

**Safe Guarding the Spirit of the Place:
Conservation and Management of Belgenny Farm,
Camden Park Estate, New South Wales, Australia.**

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Abstract: Belgenny Farm is the oldest group of farm buildings in Australia. It is part of Camden Park Estate, founded in 1805 by John and Elizabeth Macarthur, and it has strong associations with the beginnings of the Australian wool industry. Today, the Farm is an educational and tourist destination, a wonderful retreat from the hustle and bustle of the modern world as well as being a rare example of a traditional working 19th century farm. The property is managed by the Belgenny Farm Trust, but owned by the New South Wales (NSW) Government's Department of Primary Industries (formerly Department of Agriculture). This paper provides an overview of the issues involved in the conservation and management of the site over the last 20 years to ensure its character and sense of place is preserved for future generations.

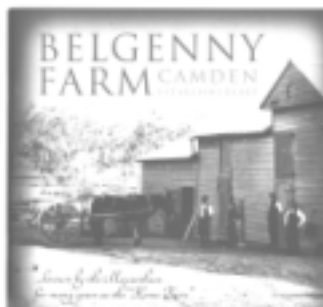


Figure 1. Photograph, c.1890s of stable block.
(DoA 1997)



Figure 2. Rear of the stables, still used as part of the live displays.

Background

My first involvement with Belgenny Farm was back in 1987, as heritage project architect (with Howard Tanner and Associates). I was part of the team conserving the physical fabric of the old timber farm buildings. Today, I am still actively involved as Honorary Architect providing heritage conservation advice to the Belgenny Farm Trust who manage and oversee the site.

Over the last twenty years I discovered that there are times when issues arise where there is no perfect solution. In the end you have to choose or accept compromises for the overall good of the project. Alternatively, there are occasions when you have to draw a line in the sand and say, NO! It is not easy managing sensitive heritage sites without attracting some criticism and you learn that you can never please everybody, but in the end it is up to the managers to make a balanced decision and resolve the issues as best they can.

The Property

November 2005, was the 200th anniversary of the original land grant to John and Elizabeth Macarthur, founders of the Australian wool industry. Their property, Camden Park Estate is located about 80 kilometres inland, south-west of Sydney, on the east coastline of New South Wales, Australia. Camden Park Estate is known as the birthplace of Australian horticulture and the Belgenny Farm Group or 'Home Farm' as it was known, was the working base for the property. It is the oldest group of farm buildings in Australia, a rare, relative intact group of 19th century farm buildings, which has evolved over 200 years. It is significant for a number of reasons including: its use, setting and association with historical people.



Figure 3. Photograph c. 1890s of original farm (DoA 1977).

This type of built environment is fast disappearing because of the growing urban sprawl surrounding Sydney [Figure 22], but visitors to Belgenny can still experience the atmosphere and character of an early Australian rural setting with living heritage displays of the descendants of the original 19th century Spanish Merino sheep.



Figure 4. Built heritage.



Figure 5. Living heritage.

From 1805 up until the 1970s, Belgenny was a working farm that produced sheep, grain, wine and finally dairy related products. These different uses are an important part of its significance. The farm was basically self sufficient, and a small village or community in its own right. It had functional service buildings for different uses including: a coach house, stables, a creamery, pig sties, sheep pens, a blacksmith shop, a mill, a granary, and an administration cottage. Except for the workers cottages in brick, the buildings are constructed in timber and these were in a very fragile state of deterioration when conservation works started in the late 1980s.

Early Conservation Philosophy: Stabilisation and Conservation

In 1976 the property transferred to the NSW Department of Planning, as part of the open space planning component for future urban growth. During the 1980s urgent maintenance and conservation repairs were carried out on the main farm buildings using traditional methods of construction, (eg. splicing together pieces timber to structural engineer's details) or using second hand materials, like old corrugated iron roof sheeting where possible to retain a weathered appearance. Modern technology was only used as a last resort or where it would not be seen, such as underground drainage or clear termite coatings to preserve the timber. Overhead electrical wiring was placed underground and essential fire hydrants were discretely placed around the site. A two metre high wire perimeter fence was also erected to secure the site.



Figure 6. Timber structure damaged by wet rot & termite attack in the late 1980s.



Figure 7. Spliced timber repair with a tar bandage to help waterproof the column

In Australia in the 1980s, the general conservation philosophical approach taken was to restore and conserve historical buildings back to a former specified period. This involved a substantial amount of intervention and new fabric was incorporated to make the buildings look new, as if they had not aged.

