



A short history of the Sydney Harbour YHA site

Sydney Harbour YHA opened in November 2009, on a site in Sydney's historic heart that is rich in history, stories and artifacts. On this site, the remains of some of Sydney's earliest and most well-documented colonial houses have been uncovered.

The design of the YHA embraces this history and will bring it to life for future generations, while simultaneously providing luxury, budget accommodation. It is the largest archaeological urban development ever to be completed in Australia.

Quick Historic Facts:

- * The site is located in the heart of Sydney's Rocks district, overlooking Sydney Harbour
- * The site is 500 metres from where the First Fleet of Europeans landed in 1788
- * Archaeological remains of housing on site dates from 1795
- * By the late 1800s more than 200 people lived on the site
- * A number of hotels, a bakery and an abattoir were discovered, plus an illegal still down a well
- * Colourful residents included a number of convicts and former convicts, one of whom was a bigamist
- * After plague broke out in Sydney in 1901 the site was cleared and the houses demolished

1788 and the First Fleet

The site for the future Sydney Harbour YHA has links back to the earliest days of the new colony of Australia. Situated in The Rocks of Sydney, it is only a few hundred metres from the landing point of the First Fleet. Whilst there is no doubt the site was visited by the aboriginal inhabitants of Sydney prior to European settlement, no direct evidence of this has been uncovered.

Remains of European settlement on the site have been found from only a few years after the first fleet arrived in 1788. The footings of the house of First Fleeter, George Legg, and his wife, Ann Armsden, are evident, as are the remains of over 40 other houses dating between 1795 and the late 1800's. By the end of the 1800's over 300 people lived on the 2600 square metre site. Historic records provide information about who lived in each of these houses throughout this period of occupation, allowing us to tell the stories of the site's convict and early settler past.

Convict History – Richard Byrne

One of the site's residents was convict Richard Byrne, an Irish rebel involved with the 1798 Wicklow uprising. Within a few months of his arrival in Australia in 1800 he was involved in a plan to steal a ship and return to Ireland. As a result he was sent to the penal colony of Norfolk Island with four compatriots. A subsequent planned uprising saw two of his companions executed.

At this point, Byrne decided to follow the "quiet path" and was pardoned in 1805. After returning to Sydney, he married and built a house on the site in 1807. His seven children were born in this house and the family continued to live there until it was sold by one of his sons and torn down in the 1860s. Descendants of Richard Byrne still live in the neighbourhood.

Bigamy and Alcohol – George Cribb

Another colourful character from the site was the convict George Cribb who arrived in Sydney in 1808. Within a few months he had established himself as butcher, providing “fine fresh pork” to the residents of early Sydney. He also began a land buying spree, eventually owning almost half the site, establishing a slaughter yard, butcher shop and a hotel (George’s own house later became part of another hotel).

How a convict was able to afford such investments after such a short time in the colony was open to conjecture. At one stage he was arrested under suspicion of illegally producing alcohol but there was insufficient evidence to charge him. However, during the archaeological dig in 1994, an alcohol still was retrieved from down in his well. Was this the source of his income?

He married a convict called Fanny Barnett in 1811, but had left a wife back in England. A few years later the first wife, Martha, sent to word to George that she was coming to the colony, so George paid Fanny to return to England. Martha may not have been entirely happy about George’s former arrangements as a large quantity of early 1800’s crockery in good condition was found thrown down Cribb’s well around this time – was this a spiteful act on Martha’s behalf?

Plague hits Sydney

In the early 1900s, bubonic plague broke out in Sydney and the government seized the opportunity to clear areas they perceived as slums, including this site. In fact, only 3 people in The Rocks died from the plague, including 15 year old James Foy who live don the site. By 1915 almost all the dwellings on the site had been demolished. Throughout the 1900s the site was used for light industry and bus and car parking. In 1994 an extensive archaeological dig which became known as The Big Dig was undertaken. This uncovered the remains of over 40 dwellings plus in excess of 750,000 artifacts. This evidence led to the re-assessment of the lifestyle, diet and prosperity of the residents, indicating the neighbourhood was less a slum than previously thought.

The Future

The Sydney Harbour YHA development will provide future generations with access to this archeological heritage through on-site interpretation, visual and physical access to the remnants, an on-site education centre and the unique opportunity of sleeping amongst Australia’s history.

Sydney Harbour YHA has 106 rooms providing accommodation for 354 guests. Private double and twin rooms, family rooms and four to six bed multi-share rooms, all with an ensuite bathroom will be available. This is an environmentally sustainable YHA with state of the art facilities and an archaeological education centre, built amongst the archaeological remnants of early Sydney.

YHA is part of the world's largest budget accommodation network, Hostelling International, which provides more than 4,000 YHA/Hi hostels in more than 60 countries. Renowned for its unique properties, YHA hostels include heritage castles, log cabins and beach houses. A membership based organisation, YHA provides travellers with quality accommodation and the opportunity for personal growth through travel, fostering cross cultural understanding and environmental responsibility. YHA is a not for profit organisation, with profits invested in the accommodation network and the experience it provides.

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