

Appendix F—Interpretation Discussion Framework

This section provides an overview of existing interpretation and a brief framework for future interpretation considering the operational constraints and opportunities of the site

F.1 Introduction and Existing Interpretation

Currently the cottage and its collections are interpreted together in a holistic manner. The majority of collection items (apart from notable handful of items) have been introduced and are provenanced elsewhere. They do not relate to the cottage or any of the people who lived there. The NCA currently advertises Blundells Cottage as ‘a hands-on museum’ since much of the collection is relatively robust, unrelated to the historic cottage and able to tolerate public touch.

F.1.1 The Museum Collections and House Museum Displays

The cottage was empty when it was handed over to the CDHS in March 1963. A call was put out that the Society wanted donations of equipment that was 75-125 years old to furnish the cottage and depict a rural lifestyle of the 1890s to 1910. The cottage collections were assembled by the CDHS from a mixture of member donations, long term loans and by purchases from commercial sources to achieve the desired displays. The interpretation approach was essentially one of folklife and pioneer history. The CDHS researched the history of the cottage and the families who lived there and organised volunteer guides to open and show the cottage to the public. Two main guide books were researched and published by the CDHS. *A Visit to Blundells Farmhouse* edited by Patience Wardle and Illustrated by Sylvia Fitton was published in 1972 and reprinted in 1982. *The Cottage in the Parliamentary Triangle, a social history of the building known as Blundells* was written by Beth Knowles was published in 1990.

CDHS Approach to Interpretation at Blundells Cottage

The CDHS provided guided tours through a program of volunteer guides supplemented by laminated information sheets in each room and small labels on specific items. Their approach to interpretation at the cottage was to relate the building and collected contents to the lives of the family members who lived there to evoke the past lifestyles and experiences. The guide ‘A visit to Blundell’s Farmhouse’ was neither a history of the building or its context, or a guide to the whole collection, but cleverly led the visitor through the building room by room with a description of select items of an unusual nature or special local interest.

The CDHS did a very good job of furnishing the cottage quickly over a period of a few months on a shoe string budget. Naturally the resulting collections are also in many ways inconsistent. Some are anachronistic and inappropriate for display in a contemporary house museum interpretation. Their own guide book specifically refers to this particular issue, alerting the visitor to these inconsistencies:

in the parlour it describes ... ‘a small copper utensil with a long handle and a perforated box. No, not a warming-pan, but a chestnut roaster. This would be quite out of place in a country farmhouse, for a hundred years ago chestnuts would have had to be brought from a distance at great cost. We keep it by the fireplace as a curiosity.’¹

and

¹ Wardle P, 1972, pp 6–7.

... a motley assortment of plates and cups, many of them chipped and cracked' on the kitchen dresser.²

This collections approach has resulted in several splendid items which do not relate well to the interpretation of the heritage values on the site. For example, the beautiful bedspread made by the Embroiderers Guild of Canberra out of 1440 patches hand sewn in three weeks as a gift to the cottage. While the type of the bedspread is traditional, its design and the materials are not, either in type of fabric, or colour. The relevance of such items to the cottage history is potentially confusing.

NCA Approach to Interpretation at Blundells Cottage

The advantage of a collection with less inherent value to the site is that the NCA now runs Blundells Cottage as 'hands-on museum.'³ As well as the cottage and its collections being interpreted in this manner, the surrounding landscape, including the immediate garden area, is also referenced but in a minor way.

The eclectic collection of the CDHS has been retained but not selectively interpreted or rationalised. For example a visitor to the cottage could be forgiven for thinking that people in the past dressed only in white cotton lawn, babies exclusively wore christening gowns and that the six old fashioned irons really were a necessity for any family to deal with this amount of linen.

Guided tours are still provided on request and a self-guided tour brochure is available. The cottage interpretation relies on laminated information sheets in each room and small labels on specific items.

For the Centenary of Canberra and the 50th Anniversary of the cottage as a house museum the NCA is seeking a new interpretation position. This is to extend the interpretation of the cottage from a primary focus on the rural colonial period to encompass the more recent development of Canberra. There is also the perceived need to increase the relevance of the cottage to the local Canberra population.

