

UPDATE OF CONSERVATION WORKS AT DURHAM BOWES

Conservation works are under way at Durham Bowes thanks to a \$150,000 grant from the NSW State Government, through the Heritage NSW Caring for State Heritage Grants Program.

Durham Bowes on Dights Hill at Richmond was the home of free settlers John and Hannah Dight. Part of the homestead dates from 1804 and it is the oldest extant building in private ownership in Australia. The homestead's sequential pattern of growth is easily read and it is a rare survivor from the first quarter century of the Colony of New South Wales.

The conservation works are being meticulously carried out under the guidance of Jyoti Somerville, Senior Associate GML Heritage and the team from The Sydney Restoration Company.

The works so far have included reinstating a skillion over early flagstones and repairs to doors and door frames, including one of the 1820s French door frames. The Sydney Restoration Company has respected the original materials and construction methods so that the integrity of this highly significant building has been maintained. Where doors and door frames needed repairs, original timber has been retained where possible and original early screws and hinges have been put back in place.

Work has also been carried out on the 1812 staircase, most likely to be the oldest example in Australia. The 1812 building agreement survives in the Mitchell Library and identifies Lewis Jones as the builder, who along with James Vincent, carpenter, were described in the Bigge Report as *two of the best builders in this part of the colony*. The well worn treads of the staircase remain and evoke thoughts of those who trod them, such as Margaret Catchpole, the Dight family's nurse – there was much controversy and confusion about her identity following the publication of the Rev. Cobbold's 1845 best selling novel, *The History of Margaret Catchpole – A Suffolk Girl*, that gave her legendary status. It was her signature as witness to the 1812 building agreement that was to become key evidence in the 1890s of her true identity.

It is thanks to the Caring for State Heritage Grants Program that these essential works are being carried out to conserve this significant piece of history. It is an investment in the property as a well documented resource of early building materials and techniques for researchers and heritage enthusiasts that will promote the preservation of Durham Bowes.

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