

# *Yester Grange*

## **Another World... Another Time...**

This brief history covers the story of Yester Grange from the earliest explorers back in 1788 through to present day. We hope you will enjoy the results of our research, investment and commitment to preserving this wonderful landmark.

Some visitors may have been here in years gone by and have interesting stories to share with us. Others may help us add to the history of the house and estate ( there is always something new to learn! ) - we welcome your comments and suggestions. Please contact us via email if you notice anything which needs correction or addition.

## **The Blue Mountains - 1788**

The house and the estate are surrounded by the magical and mystical Blue Mountains - now listed as a World Heritage Area. Before the arrival of the Europeans the original inhabitants of this beautiful place were the Gundungurra Aborigines of the great valleys to the south and the Dharug Aborigines of the Cumberland Plain to the east.

Evidence of their occupation may be seen throughout the mountains - there are many tool-sharpening grooves and also rock engravings and stencils. Radio carbon dating from excavated sites shows that some caves were occupied by them 22,000 years ago.

First contact with the original inhabitants was probably made with the Dharug people in 1788 by Governor Arthur Phillip on his first exploration of the Hawkesbury River.

Over the next twenty five years settlements began to appear at the foot of the Blue Mountains along the Hawkesbury and Nepean rivers and many expeditions tried to find a way over this barrier to what was thought might be an inland paradise or an inland sea. Several attempts were made over the years to cross the mountains following the rivers and creeks but they all failed due to the huge vertical cliffs at the end of the valleys.

On 11th May 1813 three explorers, Gregory Blaxland - a wealthy free settler, William Lawson - a soldier-farmer and experienced surveyor and young William Charles Wentworth (who later led the movement for self-government in New South Wales) set out with four convict servants, five dogs and four horses to find a way across the mountains by staying on the tops of the ridges.

By 28th May they had reached Mount York, just beyond the present township of Mount Victoria, and had sighted the open plains on the other side. Settlement of the mountains and the inland had begun.

# *Yester Grange*

## **Charles Darwin. 1836.**

(Charles Darwin 1809-1882)

On the 18th of January 1836 Charles Darwin, who became world famous many years later for his book 'The Origin of Species', crossed the Nepean River near present day Penrith on his journey over the Blue Mountains to Bathurst. His visit to Australia, as recorded in his first book 'The Voyage of the Beagle', is a fascinating glimpse of the colony at that time.

On his first night in the mountains he stopped at Weatherboard. The name of this small settlement was changed to Wentworth Falls with the coming of the railway in 1867. Darwin made numerous side trips off the main track and was probably one of the first Europeans to visit many of the wonderful valleys and waterfalls we enjoy today.

In his book Darwin wrote 'About a mile away there is a view exceedingly well worth visiting. Following down a little valley and its tiny rill of water, an immense gulf unexpectedly opens through the trees which border the pathway, at the depth of perhaps 1500 feet. Walking on a few yards, one stands on the brink of a vast precipice, and below one sees a grand bay or gulf, for I know not what other name to give it, thickly covered with forest. The point of view is situated as if at the head of a bay, the line of cliff diverging on each side, and showing headland behind headland, as on a bold sea coast. These cliffs are composed of horizontal strata of whitish sandstone; and are so absolutely vertical, that in many places a person standing on the edge and throwing down a stone, can see it strike the trees in the abyss below. So unbroken is the line of cliff that, in order to reach the foot of the waterfall, formed by this little stream, it is said to be necessary to go sixteen miles round. About five miles distant in front, another line of cliff extends, which thus appears completely to encircle the valley; and hence the name of bay is justified as applied to this grand amphitheatrical depression. If we imagine a winding harbour, with its deep water surrounded by cliff-like shores, to be laid dry, and a forest to spring up on its sandy bottom, we should then have the appearance and structure here exhibited. This kind of view was to me quite novel and extremely magnificent'.

