

Legislative Council Inquiry into Built Heritage Tourism in Tasmania

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The Friends of Willow Court (formerly the Willow Court & Barracks Working Group) was established as special committee of the Derwent Valley Council on 15 April 2010 with the following terms of reference (part):

- To assist Council in the development, protection and promotion of the Willow Court Precinct.
- To make recommendations to Council on specific projects.
- To monitor projects on behalf of the community.
- To facilitate communication between Council and the community.

The Friends of Willow Court wish to thank the Legislative Council for the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of Willow Court.

The Friends of Willow Court are making this submission to the Legislative Council Inquiry into Built Heritage in Tasmania, because we want the tourism potential of Willow Court realized.

Our concern is that while the ownership and management of this nationally significant heritage site is the responsibility of a small regional council, the tourism potential of the site and economic benefits to the Derwent Valley economy will not be realized

Willow Court in its current state is a prime example of neglected recognition and interpretation.

STATEMENTS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Statements of Significance for the Barracks and Bronte buildings and adjacent spaces acknowledge that:

- the whole New Norfolk complex demonstrates the evolution of philosophies for treating the insane throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and is the only place in Australia where such a full breadth of the developments in mental hospital design and management are preserved;

- the Barracks building is historically significant as the first custom-built institution for mental health in the Australian colonies;
- the Barracks building is an outstanding example of colonial Georgian design and is believed to be the earliest intact Australian example of a convict barrack in the Palladian courtyard design; and
- the Bronte building (B Ward) is a good representative example of changing views on psychiatric care, featuring access to light and ventilation, a pleasant outlook, and access to outdoor space, as well as demonstrating the growing emphasis on patient surveillance. (Conservation and Management Plan Stage C The Barracks and Bronte October 2005, in the Willow Court Visitor Services Project Interpretation Plan 2006)

The current and future potential contribution that built heritage makes to tourism in Tasmania.

The Willow Court former hospital complex, incorporating the Barracks and Bronte precinct, is a site with a potent mix of architecture, stories, myth, memory, history, social attitudes, and multiple layers of meaning. The Barracks was built in 1830 as a convict invalid hospital but soon became a mental asylum. Over the years, the site was developed and expanded and operated as a psychiatric institution, with a series of name changes, until it closed at the end of the 1990s as the Royal Derwent Hospital. While the hospital complex has closed, it continues to live on in the minds of individuals, families and former staff; and in the New Norfolk community. Some of the Willow Court history, from its beginnings, is fraught and challenging. While a view has been expressed by sectors of the local community that the visitor experience should focus only on positive aspects of the site story, the historical evidence cannot be sanitised. To do so would not only make the content one dimensional but would undermine the authenticity that research shows visitors seek in their Tasmanian holiday experience. This authenticity is part of what distinguishes Tasmania in the tourism marketplace. (Willow Court Visitor Services Project Interpretation Plan 2006)

Without doubt Willow Court has the most diverse reputation of all Tasmanian heritage locations, and one that should be taken advantage of and not ignored. It has been described as 'possibly the worse institution

in the southern hemisphere' and 'a model institution with state of the art practice'. Parents and advocates describe it as 'a place of torment', and patients remember with fear and with happiness past experiences. The hospital was described as a "troubled asylum" by the author of the definitive history of the site.

The site has a significant role to play as a long term archaeological site. Associate Professor Heather Burke from the Flinders University in South Australia, who will lead archaeological investigations of the site has described the potential as a place of learning, lasting twenty years. The potential therefore exists for archaeological tourism experiences.

The Willow Court site is one of Tasmania's biggest if not the biggest juxtapositions socially, medically, educationally and politically. It is this huge diverse opinion that makes this history fascinating and at the same time one of the most difficult to interpret.

The tourist experience has already been proven through the successful educational tours, temporary installations and open days conducted by the Friends of Willow Court.

The post closure history has also been one that many countries around the world have experienced when they started the process of deinstitutionalising the people that they supported. Closure and abandonment of asylum complexes and eventual reuse is common across the world, but too often the derelict state of the buildings catches the attention of promoters of the dark tourism experience, which perpetuates the stereotype that conditions people to believe that mental asylums are haunted. Currently the opportunity exists for Willow Court tourism to be based only on the authentic history of the site, which would make it a 'point of difference' from other asylums in Australia.

The Role of Government

The Government should take full responsibility for Willow Court, and have it managed by an authority that has the expertise in management, marketing, conservation, ongoing maintenance and interpretation under a holistic plan.

Willow Court is a significant part of the Port Arthur convict story, just as Point Puer and Cascades Female Factory are. For this reason the Port Arthur Authority should be responsible for Willow Court. Both Port Arthur and the Cascades Female Factory are listed as World Heritage sites, so should Willow Court.

The role of tourism organisation

Tourism organisation would provide ongoing advice in promotion of the site and its potential to the wider tourism marketplace. Particularly

through interconnectedness to other/different tourist locations within or on the way and beyond Willow Court, to provide a total experience for potential visitors.

The role of heritage organisation

To provide information about interconnectivity to other heritage sites and advice on how to maintain the purity of the heritage values inherent within the physical and social history of Willow Court and linked heritage sites.

Any relevant considerations in other justifications

Consultation needs to occur with the Departments that controlled the hospital throughout its history, to gather the history of patient/resident/client care/support during the time of the hospitals history, and to assist in the authentic interpretation of the sites history.

Any other matters incidental thereto

Funding is required to record and maintain the history of the site that has been lost due to sale, mismanagement and conversion to other purposes. This information can be interpreted by digital multimedia including podcasts, interviews virtual tours using remaining pictorial evidence to record the stories from past residents, staff, administrators, family, advocates, service contacted providers.

This history of Willow Court is one of Australia's most diverse and the opportunity exists to record the living history for the future education on the site. This education would be connected to the current school curriculum at the grade five and nine level and at vocational education of the workforce through the relevant unit descriptor as well as higher educational studies.

To ensure that the full tourism potential of Willow Court is realized there must be a clear State Government leadership role and expectation of how sites are to be protected and integrated into a Heritage Tourism Strategy.