

Remembering Mittagong Farm Homes (renamed Renwick in 1976)

A documented study of the working history of the former welfare homes

Project	A local heritage study project funded through the Royal Australian Historical Society Small Grants Program for Local History and Archives projects
Type of work	Local Heritage Study
Funding	\$1,500
Project cost	\$19,600
Heritage listing	Wingecarribee LEP heritage schedule
Local government area	Wingecarribee Shire Council
Applicant	Leonie Knapman, Berrima District Historical and Family History Society
Project description	Publication of Mittagong Farm Homes 1885 – 1994 A pilot government facility for delinquent and disadvantaged children, the homes reflected significant State Welfare developments, which impacted on our local community. This history will enable the assessment for future heritage listing of the many homes and buildings on the property, for collecting photographs, archival and oral history towards the publication.
Project aim	The aim of the project is to produce an illustrated history to provide researchers, welfare recipients and the general public with an overview of controversial NSW child welfare policy and to assist heritage listing of buildings. The historic reasons for this, is more understood when reflected through daily life in a major institution in a local community.
Funding focus	This program targets historical research and publication of local history; cataloguing, interpretation and conservation of local archives; conservation and interpretation of NSW State Heritage Register or state significant heritage items

“One of the most humbling days of my life was when I organised the Renwick Reunion at Mittagong RSL, and I worried that people may not want to attend. They came in their hundreds, from those in their 40s to those in their 80s. It was great to see so many people greeting others from house parents to staff and children who were in their care. It turned into a healing day for many.” Quote from Leonie Knapman



*Boys marching to school with their lunch box
Photo courtesy of Enid Hawkin*



*Boys also worked in the dairy including with the milking
Photo source unknown*



*Recreation activities included horse riding
Photo courtesy of Clive Jones*

Built in 1881 and finally closed in 1994, Mittagong Farm Homes (renamed Renwick in 1976) provided a refuge and home for up to 30,000 children during

its 113 year history.

Heritage specialist Leonie Knapman had both family and emotional connections to the homes; what began as a private and personal research project soon turned into a race to capture and record the history before the former farm site was redeveloped as a housing estate.

“As a Mittagong historian and Vice President of the Berrima District Historical and Family History Society, I believe it is vital to record and share the farm’s history, not only to acknowledge the children and staff who once lived or worked there, but to help relatives and friends understand the unpredictable, sometimes lifelong influence of time spent at the homes,” Leonie said.

“My years of collecting information came to a head in 2005 when I found that six hundred new homes were soon to be built on the site and that its physical history would be lost forever.

“Many (of the original) buildings and homes had already been removed and others sold,” Leonie said.

Leonie set about recording oral histories and building an extensive collection of more than 1000 photos, 200 local newspaper articles building plans and annual reports of the State Children's Relief Board dating from 1881.

Mittagong Farm Homes was a 'pilot' government facility that reflected developments in educational and institutional welfare in NSW. Not only did the operations of the various homes affect the lives of many children who were orphaned, disabled, indigenous, state wards, disadvantaged, mentally challenged and those who went through the court system, they also impacted on the local communities.

The building of the homes had a great impact on Mittagong and surrounding towns with the increase in work for teachers, house parents, staff, farmers and labourers. Businesses in the area were also needed as the numbers at the homes increased and so did their needs.

Many of the children later left the homes to settle in the Southern Highlands and are now raising their families in the area where they had spent most of their early lives.

Leonie soon discovered that her oral history sessions provided ‘therapy’ for many former child residents, staff and Mittagong community members who still held strong emotional links to the home.

“It may have been the first time they had spoken about their days on the farm, and they felt that these interviews gave them back part of the life they had lost. Once you start asking questions, memories come flooding back and for some you can see a load being lifted from their shoulders. For others their letters get longer each time I ask questions as I unlock more thoughts that have been

hidden for many years," Leonie said.

"I had often wondered if anyone was interested or cared about Renwick's history, but as soon as I started to advertise and search for people I could not believe the interest that I had created. I now correspond with people from all over Australia and New Zealand.

"Renwick girls and boys have visited me at home to look at what I have collected and to share their stories. The level of interest in this project is outstanding. Once the information that I have collected is catalogued and indexed, I will look at producing a book," Leonie said.

"It is imperative that future generations of children can grow up with some understanding of the significance of places such as the Mittagong Farm Homes and appreciate the impact they had on earlier generations of boys and girls who once lived there," Leonie said.

With thanks to:

Leonie Knapman, Berrima District Historical and Family History Society

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