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# OLD GOVERNMENT HOUSE soft furnishings project

Public rooms bring a contrast in colours and styles

In January 2004, one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken by the National Trust was launched cautiously at Old Government House. The aim of the project was to recreate as far as possible the tastes and style of Mrs Macquarie during the residency of Governor Macquarie until 1821.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Silk covered wooden spindles. They will be attached to a silk trellis fringe, for the Drawing Room curtains. From left: Peg Sweeney combs and cuts the hand-made fringe on the Drawing Room ottoman; Completing the palempore – Morny Burns and Thelma Scanes; Anne Lynch and Ingrid Padina, with hand-painted borders.

One year down the track, as morning light filters gently into Mrs Macquarie's breakfast room with its sunny yellow walls and contrasting soft furnishings, the finishing touches are being added to the principal bedroom and work is well underway in the dining and drawing rooms. The project has exceeded all expectations, and it is time again to take stock of the vast amount of research, skill and teamwork that lies behind the scenes. **Dr James Broadbent and Elizabeth Wright** talk to **Angela le Sueur**.

## From 'making do' – to accurate Museum of Decorative Arts replicas

The concept of recreating a household of this era as it was, rather than as we might imagine it, was unique, relying on detailed detective work by Dr James Broadbent and Elizabeth Wright to research and translate into practical plans evidence not used before in Australia for this purpose. The underlying challenge of the project, however, was that budgets did not run to sourcing commercial suppliers in Europe and the United States to produce the finely crafted, authentic soft furnishings needed to bring the project to life. The work was to be done entirely by volunteers!

The idea started, as most good ideas do, on a modest level. From a seminar on soft furnishings in the 1820s in Sydney – a little known period - James and Elizabeth hoped that volunteers would be inspired to join a team to make a fringe needed at Old Government House which would have been prohibitively expensive to buy. The seminar was well attended, but no volunteers came forward!

Undeterred, they set about to persuade, entice and coerce the team they needed to get started. Many had no skills at all in the delicate – and not so delicate – art of creating soft furnishings. But they were keen, and gradually the momentum of the group took over. A year later, a core group of around 20 has progressed way beyond the original concept, armed with skills which include upholstery, weaving, carding of wool, painting of velvet, drapery, embroidery, making of trimmings, cord and tassels.

James says, 'the project started cautiously – making do. It developed into something far more accurate and painstaking than if we'd had an open purse and gone to commercial and more obvious sources. We weren't afraid to

change direction if something didn't work, or to tweak the results until it was perfect. The latest fringe developed for the drawing room curtains would probably have cost £1,500 a metre if we had bought it!'

With Mrs Macquarie's Breakfast Room and the Principal Bedroom all but complete, Stage 2 of the project is focusing on the Dining and Drawing Rooms.

Whereas the first two rooms of the project were private, for the household only, the Dining and Drawing Rooms were for receiving and entertaining.

In the light of day the dining room furnishings, scrubbed timber floors, relatively unadorned windows and bare table seem minimal – but they are an accurate reflection of the military background of the Governor and the male dominated social life which characterised his household.

Documentation suggests that equal numbers of male and female guests at table was most unusual – and Mrs Macquarie was not noted for her lavish approach to dining!

Nevertheless, the scene is striking: perhaps visually unadorned, yet replete with historical references which bring a much earlier time to life.

Window coverings are restricted to rich red drapery covering the upper edges, allowing every last minute of daylight to complement the candles which would have been the only source of light at dinner. The sole covering on the scrubbed timber floors is a fringed hearth rug, brightly coloured to echo the red from the draperies, complemented by two elegant, tasselled bell pulls. The design of the rug was taken from a fragment of an early 19th century Wilton carpet, which volunteers charted to recreate the correct shapes and colours before stitching began.

The central piece of furniture is a drop leaf, double D-ended dining room table, as listed in the 1821 Inventory of the Room and recently purchased by the National Trust. Two original Anglo-Indian elbow chairs with a convincing provenance to Government House, Hobart, have been replicated to provide 12 dining chairs of the kind believed to have been used by Governor Macquarie.

(Following the tradition of Anglo-Indian dining, only elbow chairs were used).

Marble was not available in the colonies before the 1830s, however painted marbling was popular. An elegant colonial side table has had its delicate marble finish restored, and takes its place as one of two such tables listed in the dining room in the 1821 inventory which, along with watercolours and sketches, diaries and other writings, is the main source informing the development of the project.

Minimal by day, the room with its central table, set with traditional damask and the elegant china the Macquaries brought with them, would have had its own understated elegance, while expressing the functionality of Macquarie's life.

The drawing room, nearing completion, will be a complete contrast with both the dining room and, more particularly, with Mrs Macquarie's breakfast room.