One hundred and sixty six years later we can only echo these sentiments. Standing today in the lovely grounds of the Yester Grange Estate we share all of Darwin's wonder, pleasure and enthusiasm at the magnificent vistas he enjoyed - unchanged to this day.

Charles Darwin's visit to Australia is remembered by the Darwin Walk from Wentworth Falls village down the Jamison Creek, which forms one boundary of the Yester Grange Estate, to the spectacular Wentworth Falls. Guests staying at our self contained cottages can take a leisurely stroll from their front door straight onto the historic Yester track and into the National Park.

# *Yester Grange*

## **The Yester Grange Estate. 1878.**

The land on which Yester Grange is built was first recorded at the Land Titles Office in Sydney as a Crown Grant of 58 acres to Benjamin Backhouse in 1878. On the 18th June 1888 the land was transferred to John Charles Smith.

In 1891 J.C. Smith's name was included in the Electoral Roll for Wentworth Falls so we know the house was built between 1888 and 1891. The house is superbly situated to take advantage of the site and enjoy the incredible views of the wilderness which Charles Darwin found to be 'extremely magnificent'.

On hot summer days the huge waterfall plunging off the edge of the escarpment creates a rising current of cool air which spills up the grassy slopes of the grounds and provides natural air-conditioning on a breathtaking scale. To relax on the verandah and enjoy that breeze brings the wonders of nature even closer - and inspires admiration for the people who created such a beautiful place.

## **John Charles Smith. 1888.**

John Charles Smith is the person most associated to date with the building of Yester Grange. He was a former sea captain and at the time Yester Grange was built he was Managing Director of Goodlet and Smith, a large Sydney timber, pottery and building firm (see illustration after house plan).

It has been recorded that Yester Grange was built for his retirement - although he was only twenty eight when the house was built. His father James was a prominent, wealthy citizen of the colony and, looking at the house and the estate, John Charles must have been as well. There is still much to learn about John Charles and his wife Susan. Ongoing research in Australia and Scotland will update this short history as our quest continues!

We do know that Goodlet and Smith built the house and also provided much of the timber and wrought iron for the railings around the scenic lookouts at Wentworth Falls as well as the lamp standards for Katoomba's first gas street lights. They also produced all the wonderful leadlight work in the Queen Victoria Building near the Town Hall in Sydney which, thanks to the superb restoration of that fine building, we are still able to enjoy today.

Yester Grange is believed to have been designed by James Barnet Jnr., the son of the New South Wales Colonial Architect, James Barnet, who designed the GPO in Martin Place, the facade of Customs House at Circular Quay, The Australian Museum and many other fine buildings we enjoy today including most of the Post Offices, Court Houses and Police Stations in the large country towns of NSW.

The house is built of the finest New Zealand kauri timber that Goodlet and Smith could obtain and the completed house was important enough to be featured in the Illustrated London News of the day.

It appears the house is named after 'Yester House' in Gifford, near Edinburgh in Scotland, which was built circa 1700. The initials of Captain Smith and his wife Susan are in the leadlights of the doors in the main hallway. Looking at the restored house today gives us a glimpse of how very wealthy, prominent citizens of the day enjoyed their leisure.

# *Yester Grange*

## **Sir John See. 1902.**

Yester Grange was purchased in 1902 by Sir John See and his wife Charlotte. Sir John was Premier of New South Wales from 1901 to 1905. A biography of this prominent citizen of NSW is on the next page.

Lady Charlotte and Sir John were leading members of the political and business worlds and of the 'social set', who would have enjoyed many fine soirees at Yester Grange.

Sir John added the large kauri-lined ballroom to the house and used the estate as a summer residence. As the house had only two, 'his and hers', bedrooms visitors to parties and balls had to leave at the end of the day. The hotels and boarding houses of Wentworth Falls and Katoomba bustled with the late-evening arrival of the guests from Yester Grange ~ leaving Sir John and Lady Charlotte to the blissful quiet surroundings of the estate.

