LANDS DEPARTMENT BUILDING
BRIDGE STREET  SYDNEY
1876-1976
FOREWORD

We have the honour of presenting a brief history of the Lands Department building, which celebrates the centenary of the laying of its foundation stone, on 7th October, 1876.

The building has been classified for some time by the National Trust of Australia as being essential to the heritage of Australia. The classification lists the building as one that must be preserved; in fact, much work has been carried out in recent years with this in mind.

MINISTER FOR LANDS

UNDER SECRETARY FOR LANDS
Background History of the Department of Lands

In 1856, following the establishment of responsible government in New South Wales, the Department was created. The first Secretary (Minister) for Lands, the Hon. G. R. Nicols, M.L.A., was appointed on 6th June, 1856 and the first Under Secretary, Mr Michael Fitzpatrick on 9th October, 1856.

The Department of Lands became a separate entity in 1859 when its administrative functions were separated from those related to Public Works. The Hon. Sir John Robertson, K.C.M.G., M.L.A., was then Secretary (Minister) for Lands but Mr Fitzpatrick was still Under Secretary.

At this time the staff of the Department was housed in the Surveyor-General's Office, a two-storey building occupying part of the present site but located at the Gresham Street and Bent Street corner.

The introduction in 1861 by Sir John Robertson of the principle of “selection before survey” brought about a rapid expansion in the Department's activities and staff numbers were substantially increased to deal with the additional work. Despite extensive renovations, the old Surveyor-General's Office became inadequate to cope with the increase and Sydney directories of the period show several branches of the Department occupying other offices in Bridge Street.

To bring these separated branches together and provide for future expansion the Government of the day decided to construct a new building covering the entire block bounded by Bridge Street, Gresham Street, Bent Street, and Loftus Street (then known as Castlereagh Street (North)).
History of the Site

On a sketch map by Lieutenant Bradley and Captain Hunter of the Sirius, dated 1st March, 1788, is shown a "Surveyor's Marquee" the position of which, if not on the present site, is nearby.

In 1791, a house for the Surveyor-General was erected on the western end of the site but this building was destroyed by fire in August, 1798. A house subsequently erected was later largely absorbed by the widening of Gresham Street.

In 1804, a view of Sydney published in London, known as Dayes picture shows the Surveyor-General's, the Judge Advocate's and the Chaplain's houses on the site. Meehan's map of 1807 confirms these facts although Meehan's map and Harper's map of 1822 indicate that the Judge Advocates' house was partly on what is now Loftus Street.

The Sydney Directory of 1855 shows that the Colonial Secretary's Office, the Surveyor-General's Office and Royal Exchange occupied the south side of Bridge Street, between Macquarie Street and Pitt Street.

Additions to the Surveyor-General's Office were made in 1854 and again in 1867.

The Building Design

The Colonial Architect, James Barnet, who had designed the Colonial Secretary's Office, the Post Office and the Garden Palace, was given the task of designing the structure. The following extracts from an article in the Illustrated Sydney News of 19th August, 1876 gives a word picture of the building design.

"The new office for the Lands and Mining Departments, which is about to be built from the designs of Mr Barnet, the Colonial Architect, will be, when completed, the largest public building in the city.

