captain of the Guard, who also loved her. The operetta premiered to great acclaim in 1933 in Melbourne with Gladys Moncrieff in the leading role, moving to Sydney in 1934 where it ran for three months.

In 1975, Russell Stewart's mother bought a property on land behind the Inn, as a retreat for her work as an artist. The Stewarts spent many holidays there, hearing stories about the old inn. They had no interest in buying it as it was very derelict. The reason they did buy it 23 years later was concern their entry road informally crossed the Inn's land. Their intention was to split off some land to secure the road access, make basic improvements to the inn and resell it on the smaller land holding. However, unbeknownst to them, a heritage order had been placed on the Inn, so nothing could be done to the buildings without heritage architect involvement and Heritage Office approval. A simple repaint was no longer possible.

Christine then realised the Inn was an important historical building that should be preserved and restored. A heritage architect was engaged, who encouraged her to write the Conservation Management Plan herself. She described the immense challenges and rewards in undertaking the project, and some of the fascinating and unusual surprises they found during the restoration, as described by some spectacular photos. Surprises included finding the foundations of a cottage of Pierce's son William on the property, as well as details of the murder on Victoria Pass of William's wife (the subject of a Henry Lawson poem)

After opening on Australia Day 2002, a French chef set up a gourmet restaurant there, winning many fine dining accolades, whilst Christine and Russell were at the same time winning awards for the restoration

After the thrill of seeing its renaissance, they sold the Inn in 2007. Recently at the urging of a publisher friend, she wrote and published a book about its history and her experience with its restoration, "Collits' Inn: Uncovering the Past". This superbly presented book covers numerous aspects which time did not permit inclusion in the presentation. Almost 200 illustrations and 40 chapters combine to document the

remarkable history of the Inn and the local area. Please visit the website www.collitsinnbook.com to find local stockists or buy direct from Christine through the website

On behalf of members, Geoff McWilliam thanked Christine for such a fascinating presentation, and praised her achievement in restoring this special part of the early colony's architectural heritage.

A copy of the powerpoint presentation can be obtained by emailing Peter James

PJ