INTRODUCTION
This guideline explains the importance of historical research and analysis in assessing the heritage significance of an item. It is written primarily for those new to the process and explains where to start, and who to contact for help.

WHY IS HISTORY IMPORTANT IN INVESTIGATING HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE?
Heritage comprises those things which we value and want to pass from one generation to the next — our inheritance. Knowing the historical background of a heritage item and seeing it in context helps to explain why it is significant. The analysis of history, which includes very recent history, forms the core of any heritage assessment process. The NSW Heritage Management System, outlined in the NSW Heritage Manual, requires that an historical context report be done in order to assess an item and state its significance.

Assessment of heritage significance is multi-disciplinary. It includes an investigation of history, geography, community esteem and aesthetic quality, as well as research and educational potential. Although ‘heritage’ is often associated with the finest of our architectural heritage — the handsome building produced from wealth, the grand buildings of church and state — this view emphasises physical values. However, some of these items may not be as historically significant as, for example, workers’ housing or a factory retaining a traditional manufacturing process. Consideration of historical context is therefore essential for a balanced view.
WHAT IS HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE?
Historical significance is popularly considered in terms of age — the older an item or event, the more ‘historic’ it is; or fame — its association with a well-known person or event. However, historians consider that an emphasis on age alone denies the continuity of history, and the place of the present or recent past within this; while a concentration on items associated with famous persons, places or events narrows our view of what constitutes history.

It is important for an analysis of significance that a heritage item ‘documents’ its history. If documents are understood to be sources of information, then they include not only those traditionally relied on (for example, archives and photographs) but also buildings, works, relics and places that:

• show significant evidence of human occupation or activity
• are associated with a significant activity, event, historical phase or person
• maintain or show the continuity of a historical process or activity.

To the trained eye, a building can reveal as much about historical significance as a set of letters or diaries. These different types of evidence complement each other, and it is through historical research that this information is brought together for a more accurate impression. To be considered historically significant, a heritage item needs to inform us in an exceptional way about its time and place.

Kimbell’s Kitchen Bakery, Wellington has been operated by the present owners since 1971 when it was sold by the Kimbell family. The two-storey veranda was removed in 1960. Photographs obtained from the Kimbell family, the Wellington Museum and Historical Society were copied and enlarged to show the detailing and provided the information needed for its restoration. Photos: E. & F Ogdon.
WHAT IS INVOLVED IN RESEARCHING HISTORY AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE?

Historical research aims to find out the ‘facts’ about an item or event — a fundamental though often neglected requirement for identifying and interpreting heritage. Analysing these facts is the work of a professional historian. This level of analysis is needed to fully understand and communicate historical significance, and would be done in a heritage study or for a conservation management plan. To get in touch with a professional historian, and for further advice, see Contacts, page 4.

If analysis and interpretation is not required, then there is basic research you can do yourself. Be aware that information can be misleading, or wrong, and that evidence may be available in sources which are not immediately obvious — for example, primary sources (these are original documents such as letters and maps). These tend to be more reliable than secondary sources, which are someone else’s interpretation of events.

WHERE IS A GOOD PLACE TO START?

There are some excellent guides on researching the history of heritage items, see Further Information, page 7.

Primary Sources

Consider visiting the local history section of your local library. Many libraries have well-established systems for researching the history of a property using maps and council rate assessment books, and have on microfilm Sands Sydney Directories from 1858 to 1933 — a fundamental reference for the older areas of Sydney. A useful guide to council records is Local Government...Local History: A Guide to NSW Local Government Minute Books and Rate Records by J. Hughes.

There are also specialised libraries and archives in government departments such as State Rail, Sydney Water and Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, as well as in other types of organisations.

Secondary Sources

Both local and specialised libraries are good sources of specialised (for example, company) histories. Such histories may be in the form of books, pamphlets or magazines. Though they may contain inaccuracies, these secondary sources are useful in establishing a broad picture and might contain information on the item you are researching.

Blackett’s design for the University of Sydney was modelled on the quadrangle precincts of Oxford and Cambridge. This 1871 photograph shows the completed main building from Victoria Park. While the university’s archive has an extensive collection showing the construction of the building, the main plans have been lost. Photo: University of Sydney Archives.

Major Australian history libraries are the Mitchell Library, part of the State Library of NSW, and the Royal Australian Historical Society (RAHS) library, both of which are in Sydney. The RAHS has, on computer, a local history and heritage bibliography for the whole of NSW.

Current and previous owners of a heritage item as well as other members of the local community can be valuable (though not necessarily accurate) sources of information.

For a more detailed introduction to historical research sources see Regional Histories, produced by the Heritage Office and Department of Urban Affairs and Planning.
INVESTIGATING HISTORY

Drawing: Albury town perspective, 1881. Documents like this help historians and heritage consultants to map successive stages in the development of a city.

CONTACTS

Archives Office of NSW
2 Globe Street, The Rocks (02) 9237 0254. Contains the official historical records of the State. Many of these records (which include documents, maps and photographs) help to identify the history of specific sites.

Australian Archives
Level 17, 477 Pitt Street, Sydney (02) 9201 3100. Holds Commonwealth Government records relating to NSW.