"The style of the new building is Italian Renaissance, somewhat of the Venetian type. There will be a massive rusticated basement, visible on the Bridge Street and Gresham Street fronts, but partially buried on the other two sides by the rise of the ground. The basement will have three entrances; one in the centre of the Bridge Street front, a boldly recessed and moulded archway with handsome wrought iron gates, and protected by a projecting pediment, will be the public entrance. A somewhat similar doorway in the centre of the Gresham Street front will be one of the official entrances; and there will be a carriage gate also in Gresham Street, near the corner of Bent Street. The ground floor, first, and second floors, will have pilasters and entablatures respectively of the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian orders, each order standing on an appropriate pedestal. Each front will be divided into five parts, a projecting centre and wings, being joined by boldly recessed arcades, sheltering the windows and giving play of light and shade to the building. The upper, or Corinthian story, will be surmounted by a bold cornice and balustraded parapet, having a total elevation from the ground of ninety feet; each front will be further relieved by the broken outline of the roof the centre of the Bridge Street front being roofed by a copper dome fifty-five feet square at the base—changing to an octagon at the top, and carrying an octagonal lantern with revolving copper dome roof, fitted for an observatory, with a base for the instrument, carried up to a height of one hundred and twenty feet from the ground in brickwork set in cement. The centre compartments of the east and west sides will have pediments backed up by high mansard roofs, and at the south end of the building will rise a clock tower two hundred feet high, having four eight-foot clock faces, and
Rear view of the front section of the building during construction—photograph taken from the corner of Pitt and Spring Streets
View of the front section of the building—photograph taken looking east up Bridge Street in the mid-1880's
surmounted by an observatory dome; as the clock faces will be one hundred and eight feet above the ground level, they will be visible from most parts of the city.

“The building will be constructed, externally, of Pyrmont stone, and all the internal walls will be of brick. The staircases, of which there will be four, will be of iron, and in each staircase well there will be a patent lift, to be worked by water power. In the internal fittings of the building all the best modern arrangements for heating, light, ventilation and for communication by speaking tubes, pneumatic bells, etc. will find a place; and the danger from fire will be reduced to a minimum by the use of iron girders, concrete floors and ceilings, and iron-framed roofing.”

The Builder

The task of constructing the first section of the building was awarded to Mr John Young about whom Mr Morton Herman, F.R.A.I.A. in The Architecture of Victorian Sydney writes:

“Young was a most interesting man who had originally been trained as an architect but who found building work much more profitable. With this background he had no hesitation in suggesting changes in design to his architects and often made constructional alterations without consulting anybody. He was Sydney’s first protagonist of reinforced concrete, of which he had no real understanding, but enthusiasm compensated for lack of knowledge, and at the Lands Department he experimented to his heart’s content. The vaults he made of coke concrete carried on iron joists. Elsewhere concrete slabs were reinforced without any scientific basis whatever . . .”

Construction of the Building

The building was erected in two sections, the section constructed first occupying the Bridge Street frontage and extending about 24.38 metres (80 feet) along the eastern and western frontages. The contract was signed on 15th June, 1876, work commencing that year and the section was completed in 1881. Photograph on page 4 is taken from the corner of Pitt Street and Spring Street and shows construction of the dome in progress. The old Surveyor-General’s Office is in the foreground.

A foundation stone was laid by the Minister for Lands, the Hon. T. Garrett, M.L.A., on 7th October, 1876, but despite exhaustive searches both of the building and available records its location has not been established.

In its issue of 12th October, 1876, the Sydney Illustrated News reported in part as follows:

“On Saturday last, the foundation stone of the new Lands Office was laid by the Hon. T. Garrett, Minister for Lands, in the presence of a large number of persons who had been invited towards the ceremony. An illustration shewing the proposed building appeared in a recent issue of the News, together with a very full description of the leading features, the extent, size, etc., of the structure.

“There was present among the spectators the Hon. Sir E. Deas Thompson, M.L.C.; Sir John O’Shanassy; the Hon. J. B. Docker, M.L.C., Minister for Justice and Public Instruction; the Hon. J. F. Burns, Postmaster-General; the Hon. G. W. Allen, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly; the Hon. Alexander Stuart, Colonial Treasurer; a great many members of Parliament, influential citizens, public officers, etc.
"Everything being in readiness, at 12 o'clock punctually, the Hon. T. Garrett said he was about to proceed to lay the foundation stone of the new offices of the Department of Lands in the usual formal way. Mr Barnet, Colonial Architect had presented him with the plans and designs of the building, which had been duly approved of by him and by the Executive Council.

"Mr P. F. Adams, Surveyor-General, on behalf of the gentlemen employed in the offices of the Lands and Survey, presented to Mr Garrett a handsome silver trowel and myall wood mallet, suitably inscribed, with which to perform the ceremony."