Sir John retired from politics in 1904. Lady Charlotte died while they were on holiday in New Zealand in 1905 and Sir John did not live long to enjoy his retirement after a very busy life. He died in January 1907 at the family home in Randwick (later a Private Hospital) at the age of 63.

From 1907 to 1938 the house was used as a holiday home by their descendants.

## **Biography of Sir John See**

Sir John was born on 14th October 1844 at Yelling, Huntingdon, England. He was the third son of a farmer, Joseph See and his wife Mary Arm. He arrived in NSW with his parents in 1853 and they settled on the Hunter River where he was educated at Hinton. He worked on the family farm and then in 1861 he took up land with his brothers at Southgate on the Clarence River in northern NSW

In 1865 he moved to Sydney and became a produce merchant - the firm became John See & Co in 1884. He then became a partner in Nipper & See, a coastal shipping line which amalgamated with two other lines in 1891 to become the North Coast Steam Navigation Company. John See became the Managing Director of the new company. He became a leading figure in the business affairs of NSW and was also a Director of the Newcastle and Hunter River Steam Navigation Company; of the London and Lancashire Fire Insurance Company; of the Ocean Accident and Guarantee Corporation; of the Gloucester Estate Company and of WH. Soul Pattinson and Company. He was also Chairman of the Citizens' Life Assurance Company from 1896 to 1907.

He held an interest in the Daily Telegraph Newspaper Company, was a Founder and Director of the Australian Star Newspaper Company in 1887 and also a Trustee of the Savings Bank of NSW He was known as a shrewd investor and he speculated very successfully in land.

He became a JP in 1878 and was Knighted KCMG in 1902. He was President of the Royal Agricultural Society from 1890-1907; a Director of Sydney Hospital from 1903; a Trustee of Captain Cook's Landing Place National Park and a Trustee of the Sydney Cricket Ground. He was also a Freemason.

# *Yester Grange*

## **Biography of Sir John See Continued**

He was Commissioner of the NSW International Exhibitions in Amsterdam 1883, Calcutta 1884, London 1886, Melbourne 1888 and Chicago 1893.

He was an Alderman of Randwick Council 1878-90 and Mayor in 1880-1881 and again in 1886. He was MLA for Grafton November 1880 to June 1904 and MLC for Grafton from June 1904 to January 1907.

He was Postmaster-General of NSW in 1885, Colonial Treasurer 1891-94, Colonial Secretary 1899-1901 and Premier and Colonial Secretary from March 1901 to June 1904.

Sir John could often be seen striding down Macquarie Street from the NSW Parliament House to the magnificent Colonial Secretary's building, which we still admire today, on the corner of Macquarie and Bridge Streets.

Sir John always travelled to and from Sydney and his electorate on the North Coast by steamer as the road north was 'often impassable and the coach mails unreliable'. He was an interesting and obviously very busy man who no doubt welcomed the peace and tranquillity of Yester Grange as a retreat from the worlds of business and politics.

## **Margery & James Anderson. 1944.**

In 1944 Yester Grange was purchased by Margery and James Anderson - it had been vacant since 1938. Margery was an Alderman of the Blue Mountains City Council for sixteen years and was the founder of the Pioneer Way Association. A small park in Scott Avenue at the entrance to Leura commemorates her name.

Their daughter Joy later continued this tradition of service to the community when she became an Alderman and Mayor of the Blue Mountains Council.

During these years the Coach House, which had eight rooms and a Pigeon Loft, burned down while Margery and Jim were away on business in Lithgow and was replaced by a large shed. Writing in the 1980's of those years Jim reminisced 'There was a red-painted picket fence along the 500ft frontage to Yester Road with lots of climbing and bush roses.'

