

# History and Heritage

## The Use of Historical Context and Themes in Heritage Assessment

.....

### INTRODUCTION

Heritage items, which include landscapes, buildings, structures, relics, places and other works, are valuable cultural resources that are not renewable and are becoming increasingly scarce. They inspire present and future generations and therefore need careful consideration by owners, managers and the community.

An awareness of the importance and benefits of sound heritage conservation practice has grown in recent times because of the community's concern about the loss of our heritage.

An analysis of history, including the very recent past, is central to heritage assessment and management. The NSW Heritage Management System, outlined in the NSW Heritage Manual, requires the historical context of an item to be investigated as a first step — so that its heritage significance can be understood, logically analysed and clearly stated.

### WHAT IS HISTORICAL CONTEXT?

A heritage item needs to be considered in the context of the history and historical geography of the area surrounding it. When identifying the heritage items of a given area, a purely visual approach is inadequate. It is important to understand the *underlying* historical influences which have shaped and continue to shape the area.



## HISTORY AND HERITAGE



**Sydney's Macquarie Lighthouse.** A well known landmark located close to the entry to Sydney Harbour, it was designed by colonial architect James Barnet in 1883 as a modified copy of Francis Greenway's 1816 lighthouse. The original lighthouse, and thereby Barnet's copy, are superb examples of colonial design and with its coastal setting it has strong visual appeal. The Barnet lighthouse is also of state significance historically, socially and for technical/research reasons. Historically, it is a now rare example of the critical importance of shipping to the early colony of Sydney.

**State historical themes:** convict, transport and government and administration.

**Local historical themes:** The city portal.

### WHEN IS HISTORY INVESTIGATED?

There are four main situations when history is investigated in relation to heritage assessment:

- as part of a heritage study
- when preparing a conservation management plan
- when nominating an item for heritage listing
- for a development or building proposal which effects a heritage item.

Historical context reports and 'historical themes' (explained below) usually form part of a heritage study of a locality or region. When more detailed studies are done of an item (or group of items) such as in a conservation management plan, the history of the item forms a major part of the document, providing a framework to analyse its significance.

It is often not possible to undertake detailed historical research for the assessment of an item subject to a nomination or to development or building application, particularly if they have not been previously identified by any study. In such cases, state historical themes, along with local and regional themes identified in heritage studies, help to place the item historically.

### WHAT ARE HISTORICAL THEMES?

An historical theme is a way of describing a major force or process which has contributed to our history. For example, *migration* is a state historical theme which helps researchers to focus on the impact of the waves of settlers from other states and countries who have come to NSW during the last two hundred years.

Historical themes provide a context within which the heritage significance of an item can be understood, assessed and compared. Themes help to explain why an item exists, how it was changed and how it relates to other items linked by the theme. As a theme can unite a variety of actions, events, functions, people and dates, it helps to prevent any concentration on a particular type of item, period or event of history during the investigation process of a local or regional heritage study. Historical themes are identified when a thematic history is prepared.



A theme could be specific to a local area or a region; or it could reflect a function. Themes that commonly occur in the history of NSW are listed on page 6. Not all of these themes are relevant throughout the State, but they are a useful checklist that can help in developing local histories and local themes.

The identification of historical themes is an ongoing process. The historian begins with questions about what happened, then searches for historical evidence to answer them. Additional or unexpected evidence is usually uncovered in this process, which can, in turn, lead to new theories and questions. The review of historical context is an important part of ongoing heritage assessment.

### HOW DO LOCAL THEMES RELATE TO REGIONAL OR STATE THEMES?

In many cases the themes identified in specific historical context reports will parallel the state themes. Local and/or regional themes should be cross-referenced to state themes wherever possible, as this will assist both state-wide comparative analysis and the assessment of individual items.

In using themes to assess individual items it is useful to identify both local or regional themes applying to the item and the broader state theme to which the local or regional theme relates. For example, an inner western Sydney railway station may be considered within the local study area theme 'Sydney Railway Company', which is itself related to the state theme of *transport*. Identifying both themes in an assessment can be helpful for future comparative studies. The same technique can be used in relating regional area themes to state themes.

Local themes will not necessarily fit neatly into the state thematic framework, and themes may overlap. A useful way to deal with this is to include a cross-referenced schedule of state, regional and local themes in the historical context report.

Relating local and/or regional themes to state themes is important in helping to work out the relative importance of the historical forces, processes, events and issues within the area being considered.