Photograph on page 5 is a view looking east along Bridge Street with the completed half of the building in the centre. Note the Chief Secretary's building in the background.

Some difficulty was experienced in obtaining a contractor to undertake the construction of the second section of the building, including the clock tower. Tenders were called on four occasions and finally a tender by Waine and Baldwin for the sum of £49,499 (excluding the joinery and finishing trades) was accepted. Work commenced in mid-1888 and was completed in the early 1890's. A plaque in the tower bears the inscription: "This stone was laid by Hon. James N. Bruncker, Minister for Lands, January 5th, 1891—Waine and Baldwin, contractors."

The Clock

No clock was installed in the tower when the building was completed but the reason is not known. Over the years many proposals were put forward that the clock be installed, including one in 1919 through the Sydney Morning Herald for not only a clock but a set of peace bells.

Finally in June, 1938, the Premier of the day approved that the work be undertaken as soon as possible. The work undertaken provided not only a clock for the tower but a clock system throughout the building, all being worked from an electrically-driven, pendulum master clock. The whole installation was Australian made and was installed by Proud's Limited. The tower clock does not chime or strike, and the centre of the clock is 53.03 metres (174 feet) above Bent Street level.

In later years the clock was fitted with its own motor and the system of clocks throughout the building abandoned. The original master clock has however been retained.

The Statues

There are twelve niches on each of the four sides of the building, designed to be filled with statues of men who had distinguished themselves in the exploration of the colony, thus leading to its development, or of legislators responsible for promoting settlement in the lands explored. Twenty-three of the niches have been filled but only on the Bridge Street frontage have all twelve been used.

The concept referred to above appears to have been departed from in several instances, notably in the case of Sir James Martin who had no direct association with the Lands Department or exploration. He was, however, Premier and Attorney-General in three Governments and became Chief Justice in 1873. Martin Plaza carries his name.

About 40 years ago, there was a suggestion that pioneers of aviation such as Lawrence Hargrave, Ross and Keith Smith, Bert Hinkler and
Kingsford-Smith might be commemorated by statues in some of the empty niches, but it was felt that the Lands Department building was not an appropriate location. Consequently twenty-five niches are still vacant.

The statues on the Bridge Street frontage are of:

- George Bass 1771–1803 Surgeon and Explorer
- John Oxley 1781–1828 Naval Officer, Explorer, Surveyor-General
- Sir Thomas Mitchell 1792–1855 Explorer, Surveyor-General
- William J. Wills 1834–1861 Explorer
- Hamilton Hume 1797–1873 Explorer
- Sir Joseph Banks 1743–1820 Botanist
- Robert O'Hara Burke 1820–1861 Explorer
- William Hilton Hovell 1786–1875 Explorer
- Dr Ludwig Leichhardt 1813–1848 Naturalist, Explorer
- Admiral Sir Arthur Phillip 1738–1814 Founder and First Governor
- Matthew Flinders 1774–1814 Explorer
- Captain Charles Sturt 1795–1869 Explorer.

On the Gresham Street frontage the four statues are of:

- Sir Henry Parkes 1815–1896 Premier
- Sir George Grey 1812–1898 Explorer
- Sir James Martin 1820–1886 Premier and Attorney-General, Chief Justice
- Daniel H. Deniehy 1828–1865 Member of Parliament.

The Bent Street frontage has six statues. These are of:

- Captain William Lawson 1774–1850 Explorer
- William Charles Wentworth 1793–1872 Explorer
- Gregory Blaxland 1778–1853 Explorer
- Sir John Robertson 1816–1891 Premier
- James Squire Farnell 1827–1888 Premier
- Allan Cunningham 1791–1839 Botanist and Explorer.

Only one niche on the Loftus Street frontage is occupied and that by the statue of:

- James Macdouall Stuart 1815–1866 Surveyor and Explorer

It is understood that all the statues were placed in position during the 1890's and were the work of Mr J. White, a sculptor named McIntosh (thought to be W. P. McIntosh) and an Italian sculptor (possibly Sani).