F.1.2 Guided Tours

During its period of management the CDHS had the cottage open every day, both to the public and to school groups. Tours of the cottage were available and a text to assist guides interpret the cottage was prepared by Patience Wardle a founder member of the CDHS.⁴ This guide provides an excellent overview of the cottage collections acquired under CDHS management. The cottage was largely interpreted through the dialogue of the guides limiting labels which might distract from the objects themselves.

Under NCA management the cottage opening hours were reduced and currently the cottage is open five and a half hours on Thursdays and for the same period again on Saturdays. An NCA employee is available on site to provide guiding. More interpretation labels have been introduced into the

² Wardle P, 1972, A Visit to Blundell's Farmhouse, CDHS, p 15.

³ NCA, A Self Guided Tour of Blundells Cottage, A Look into the Past 30 minute tour.

⁴ P Wardle, 1972, A Visit to Blundell's Farmhouse, CDHS. In 1953 she was a foundation member of the Canberra & District Historical Society (CDHS) for which she worked tirelessly for 38 years. She was Newsletter Editor for nearly 30 years until 1982, a Councillor for 20 years (1960 to 1980), President 1965-67 and Vice-President 1970-71. She was heavily involved in the organisation of excursions, giving talks and helping with the upkeep of Blundell's Farmhouse, then operated by CDHS. She was made a life member in 1983. Her services to community history were recognised with the award of the Medal of the Order of Australia on 26 January 1990. From the Australian Women's Register, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE4782b.htm>

rooms for those visitors preferring self-guided tours.⁵ Initially the NCA retained a charge for cottage entry but around 2007 entry was made free of this admission fee.

Currently guided tours of the cottage are provided to visitors on request. Not all visitors want guided tours. Discussions with guiding staff at the stakeholder consultation indicated that no single pattern of interpretation was followed but rather the interpretation of the cottage and its collections followed the interests of the visitors and their questions and responses to the place. There is an impression that the guided tours are more focused the collections than the cottage and slab shed. The wider setting of the cottage and its context in the landscape of the former Duntroon Estate is little discussed.

F.1.3 Brochures

The NCA has produced a colour brochure *A Self Guided Tour of Blundells Cottage—A Look into the Past* which is available at the cottage and available on demand for visitors. An electronic version of this brochure is available on line. The brochure guides visitors through the cottage room by room concentrating on the collection items while providing details about the three main families who lived in the cottage. The garden is included in the guided tour but the wider context but its relationship to the Duntroon Estate are not. The presentation of the brochure is neither chronological nor thematic but provides a selective description of both the lives of the families who lived in the cottage and the collections displayed at the cottage.

E.1.4 Internet Presence

The self-guided brochure and education programs are provided on the NCA website but in different locations. An interactive virtual tour is also available on line. Information about Blundells Cottage is not provided under the NCA website Planning and Heritage tab but under the Discover the National Capital—Visiting tab. This underscores the public perception that Blundells Cottage is a tourist destination rather than a heritage place. Education material is located under the Discover the National Capital—Education tab. There is no one place on the NCA website with all information about Blundells Cottage.

F.1.5 Educational Programs

The cottage provides a learning environment for students via free educational programs developed by the NCA. These are linked to curriculum needs but not overtly and are currently not sufficiently closely aligned to the new National Curriculum outline. The educational programs aim to engage students through experimental learning and discovering how families lived in the past. The target student group is local schools and the lower-middle primary age level. The three educational programs offered are: In their Footsteps, Mechanical Toys, and Step Back in Time. The NCA Internet website offers teachers curriculum guidelines and activity sheets. There is a photo gallery of useful images of both collection items and historic photos for teachers to use.

F.2 Constraints for Addressing in a Future Interpretation Strategy

The cottage presents as ‘cluttered’ with collection items, with a depiction of family life which has been necessarily manufactured from the availability of collection items rather than a realistic depiction of tenant farmer life at the turn of the century, the interpretation period chosen initially by

⁵ NCA, *A Self Guided Tour of Blundells Cottage, A Look into the Past* 30 minute tour.

the CDHS when they took over the cottage and continued in the current NCA presentation of the cottage.

Full knowledge and understanding of the collection is currently unclear. The collection requires a Significance Assessment and the development of a Collection Management Plan. There is the opportunity to investigate partnerships with the University of Canberra to explore the development of these documents in a cost efficient manner.