**Soldiers and miners memorial cemetery, Mount Kembla.** *In addition to its social significance at a local level, the cemetery is of historical, aesthetic and technical/research value. It is typical of rural burial grounds generally, featuring ordered rows of late nineteenth and twentieth century monuments. It is a comprehensive, social document of the local community, showing evidence of genealogy, history and changes in taste and style. The cemetery also provides graphic evidence of the social impact of the 1901 Mount Kembla mine disaster, in which 96 miners lost their lives. Almost the entire male population of the township was wiped out overnight. The sad and poignant verses and the grouping of family memorials, document the significance of the disaster and its effect on the community. Today, the place is highly regarded, and is a focus for community interest.*

**State historical themes:** *mining, death and events.*

**Local historical themes:** *coal mining, community spirit.*

*Photo: courtesy National Trust.*



## HISTORY AND HERITAGE

### HOW ARE HISTORICAL CONTEXT REPORTS AND THEMES USED?

An historical context report identifies and explains the major factors and processes, expressed as historical themes, that have influenced the history of an area. The primary objective of a report is to provide a framework to investigate and identify heritage items. It is not intended to be a detailed account of all aspects of the history of an area, nor to replace histories designed to serve other purposes.

An historical context report, if used in combination with information about the physical evidence of a place, can suggest areas requiring more detailed historical research. The use of major themes can draw attention to gaps in existing histories which could lead to an incomplete assessment, study, register or list.

Themes guide judgements about what types of heritage items might exist on a site or in an area, and what expert assistance might be required to assess their heritage significance. For example, if *goldmining* has played an important part in an area's history and is identified as a theme, field surveys ought to be done to find any physical evidence of that activity. It might also be necessary to engage specialist engineers and archaeologists experienced in identifying and assessing these types of sites.

### HOW ARE HISTORICAL THEMES USED TO ASSESS SIGNIFICANCE?

The historical significance of an item can be assessed by checking whether it physically demonstrates any of the historical themes which shaped the area in which the item is located. The themes can be used to consider how the item demonstrates or achieves other heritage values such as technical excellence or educational potential. The themes may give clues as to why a community may hold an item in high esteem. Using historical themes in this way can be particularly important for large survey and assessment projects, where there may be insufficient resources to allow detailed research for each item.

To consider an item in its historical context, it is important to identify the links between information known from historical sources such as documents, and physical evidence identified in the field.

### WHEN IS AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT REPORT PREPARED?

An historical context report is usually prepared as the first part of a more extensive significance assessment process — particularly as the first stage of a heritage study prepared for a local council or other agency. Heritage studies investigate and assess the heritage resources of an area or agency and make recommendations on how they can be managed. As well as producing an inventory of



**Tenterfield School of Arts** has historical value at a state level (and other significance values at other levels). The building is famous as the venue for Sir Henry Parkes' 'Tenterfield Oration' in 1889. This speech called for the Federation of the Australian States and was a test of national feeling at the time. It was built in the last century as a community facility. In its prominent location, it makes a major contribution to the streetscape of the town. Two extensions were added early this century. The original building is now the Henry Parkes Memorial Library and is operated by the National Trust of Australia (NSW).

**State historical themes:** government and administration, social institutions, events, persons.

**Local historical themes:** a town develops, community support, tourism.  
Photo: courtesy National Trust.



## HISTORY AND HERITAGE

significant items, a heritage study is a tool to use in the promotion of community or corporate identity through an understanding of our cultural history.

An historical context report can be prepared for a large or small area, or for particular types of items, such as maritime or railway heritage. For example, it can be used when preparing a register of heritage items owned by a government agency, setting out the historical development of the agency and the service it provides. A report can also provide background comparative data for the assessment of just one item.

Local themes identified in local historical context reports need to relate to the regional and state themes used for the NSW Heritage Database. As local themes are developed from analysis and research confined to a local area, they are usually more precise and specific in character than regional and state themes, which are necessarily broad in scope.

An historical context analysis ought to be undertaken for *any* type or number of heritage items, including a single item or site which is the subject of a conservation management plan. Without historical background it will not be possible to place an item in its larger cultural and geographic context; this will, in turn, inhibit an assessment of its significance.

### WHAT ARE THE HISTORICAL THEMES FOR NSW?

Thirty-five themes have been adopted for use with the NSW heritage management system and are listed on page 6. They provide the context needed to be able to assess whether an item is of State heritage significance. They also serve as a useful checklist when preparing local historical context reports.

The themes summarise the historical framework for NSW, but they do not describe physical evidence or items in the study area. For example, the theme of *housing* refers to a process of land subdivision and building, not to the fact that an area contains houses. Residences that are part of a specific housing venture (such as the advent of public housing or housing estates) would fall within this theme; individual residences that are not part of such processes, would not.

As the themes have been prepared to help us understand the context of individual items, they are deliberately general. The use of single words rather than descriptive phrases allows for flexible interpretation of each theme. For example, the theme of *exploration* refers to any form of exploration, from the early expeditions of Hume and Hovell to more recent treks in wilderness areas.