As the Governor's residence, Old Government House combined the public functions of His Majesty's Representative in the Colony with the home needs of the Governor's family. While the breakfast room is for 'family', private and informal, the drawing room is the public space in a governor's household, where receptions, balls, and formal entertaining were part of life.

Furnishings in the drawing room were richer and formal, adhering to a stricter protocol. Furniture was minimal, since this room had to accommodate large numbers of people. In tune with Regency fashions, colours and textures will be richly contrasted, with green moiré upholstery on a pair of square, high backed Georgian couches providing a perfect foil to rose pink and rich green curtains, and the dark emerald green Chinese silk cushion covers on a pair of bergère cane side chairs. The somewhat sombre moiré, copying the original upholstery on the colonial couch is lifted by elegant cushions, in the process of being embellished with thistles by embroiderer Judy Bayles – a reminder of home for the Scottish Macquaries.

The pièce de résistance in this room will almost certainly be a large, square ottoman, an item becoming fashionable at this time, and a particularly functional piece in a room of this kind, as it could



ABOVE: Satin pin cushion. Detail of satin pin cushion. OPPOSITE Carding fleece. From left: Gwen Hanna and Sue Rogers.

seat four. The ottoman at Old Government House is copied from an 1813 illustration, and is a symphony of greens: Chinese emerald green silk seat, with pleated moiré sides, finished with rich green fringes, each one woven and applied by hand.

### A story of contemporary pastimes and influences

The use of Chinese silk and, elsewhere in the House, Indian fabrics and furnishings reflects contemporary trade routes between Australia, India and China. (Given the state of relations between England and France at the time, it would have been unthinkable to have imported French silks!)

Chinese influences can be seen in other details, such as the transparencies being applied to windows and glass door frames in the colonnades. Mrs Macquarie is known to have been fond of transparencies which are well documented as being popular in English country houses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and had them painted for special events. On a functional level, they added privacy to glass windows, but in the right hands they became an art form, skillfully designed to take advantage of sun and moonlight. The challenge for the volunteers is that there are no existing examples in Australia. Mixing the right mastic varnish has already proved problematic and the first transparencies will have to be redone.

The curtains when completed will also be a work of art, reflecting a fashion of the time for handpainted borders. Painting (with stencils) on velvet was popular enough in England to have found its way into contemporary literature. Grace Nugent, in Maria Edgeworth's novel *The Absentees* offers to give her aunt her handpainted white velvet chairs – if only

she will return to Ireland! In colonial Australia, no specific examples exist of this as a ladies' pastime; however it is likely that ladies like Mrs Macquarie followed such fashion for their homes. The early colonial artist, Richard Reid (Snr) patented the drawing of designs for colonial ladies).

At the time of writing, volunteers Anne Lynch and Ingrid Padina are working on the rose pink and green borders. Both are artists, but neither has embarked on a project anything like this before. Stencils have not been successful in trial runs; the designs taken from pattern books of the times are too delicate, the lines too fine, and colours have run. Silk screening is effective, with details added by hand – but the colours don't work. Red paint on dark green velvet comes out brown. Further experimentation is needed so that the colour is just right – by mixing white, then trying, and trying again.

Finishing touches – yellow berries, green highlights on leaves – are applied by hand. Anne and Ingrid are nervous; a steady hand is required as mistakes on the fine cotton velvet are almost impossible to undo. The other volunteers skirt carefully around the table where work is in progress, anxious to avoid creating a distraction.

Sitting in a box, waiting to be added to the fringe are 67 decorative spindles. There are sighs all round as volunteers remember the painstaking work of wrapping and threading gold yarn around strips of velum less than 2mm wide.

Elizabeth is charged with cutting the richly coloured satin curtains, which follow directions in the first publication of James Arrowsmith's *Manual of Curtain Making*. The curtains will be sewn when the borders are completed. Most of the long seams will be done by hand; for

authenticity, and because that is the only way to ensure the correct positioning of fringes.

The curtains are still a work in progress, however. The final designs will be the result of constant discussion, trial and tweaking, to make sure everything works in every way.

Elsewhere in the House, other smaller projects are adding the final touches, while the recently acquired campaign bed poses new challenges which are not for the fainthearted.

A pincushion in the Principal Bedroom has been reproduced in white, fringed satin, its pins arranged in the shape of a perfect rose copied from a contemporary pin cushion in the National Trust's collection. The youngest member of the group, 21 year old Jessica, worked out how to flute the silk on the bag of a work table, in which ladies kept their needlework.

Seated around a table in a side room, four volunteers are quilting a palempore – a bed covering typical of the Macquarie era - made from early 19th century blocked Indian fabric found by James Broadbent in a London market.

Clumsy darns in the original have been replaced with the tiniest of stitches and perfectly matched patches. Pride in their work is evident, and the volunteers share jokes and observations as the palempore takes shape.