What differentiated the conservation works at Belgenny Farm, from other contemporary projects in the 1980s, was the philosophy taken by my employer Howard Tanner to retain the “*patina of age*” by “*stabilisation and conservation*”. The buildings were meant to look like they were over a 100 years old. In recognition of this approach, Belgenny Farm, received the 1988 Royal Australian Institute of Architects (NSW Chapter), Greenway Award for Conservation, because of the fresh and innovative approach taken.

The Exception to the Rule – The Creamery

On the whole, the policy of using traditional conservation and stabilisation principles was strictly followed. However, there is always an exception to the rule. It was decided that the modern steel doors [Figure 8] on the creamery were inappropriate and that the buildings contribution as a creamery was an important part of the farms interpretive history. In 1987, the steel doors were removed [Figure 9] and the upper storey reinstated. Traditional details were reinstated, such as wrought-iron hinges and multi-pane timber framed windows [Figure 10], based on photographic evidence of the original creamery [Figure 11]. This building is very significant and had a variety of uses over the years, originally as a coach house in the 1820s and then later it was modified into a creamery.



Figure 8. Steel doors on former Creamery.



Figure 9. Reinstatement of earlier façade



Figure 10. Reinstated façade with upper-storey.



Figure 11. Creamery c.1890 with upper storey.

A Change of Ownership

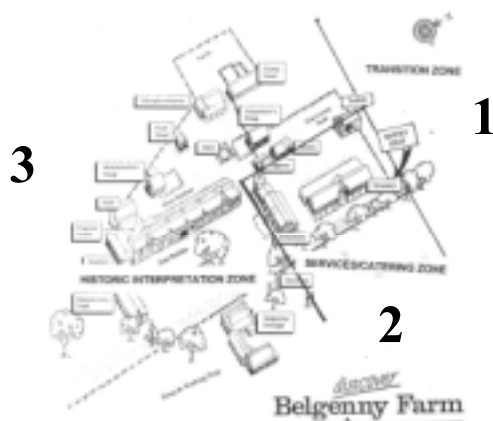
In the 1990s, ownership of the property was transferred to the NSW Department of Agriculture, who formed the Belgenny Trust to manage the property. Trust representation includes members from: local community, local Council, Department of Agriculture, Royal Australian Agriculture Society and the Friends of Belgenny (who supply volunteer help at the farm during open days). The Trust's Charter, in addition to conserving the physical structures, was to allow more public visitation to Belgenny Farm. At this time, problems started because there was no one on the Trust who had specialist heritage conservation experience. Changes not in keeping with the philosophy of maintaining the original rural heritage character of a working farm started, for example the entry to the farm had become gentrified with a 19th century English cottage garden.

It was at this time I became more actively involved in the management of Belgenny Farm as Honorary Architect for the Belgenny Trust. I worked closely with the NSW Department of Agriculture, and established basic conservation controls and guidelines for the daily conservation and management of the farm. Long term plans were placed on hold until Chris Betteridge, a heritage interpretation specialist with experience in museums was engaged in 1996 to prepare a Conservation Management Plan.

In 2000 the final Conservation Management Plan was endorsed by the NSW Heritage Council to give it the official heritage seal of approval. In 2001, an Interpretation Plan was produced by Chris Betteridge, to assist in understanding and promoting the significance of the site.

Tourist Facilities and Zoning

As a result of analysing the needs for the site in relation to controlling visitors, a scheme evolved that divided the site into three zones, [Figure 12]. The zoned approach has been very successful, not only in clearly setting out the functions of the site but also in enhancing the experience of visiting the site. It adds to the sense of arrival and sense of place.



1. Entry / Transition Zone:

Arrival entry area where the garden setting is a place of transition between the car park (outside world) and the farm area.

2. Services / Catering Zone:

The services area is mainly located within and around the old Granary Building. This area provides essential modern facilities needed to cater for tourists and parties functions. The toilet facilities are also located in this area.

3. Historic Interpretation Zone:

This is the historic zone, which is the living farm area.

Figure 12. Zone Plan.

Catering and Function Centre

An issue that required much thought was how to provide the facilities required for catering and special functions, such as weddings and conferences. These events generate valuable extra income for the Farm. A conscious decision was made not to build a large new modern building in or near the farm because it would change the ambiance of the farm group. The Granary was chosen as the best building to recycle because of its newer age and location adjacent to the entrance of the property. It is within the services/catering zone which allows for modern facilities that are considered necessary to help service visitation to the site.

