Property Network Interview: The Grange

By Isabella Trope & Cheryl Mongelard.

An interview with Margaret, curator of The Grange which was Captain Charles Sturt's residence in South Australia from 1840 to 1853. The building houses many of Sturt's original documents and possessions in a collection of national significance.

The story of the famed Australian explorer Charles Sturt has been told in books, documentaries, and educational programs. However, as HHA members and other antique appreciators will know, there is nothing quite like seeing people of the past's possessions in person to get a sense for who they were. The Charles Sturt Museum, located in Sturt's historic Adelaide residence The Grange, allows people to do just that. The museum has the largest collection of Sturt's belongings in the Southern Hemisphere, but also has many items relating to his family and his time. These objects tell the story of these people, and tell it as clearly and with as much emotion as any other medium could. By seeing these items for ourselves, we can emotionally connect to Sturt and begin to appreciate why these objects are still important today.

Many of the items relate to Sturt's exploration career, including his famous discovery of the Murray Darling River Basin and his expedition into Central Australia. The discovery of the Murray Darling Basin opened up significant amounts of New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia to settlement as he documented water sources, soil fertility, and the variety of fauna and flora. In his Central Expedition, he went further into the interior than any other explorer of his time. The story these objects tell is thrilling and emotionally impactful. It's a story of eagerness to explore, the thrill of adventure, despair, starvation, and thirst in a foreign land with no salvation in sight. It's the kind of stuff people make movies out of.

When I interviewed the museum's curator, Margaret, she pointed out a collection of items relating to Sturt's Central Expedition as being of great interest to visitors. Among these items is Sturt's telescope, the team's Union Jack flag, pressed samples of Sturt Desert Pea and a piece of timber from their whaleboat. Seeing these items connects us to the emotions and experiences of Sturt and his party. How immense was his pride when he hoisted that Union Jack, or when the whale boat first set sail? What sense of awe, amazement, wonder or even fear would he have felt spying unfamiliar lands through that telescope?

Another important item in the collection is a model depicting Sturt's campsite on the Murrumbidgee river. This fabulous item - created in 1969 by model maker and historian, Herbert Crocker- allows visitors to 'step in' to the campsite. One can almost picture themselves tapping nails into the whaleboat, mixing damper by the fire, or watering the horses.

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Herbert Crocker's model campsite - 1969.

Source: Margaret

The other story the Central Expedition items tell is one of family. On his travels Sturt collected gold which was made into an amethyst ring for his mother, and Quandong seeds which were mounted in silver as bracelets for his daughter Charlotte. There were points on the Central Expedition where death from starvation looked imminent, where Sturt and his party would have been forced to think about their families. Would they ever see their families again? Would their children be looked after? Would they grow up, and live full happy lives? Sturt's daughter Charlotte was born in 1843, the year before he left for the Central Expedition in 1844. It would have been heartbreaking for him to think about never seeing her again.

Highly impactful items like these force us to emotionally connect to Sturt. They make Sturt's story real, vivid and engaging to all audiences, including those with little interest in Australian exploration. They give audiences an appreciation for why keeping historical collections are important: not only are they interesting and informative, but they almost hold the very spirit of a person by telling stories about them. By understanding the 'spirit' or emotions of a historical figure we understand their motives, desires, and aspirations. Why what they achieved is important to them, and the impact these achievements had on history. For Sturt, part of his motivation would have been to discover habitable land, expand colonised areas, and gain glory from the resulting success of settlements on new lands. We can see the results of his discoveries in the success of European settlement around the Murray Darling Basin, and the resulting habitation patterns today.

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Victoriana Society

Source: Margaret

After understanding why historical collections and the stories they tell are important, we can then move forward in time and gain an appreciation of why these things are still important now. For Australians the knowledge that Captain Sturt played an important part in the colonisation of Australia makes him an important aspect of Australian colonial and post-colonial identity. It is ironic how a story of travel and discovery can lead to a sense of place and belonging. Today, Adelaide historical societies like the Victoriana Society of South Australia, Fort Glanville History Association and Adelaide Rifles celebrate the anniversary of Captain Sturt's birthday each year, all dressed in historical clothing at The Grange. Wearing historical clothing, much like holding a historical artefact, engenders a feeling of connection and belonging to the past.

Sturt's former private residence continues to see people through important personal moments of their own, such as weddings, funerals and birthday parties. This speaks to the inevitable continuity of human life. Just like people having dinners and garden parties there today, the Sturts would have had their own parties at The Grange during their lives. It reminds me of people attending modern music concerts in the ancient amphitheatre at Pompeii. Humans will never stop attending live performances, mourning the dead or having parties. Some rituals are so ingrained in the human condition that they span across generations and people groups.

This makes The Grange a sort of nexus of human life, a focal point of the past and present. A place where history and humanity runs so thick that the presence of historical figures is felt as if they are still living. In some cases they are even seen walking the halls. Margaret shared with us the story of her aunt whose family worked The Grange from 1928-30 as a poultry farm.

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Charles Sturt Museum - The Grange

Source: www.charlessturtmuseum.com.au

Margaret's aunt saw Captain Sturt quite literally walking the halls of The Grange, as if inspecting what had become of his estate. He was wearing colonial clothes, and staggering down the hall using the wall as a guide, as if due to his vision impairment. Margaret also described how owners of the neighbouring property were haunted by the ghost of Sturt's cat, who they felt scratching at the quilt and jumping on their bed. It's far from established that ghosts are reality, but it speaks to the historical weight of The Grange that the presence of its past inhabitants can be felt in such a physical way.

By learning about how a collection is important to the past and present, and how it continues to tell our human story, we understand why collections are worth preserving for the future. The Grange reflects a long story, starting in 1957, of people seeing that the house and its collection were important and worth fighting for. The Henley and Grange corporation purchased The Grange 1957, before gifting it to a committee on the proviso they form a Trust and Appeals Committee to ensure The Grange becomes a memorial museum for Sturt. People like the committees, corporations and councils who worked to preserve The Grange are the reason there is much infrastructure to support the preservation of history.

Today South Australians have many sites, artefacts, and much more public access to history then they would have if people as far back as 1957 did not see the value of historical collections. It is essential to preserve historical collections. They have relevance to the past and present on many different levels- personal and public, emotional and functional. Above all, collections are important for the stories they tell, and how they allow us to make that initial 'leap' to stepping into the shoes of past peoples. No piece of history is boring or irrelevant when examined with the view that each and every last object is all a part of one great human story. Sturt's story is just one element of the greater story of all of Australia, but he represents an important and interesting area of Australian history. The value of going to see his items for yourself and stepping into his shoes m cannot be understated. With state border closures coming to an end, The Charles Sturt museum is simply a must-do item for your next Adelaide trip!

www.charlessturtmuseum.com.au