Thelma Skanes joined the team on the very first day in January 2004.

'James and Elizabeth gave us a talk, showing us wonderful fabrics and their sketches and documentation of what they



wanted us to do', says Thelma. 'We were speechless; it all looked so impossible. They started allocating tasks but people were reluctant to put their hands up – so I did. I put my hand up for so many, Elizabeth asked if I wanted to do the whole project myself!'

Morny Burns has studied many different crafts, and has certificates from the Royal School of Needlework in England.

'Right from the start, we were given so much responsibility', she remembers. 'I asked what sort of rugs would be required, and was told by James to go and do some research.' The rugs were a major project in themselves. The double-stitched hearthrug in the Dining Room was worked by six different people and is estimated to have taken up to 700 hours!

### Fine seams and family history

Peg Sweeney is another 'old hand' – one of the original group. She pulls a face as she recalls some of the tougher jobs she has done, such as sewing the rush matting for the Breakfast Room. There have only been three small projects in all, which have been done by individuals, everything else has been a team effort. But sometimes who did what was dictated by the nature of the job, and sometimes by the sheer physical intensity involved – such as the rush matting, which required the volunteers to sit cross-legged on the floor for hours.

'It's not all sewing fine seams, you know', says Peg cheerfully. Fortunately, a number of the husbands 'got into the act', helping with joinery and adapting equipment.

'And then there is Peter, another Old Government House volunteer who is 'forever doing this and that', says Peg.

Peg has her own special reason for being part of the team. She is the great, great, great granddaughter of Sgt Whalan, who was Sergeant in Arms for all governors from Hunter to Macquarie. While stitching the fragile palempore, she keeps the group entertained as she relates that Whalan was transported for seven years for poaching a trout – at the age of 14 years! There are murmurs of sympathy from the quilters – the poor young thing! But there is a happy ending. At a height of 6 foot 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches, he was a wonderful asset to security. 'How did he grow to that height after two years in Newgate?' Morny wonders.

Whalan's wife-to-be was transported for seven years for 'having an un-Christian attitude' having failed to attend compulsory religious instruction, says Peg with raised eyebrows. She was assigned to the Macquarie household in Parramatta, where she met Sergeant Whalan, and was married to him eleven days later in the Drawing Room.

Charles, Whalan's second son, was a particular friend of Lachlan Macquarie. The writing desk in the Breakfast Room was sent back to Charles by Lachlan, says Peg. It always gives her a thrill to see it, and Nerida Scarborough and Peg both remember the pleasure of seeing Governor Lachlan Macquarie's watch, also kept at Old Government House.

### Outside in the flagged courtyard, another series of ancient crafts is in progress.

Gwen Hanna is part of a team of five, carding wool destined for the mattress of the campaign bed. Using a drum carder the work looks, and is time consuming – but the worst has been done. Gwen and Sue Rogers have already done the unenviable job of washing the wool – in their own baths – to remove dust, oils and other unmentionable additions in the raw wool. The now fluffy fleeces are thinned and carded, then bagged, ready for use.

Gwen is a highly experienced weaver, contributing both skills and fabric from her own supplies, now almost unobtainable, to the project. She and Sue wove the braid needed for the chairs in the Dining Room and two cushions in the Breakfast Room. Gwen has a sample of braid sourced by James. It's about 200 years old, dusky green, likely to have been black in its youth.

Gwen says that the most time-consuming part of each project is working out what to do. She has a workbook full of calculations, illustrations and photographs, which show the degree of experimentation needed; to work out the weave, choose a suitable fabric, wind the warp, dress the loom, start weaving a sample and then, if all that works start the real thing.

As each room takes a form way beyond the wildest imaginings of what was possible two years ago, perfection is the aim.

Principal rooms are now furnished from the National Trust's collection with pieces specifically from the Macquarie era – however, there are gaps. The Trust's eyes and ears are open continually, trying to source appropriate and affordable items, and looking for ways to rationalise other pieces to provide funds for the 1821 interpretation.

What is on James' Broadbent's wishlist?

He pauses – but only for a second. 'The ultimate would have to be a colonial-made sofa table of the period, which would be a very important addition to the drawing room. However, we know of only three, and their value is way in excess of anything we can afford'. His tone is wistful – but somehow you just know he is working on it!

## OLD GOVERNMENT HOUSE

### SOFT FURNISHINGS PROJECT

**The team:** Judy Bayles, Helen Brown, Morny Burns, Wilma Campbell, Jean Forsyth, Gwen Hanna, Vicki Harris, Tricia Kernahan, Hilde Klumpp, Anne Lynch, Ingrid Padina, Sue Rogers, Fran Sanders, Thelma Scanes, Nerida Scarborough, Jessica Smith, Peg Sweeney, Elizabeth Wright.