The small size of the cottage rooms and spaces results in difficulties accommodating large numbers of visitors at any one time. This is a particular problem with school groups which often have to be split into three (a full school bus load is 45 people). This problem has given rise to the operational need of a separate facility—at least a shelter shed for students, at best a room for storage of education collections, dress up items, resource materials and school bags. The large numbers of students per school visits also puts pressure on toilet facilities at the cottage—there is only one composting toilet.

The current office facilities at the cottage are also perceived as inadequate for efficient storage of resource material for guides and storage of collection items not currently on display. There are also issues with suitable toilet facilities for staff (the same as for school groups), and adequate relaxation space. The issue of a new modern museum services building with dedicated staff office and educational facilities is discussed in Section 6.3.1 and in Appendix D.

F.3 Messages to Convey

The interpretation messages being conveyed should closely echo the heritage values of Blundells Cottage and the strategies employed to conserve those values. Many of these messages are already being transferred in part through existing museum displays, signs, tours and brochures that only require slight refocus to align with identified heritage values.

F.3.1 Key Themes of Interpretation

Key themes for interpretation at the cottage are suggested here—changing landscapes and changing lives and conserving and collecting. An interpretative thread running through these themes are the similarities and differences across the ages to illuminate both past and present lifestyles and the changing landscape of Canberra. Sub themes exist under each key theme. Storylines to illustrate and illuminate the heritage significance of the cottage can be explored within the sub themes. This framework will provide an interpretive matrix in order to express and convey the heritage significance of Blundells Cottage.

Plains to Parliament—Changing Landscapes

- Aboriginal land—the early Indigenous landscape—Ngunnawal Country to National Capital.
- Part of a pastoral estate—the Duntroon Estate and its stone cottages and outbuildings.
- Farming on the flood plains.
- ‘A Symbolic Foil to the Majesty of Parliament House’—British Town Planner William Holford recommends Blundells remains.
- Flooding the landscape—Molonglo River, then the making of Lake Burley Griffin.
- Central city location—Paddocks to Parliament.

Farm and Families—Changing Lives

- Assisted migration—working for a Laird on a pastoral estate in Australia;
- Family and farm—subsistence farming, children and chores, by the sweat of my brow (bullock driving and ploughing), a woman’s work is never done and ‘make do and mend’;
- Dispossession and resumption—the changing social structure of leasing from the Commonwealth; and
- A growing population to feed and house—boarding experiences and market gardening.

Making a Museum—Conservation and Collecting

- Conservation, community and collecting—thwarted demolition and donations for the making of a museum.
- A relic of Canberra’s rural beginnings saved from the wrecker’s ball.
- Mushroom pink—Sydney architect Morton Herman takes charge of restoration.
- ‘In keeping with its origin’—CHDS becomes a tenant.
- Thermoses and strong bladders—CDHS working bees, plain curtains and rag rugs, lining boards from the old Gribble homestead.
- Kitchen becomes a shed.
- Unsympathetically modified—What’s old is new again

Then and Now—Similarities/Differences

- Living where the work is—tied farm cottage or government housing.
- Presence or absence of modern city amenities of electricity, running water and sewerage.
- Roads, schools, hospitals, shops—once there were none.

F.4 Future Interpretation

F8.4.1 Develop an Interpretation Strategy/Plan for Blundells Cottage

Building on this Interpretation Strategy an Interpretation Strategy/Plan should be developed for Blundells Cottage that takes into account the findings and policies of this HMP and the following recommendations.

F.4.2 Transmit all Heritage Values in Tandem with Conservation Work

The Interpretation Strategy/Plan for Blundells Cottage should present and transmit, to all generations, the identified Commonwealth Heritage values consistent with the conservation of its Commonwealth Heritage values. Effective communication of key interpretative themes will both raise the profile of Blundells Cottage and assist in conveying messages of its heritage significance. Interpretation at the cottage should include the buildings and setting as much as the collections, and explore the significance

of the buildings as remnants of the Duntroon Estate. The position of the cottage in the National Triangle and its more recent history should also be included in interpretation.

F.4.3 Associate Physical Fabric with Stories

The variety of human relationships played out at Blundells Cottage can be accessed through interpretation of the physical fabric of the cottage and used to illustrate the history and heritage values. The relationship of Blundells Cottage with the wider local social and economic framework of the Limestone Plains and the physical fabric of this which remains is also relevant to the interpretation at the cottage.