'South of this was the Home Orchard with about 250 trees planted in the late 1800's. There were lots of cherries, many varieties of apples and pears, a few plums and one solitary quince. Mr Dickenson the caretaker, who lived with his wife in the cottage, looked after it all'

'In the Coach House there were stables for two horses and one cow and the apple room. What wonderful memories I have of hundreds of newly picked apples on the racks for sorting. The store was filled with chaff, lucerne, poultry food, tools, harness, pitch, oil of peppermint, fruit cases, fertilisers and, of course, the Pigeon Loft. All this next to the Coachman's little bed-sitter with the open hearth offering a warm welcome.'

What a wonderful picture Jim paints of a time when the world was not so frantic. Margery died in 1973 and Jim lived in the Gatehouse for some time before selling Yester Grange and moving to a house he had built nearby. Jim died in 1990.

# *Yester Grange*

## **Gil & Elizabeth Clarke. 1975.**

Yester Grange was very badly run-down by 1975 when it was purchased by Gil and Elizabeth Clarke. Gil and Liz, who ran the successful Gallery 98 in Cronulla, had been searching the mountains for some time intending to create an Art Centre.

At that time the main house still had its original paint and the garden was totally overgrown, with the magnificent views completely obscured by radiata pines and great areas of blackberries.

Gil and Liz put many years of hard work into the property but the days of having staff in the house and the grounds were long gone and it was a huge undertaking. Nevertheless they succeeded splendidly in their work towards restoring the house and garden towards its former glory.

They set up Yester Grange as a Victorian Museum filled with antiques, memorabilia and historic watercolours and prints. Downstairs in the cellars they created a gallery of modern art and ceramic pottery.

During Gil and Liz's time at Yester Grange over half a million visitors, many from overseas, were also able to 'take tea' in the ballroom where Liz's freshly-made scones were reputed to be 'the best in the universe'. Gil and Liz retired in 1999 after almost twenty five interesting and rewarding years at Yester Grange.

## **The Crockett Group. 1999.**

In 1999 Yester Grange was purchased by the Crockett Group who have many years of experience in the mountains in the tourist accommodation industry. They have completely restored the famous old 'California' Guest House in Katoomba. The 'California' now named 'The Mountain Heritage Hotel and Spa Retreat', is recognised as the only remaining Grand Guesthouse in Australia still being used for its original purpose.

After years of research and hard work 'The Mountain Heritage' is now one of the show pieces of the mountains and was recently recognised as the 'Best Regional four and a half star Hotel in NSW (2006)' - HMAA Accommodation Industry Awards for Excellence and, more recently, for 'Excellence in Customer Service' - 2007 Australian Achiever Awards.

The Group has also recently developed a unique, self-catering accommodation facility - The Falls Mountain Retreat - located in six acres of historic gardens in The Avenue, just off Falls Road at Wentworth Falls. It is next to the National Park and actor and television personality Reg Livermore's famous garden.

Making a commitment to preserve Yester Grange for future generations is a very expensive business. Just to keep the grounds neat and tidy takes three days a week for the gardener. Research and restoration of former garden features will take many years of investment and hard work.

Inside the house some areas of the pressed-metal ceilings have been replaced following a long search for the original stamping-moulds. Extensive research into colours and patterns and drapes have resulted in a magnificent, bright and airy interior.

# *Yester Grange*

## **The Crockett Group Continued.....**

The unique decorative paint finishes are the work of Leura-based Sita Rivas the well-known paint-finish artist. The floors have been stripped and restored as have the chimneys and fireplaces.

The superb antique furniture and chandeliers are the result of a world-wide search as the Crockett Group set out to re-create the sumptuous surroundings of the original owners. Some of the chandeliers were found in France, some in Italy and some in England. The Hudson family are historic and famous names in the timber industry in Australia and two of the chandeliers now at Yester Grange came from their former family home.

Following Gil and Elizabeth Clarke's stewardship the Crockett Group are taking the restoration of Yester Grange to the next level. The careful restoration to date now shows the house as it would have been when occupied by extremely wealthy men and women a hundred years ago. Men and women who were prominent in business and society and who surrounded themselves with the best of everything that the world had to offer. There are still many years of work ahead.