The state themes are not intended to be prescriptive or to influence an historical context report prepared for a more specific or local purpose. The structure of an historical context report and the themes it produces should emerge from the research undertaken of the area in question.

Many heritage items relate to more than one theme. This is not surprising, as it reflects the interactive way our society has developed. In many instance the more themes the item relates to, the more reasons for its significance. A grandstand, for example, may be considered under *education* because it belongs to a school, or *religion* because it is a church school. It obviously has *sporting* significance, but it may be a war memorial (*defence*) or the site may be described in a memorable poem or film (*cultural site*). It may also be the only remaining benefaction of an important *commercial* or *industrial* enterprise.

### State and National Historical Themes

The state historical themes for NSW are not intended to be exhaustive. Your analysis might identify further themes. However, you need to justify the use of any additional themes.

Remember that the state historical themes are deliberately broad. Heritage studies of particular areas or types of items will include historical context reports that identify more detailed local and/or regional themes.

National themes are currently being developed by the Australian Heritage Commission. These are also listed on page 6.



## HISTORY AND HERITAGE

### HISTORICAL THEMES RELEVANT TO NEW SOUTH WALES

#### STATE HISTORICAL THEMES

1. Aboriginal contact: may include sites of conflict, resistance, interaction
2. Convict
3. Exploration
4. Pastoralism
5. Agriculture
6. Land tenure — Aboriginal and European: may include subdivisions, fences, survey marks etc.
7. Mining: may include gold, coal, tin, gemstones, sand, shale, quarries etc.
8. Fishing: includes whaling
9. Environment — natural or modified and shaped: may include Aboriginal and European features, clearing, timber-getting, soil conservation, national parks, gardens, special plantings, preservation of open space
10. Townships: may include present, former or aborted settlements, streetscapes
11. Migration
12. Ethnic influences
13. Transport: includes road, rail, water, air
14. Communication: includes printing, postal to modern media
15. Utilities: e.g. water, sewerage, gas, electricity
16. Industry
17. Labour: includes work practices and organised labour
18. Commerce: includes banking, retailing
19. Technology
20. Science
21. Government and administration: includes maladministration
22. Law and order: includes protest
23. Defence: may include Aboriginal battle sites, war memorials
24. Housing
25. Social institutions: e.g. CWA, masonic, progress halls, schools of art
26. Cultural sites: from low to high culture; significant for the creation or performance of art, music, literature, drama, film etc; local symbols
27. Leisure: includes tourism, resorts
28. Sport: includes sporting facilities, equipment, trophies
29. Health: includes hospitals, maternity hospitals
30. Welfare: e.g. charitable and self-help institutions
31. Religion: e.g. churches, convents, manses, mosques
32. Education: includes formal and informal, schools, mechanics institutes, secondary and tertiary educational institutions
33. Death: e.g. cemeteries, undertakers
34. Events: may include monuments, sites of special significance and social value
35. Persons: may include individuals, families, dynasties, birthplace, place of residence, women's sites.

#### DRAFT NATIONAL HISTORICAL THEMES

National themes should be identified using the following list compiled by the Australian Heritage Commission:

1. Tracing the evolution of a continent's special environments
2. Peopling the continent
3. Developing local, regional and national economies
4. Building settlements, towns and cities
5. Working
6. Educating
7. Governing
8. Developing cultural institutions and ways of life
9. Marking the phases of life.





### WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

Heritage Office & Department of Urban Affairs and Planning 1996, **Regional Histories**, HO/DUAP, Sydney. A companion document to the NSW Heritage Manual.

Heritage Office & Department of Urban Affairs and Planning 1996, **Heritage Studies, NSW Heritage Manual**, HO/DUAP, Sydney. Provides information on the heritage study process and the preparation of thematic histories.

Heritage Office & Department of Urban Affairs and Planning 1996, **Investigating Heritage, NSW Heritage Manual**, HO/DUAP, Sydney.



**Yerranderie** is a settlement area and mining landscape outside Sydney which is of regional research and educational potential, together with having historical and aesthetic values. It was first developed in the 1870s and at its peak early this century the population reached 2000. Lead, gold and other minerals were produced. Today, the site comprises several modes of settlement marked by buildings, associated features such as an historic cemetery, an extensive scarred landscape and network of mines, some complete with machinery and other features. The mine suffered setbacks during the First World War and eventually closed during the Depression in the 1930s. The main township itself also declined and was abandoned after being isolated by the flooding of Warragamba Dam in 1962.

**State historical themes:** mining, land tenure, labour, township.

**Local historical themes:** metal mining, expansion and settlement, decline.

Photo: courtesy National Trust.