F.4.4 Cultivate Links with Associated Canberra Heritage Sites & Community Groups

Institutional links and partnerships should be developed to assist in complementary interpretation. Obvious partners in interpretation are the CDHS, the ACT Government's Mugga Mugga homestead, Duntroon House and St John's Schoolhouse. Partnerships with ANU and the University of Canberra teaching facilities in cultural heritage management should be explored. Ongoing contact with local Aboriginal groups is recommended.

F.4.5 Review Signage, Brochures and Guided Tour Delivery and Content

Review existing signage, brochures and Internet material for consistency with identified heritage values, site identity, desired messages and up-to-date information. Upgrade signs/brochures as necessary. The location of signs and notices in the cottage should be reviewed as part of any upgrade to ensure optimum interpretation benefit. Consider extending the operation of costumed guides acting out historic parts from school groups to the general public. Audio tours and/or smart phone/iPad guided tours linked with QR patches could also be developed to extend traditional guiding approaches and this may provide revenue generation through hiring out of equipment at the site for those who want to experience this mode of interpretation.

Guided tour delivery needs to be regularly reviewed and refreshed to keep guides engaged and enthusiastic in their visitor relationships.

F.4.6 Develop Internet Presence to Convey Information and Off-site Virtual Interpretation

Develop an internet presence to convey information about the identified heritage values of Blundells Cottage and their conservation by the NCA. This should be more than just a link to the Australian Heritage Database. The Internet presence should be user friendly and have all information related to the history, heritage values and interpretation of Blundells Cottage in one easily locatable place. Opportunities to showcase collection objects should be explored.

F.4.7 Improve Site Marketing

Blundells Cottage needs more active, consistent and targeted marketing to capture a larger market share of both local and non-local visitors. Strategies for dealing with increased visitation would need to be assessed following careful market analysis and may include extended opening hours to provide access for schools.

F.4.8 Improve Site Access and Facilities

Even with current visitation levels, site access and facilities are sometimes problematic. Additional site facilities for education and interpretation needs should be investigated and implemented where

there is no conflict with the conservation of heritage values. Reorganisation and minor upgrading of the current office provision at the cottage may provide immediate relief in terms of storage facilities on site. A longer term solution could be provided with the provision of a dedicated new museum services building as discussed at Section 6.3.1. Heating options and dehumidifiers for the cottage need to be further investigated and climate management implemented.

Provision for easier access by all ability groups should be investigated and implemented as conservation constraints permit. Alternative interpretation delivery for disabled groups should be explored.

F.4.9 Develop a Program of Themed Events, Changing Exhibitions and Community Participation

A program of themed events, changing exhibitions and community participation will assist in re-engaging the local Canberra community in Blundells Cottage. These events could be organised in tandem with stakeholders and partners at associated sites as indicated above.

Suggestions include rotating display content and temporary exhibitions. Other possibilities for exploration include temporary art installations as have happened at other ACT heritage sites such as the Valley⁶, special events (poetry nights with readings from the verandah perhaps), provision of a mobile kiosk to dispense coffee and ice creams for visitors to enjoy while in the grounds—Hobday's Cottage, a heritage cottage in the grounds of the Yarralumla Nursery, provides a great example of revitalising a heritage building.

Many house museums have found that a regular program of public events is an essential mainstay to visitation improvement. Beginning modestly with an association with nearby even such as Floriade could become a basis for an annual event.

F.4.10 Develop Monitoring and Evaluation

Develop a means of review and evaluation to ensure that operational aims, conservation objectives and interpretation needs are being met; that standards are kept high and that further investment in interpretation is suitably targeted. An annual workshop of staff and stakeholders can provide the opportunity for such discussion.

F.4.11 Ensure Funding and Adequate Resourcing for Interpretation

Ongoing funding and resourcing will be required to successfully undertake interpretation at Blundells Cottage. Some costs may be recouped with use of volunteers, donations and merchandising of guide books, developed audio tour sales or ticketed themed events; however a level of government subsidy for community heritage facilities is an ongoing necessity for sites such as Blundells Cottage. The vitality of the site will spring from excellence in interpretation and regular public programs, partnerships and engagements with community groups and development of diverse audiences.

⁶ Art installation by Annie Trevillian at the Valley ruins funded by an ACT Heritage grants as part of the ACT Heritage Festival funded by ACT Heritage grants. <http://citynews.com.au/2012/valley-ruins-brought-to-life-by-artist/>