Initially when the Granary was used for catering, plastic sheeting provided weather protection to the eating area. It looked unsightly and let in the wind and rain. Later windows were added [Figure 13] with the glazing bars lined up with the columns and set back at the entrance to reduce the impact on the façade of the building. The new glazing is a management (compromise) but a decision endorsed by the NSW Heritage Council in 2000 as being acceptable and appropriate.



Figure 13.
Creamery with
new windows.



Figure 14. Temporary
catering facilities.



Figure 15. New
kitchen.

As the farm became popular there was a need for a more permanent solution to catering, as the temporary facilities looked messy [Figure 14]. A new kitchen [Figure 15] in the service/catering zone was designed as a low key modern contemporary extension to the granary and built in 2003, in accordance with the conservation management plan endorsed by the NSW Heritage Council. It was clad with recycled materials such as, weathered corrugated steel sheets and new timber was left natural & untreated. By 2005, the kitchen exterior walls had weathered to a grey mellow finish, which blends in with the older materials adjacent.

Fire Sprinklers

Since the 1980s the buildings had fire hydrants, but not sprinklers. In the late 1990s funds became available to install a fire sprinkler service. I cannot stress enough, the need to have suitable personal carrying out the required works. The consultants need experience and an understanding of what is special about heritage places and their settings. The first design for the fire sprinklers was rejected outright because it was too intrusive. The final design was only achieved by going through every room and space with the site manager, the Fire Services Engineer and installation contractor and finding the most discrete way to install the feed pipes in each room. In all about 100 individual spaces were viewed during the course of the design. In the stable upper loft area the fire sprinklers only have a minor impact on the internal space [Figure 16]. The sprinkler pipes were placed behind rafters and hidden from general view [Figure 17].



Figure 16. Upper loft in stables, minimal impact.



Figure 17. Carefully located sprinkler pipes.

New Interpretation Museum Display

In 2004, Richard Wood, a consultant with museum and heritage expertise was engaged to help design the display layout for a new museum, in Belgenny Cottage [Figure 19]. The museum was opened in 2005, as part of the celebrations for the 200th anniversary of the original land grant. A maintenance program was carried out on Belgenny Cottage to ensure the museum is housed in a good watertight building. The project was very rewarding and provided answers to questions about the origin and exact age of the cottage, which we now believe was built by Elizabeth Macarthur in 1815, five years earlier than previously thought.

As a result of the new historic research and physical investigations, Belgenny Cottage and its original construction are to be an integral part of the museum display. An 1826 plan, [Figure 18], shows the farm's grand beginnings. It is thought to be designed by English Neo-classical architect, Henry Kitchen.



Figure 18. Plan c.1826 showing 1815 Cottage circled.



Figure 19. Belgenny Cottage, c. 1815. (new museum).



Figure 21. Interior, original earth floor and walls exposed.

Urban Encroachment

The rural character of the site is being gradually being impacted on by suburban growth as seen in this aerial photo [Figure 22]. In the 1980s [Figure 23], the farm could be seen from the housing zone, but to address the visual intrusion issue, a screen of trees was planted to hide the modern urban sprawl [Figure 24].



Figure 22. Aerial photo, farm circled, urban sprawl on left.



Figure 23. Photo taken in late 1980s, from urban sprawl.



Figure 24. 2005 trees screening urban sprawl.

The Future

The Trust's next project in addition to stage 2 of Richard Wood's plan (signage throughout the property), is an archaeological dig at the site of the original bark hut. Archaeologist Ted Higginbotham has been engaged to provide the technical input. As far as the commercial side of the business is going, Phil Anquetil stated in July 2008 that:

“We haven't looked back since we appointed Gourmet Fare as our exclusive caterer for the Granary. We are currently doing 63 weddings a year and forecasting growth of 10% a year. Also, we recently had the Hyundai new product launch at Belgenny and they ferried their guests to Camden by Helicopter. It was quite a sight [Figure 25].”



Figure 25. 2008, helicopter visitors.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the assistance and support of Phil Anquetil (Chair of the Belgenny Farm Trust) during the conservation of the Belgenny Farm Group and also for his assistance in presenting this paper as Director of Executive Support, New South Wales Department of Primary Industries.

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All photographs by Bruce Edgar, except Figure 29, by Phil Anquetil.