Department of Land and Water Conservation
23–33 Bridge Street, Sydney (02) 9228 6415. The department holds and sells copies of current and archival maps.

Department of Urban Affairs and Planning
Governor Macquarie Tower, 1 Farrer Place, Sydney (02) 9391 2000. The department’s library contains many studies of sites and regions, local histories and planning information. The department also has an information centre where copies of the Heritage Office’s publications can be obtained.

Heritage Office
The office, established 1 July 1996, is currently located at Governor Macquarie Tower, 1 Farrer Place, Sydney. (02) 9391 2115. It intends to relocate to Parramatta at the end of 1996. The Heritage Office maintains lists of heritage consultants, including historians.

Historic Houses Trust
Lyndhurst Conservation Resource Centre, ‘Lyndhurst’, 61 Darghan Street, Glebe (02) 9692 8366. The Centre was established by the Historic Houses Trust to record the design of houses, furnishings and gardens in NSW. Reference collections of wallpapers, textiles, floor coverings and fittings are being developed, together with a library which contains an important collection of design pattern books, handbooks and trade catalogues. Interior decoration, furniture and furnishings, garden and house design for the early 19th century to the present, in country and city, sophisticated and vernacular, are included.

Land Titles Office
Queens Square, Sydney (02) 9228 6666. The official land ownership registry for NSW, it contains a wealth of historical information and maps as well as title information on all property in NSW.

Local Council Archives
Contact local council libraries or the Australian Society of Archivists (NSW), PO Box A952, Sydney South NSW 2000.

Mitchell Library
State Library of NSW, Macquarie Street, Sydney (02) 9230 1414. The major Australian history collection, including books, newspapers, maps, photographs and manuscripts.
INVESTIGATING HISTORY

National Maritime Museum Library
13a Union Street, Pyrmont (02) 9552 7777. The museum library comprises of a specialist collection on maritime history, including shipping registers.

National Trust of Australia (NSW)
Observatory Hill, Millers Point (02) 9258 0123. The major community heritage organisation in NSW and custodian of a number of historic properties. It has comprehensive bookshops at Observatory Hill and other locations and maintains an extensive register supported by listing sheets with detailed information on properties.

Organ Historical Trust of Australia
GPO Box 676, Sydney 2001 (02) 9399 9932. The extensive archive and research collection of OHTA includes detailed documentations of most of the historic pipe organs in Australasia, as well as records from Australian and English organ builders. The archive is situated within the library of the University of Melbourne, and is accessible upon application to OHTA. OHTA can also advise on the location of research material in private collections. Copies of many reports on NSW pipe organs are located in the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning's library.

Professional Historians Association NSW Inc
GPO Box 2437, Sydney 2001 (02) 9331 6920. The professional body representing qualified historians. The association has a professional advisory service to answer enquiries on commissioning historical work and produces a register of consulting historians. Its publications include The Role of History in Conservation Work and Commissioning a History.

Royal Australian Historical Society
133 Macquarie Street, Sydney (02) 9247 8001. The major community (amateur) history organisation in NSW. It has a comprehensive local history library and produces many publications. A series of Technical Information Service Bulletins are available for sale from the Society (or for reference in the Society’s library). It also organises seminars and tours.

Transport Archives
State Rail, 11–31 York Street, Sydney (02) 9219 8888. State Rail has an extensive archive of railway and tramway records open to the public.

Water Authorities
Sydney region: Sydney Water, 115–123 Bathurst Street, Sydney (02) 9350 6969. Other areas: check your local phone book. Water authorities hold current and archival drainage maps of areas and properties, often including detailed surveys, photographs and other information.

Note: Some organisations may charge fees for access and the provision of information.

Watercolour by William Bradley, depicting Governor Phillip’s house, a small two-storey cottage built of bricks made from local clay. The house took a year to build and was the first major building in the colony. Archive resources like this drawing were a valuable primary source of information, helping to guide archaeological investigations of the site two centuries later. Photo: courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.
The State Rail Authority's original plans helped heritage consultant, Ken Young, to accurately restore the former stationmaster's residence, 'Billabong', in Culcairn. The building now houses the local museum. The success of the project has encouraged the conservation of other significant buildings in the town.

Hand-drawn contract drawing No. 9 — A copy of the original 1880 plan. Extract — front elevation. Source: State Rail Authority.
FURTHER INFORMATION

Databases
Australian Heritage Commission, HERA, Canberra. A bibliographic database which currently lists over 14,000 records, including all references to heritage publications after 1986, and major overseas references that have relevance for Australia. Emphasis is placed on reports written or commissioned by government and non-government heritage agencies in Australia. The database is accessible on two online networks and on CD-Rom. Contact (06) 271 2111.

Royal Australian Historical Society, Local History and Heritage Bibliography, Sydney. A computerised database which lists local history sources for NSW. Contact the society's library on (02) 9247 8001.

Publications


Professional Historians Association NSW Inc. 1993, Commissioning a History, PHA (NSW), Sydney.


Sands Sydney Directories 1858 to 1933.

