

The cottage home of Captain Cook's parents would not be in its familiar spot in the Fitzroy Gardens if a 1933 plan had been followed. **Mary Ryllis Clark** reports.

# Cook's tour



## Historic Victoria

**I**MAGINE Cook's Cottage, set in all its pretty English village-ness, located in front of the State Library of Victoria. According to Lisa Sullivan, Grimwade Intern 2000 at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, this nearly happened when the cottage was bought for the people of Victoria by Russell Grimwade in 1933 as part of the State's centenary celebrations.

From her research into the archives of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest to the University of Melbourne, Sullivan has curated a remarkable exhibition at the Potter Museum. Entitled "A Collection and a Cottage", it unravels the story behind the gift in a series of newspaper cuttings, letters, accounts, documents and images.

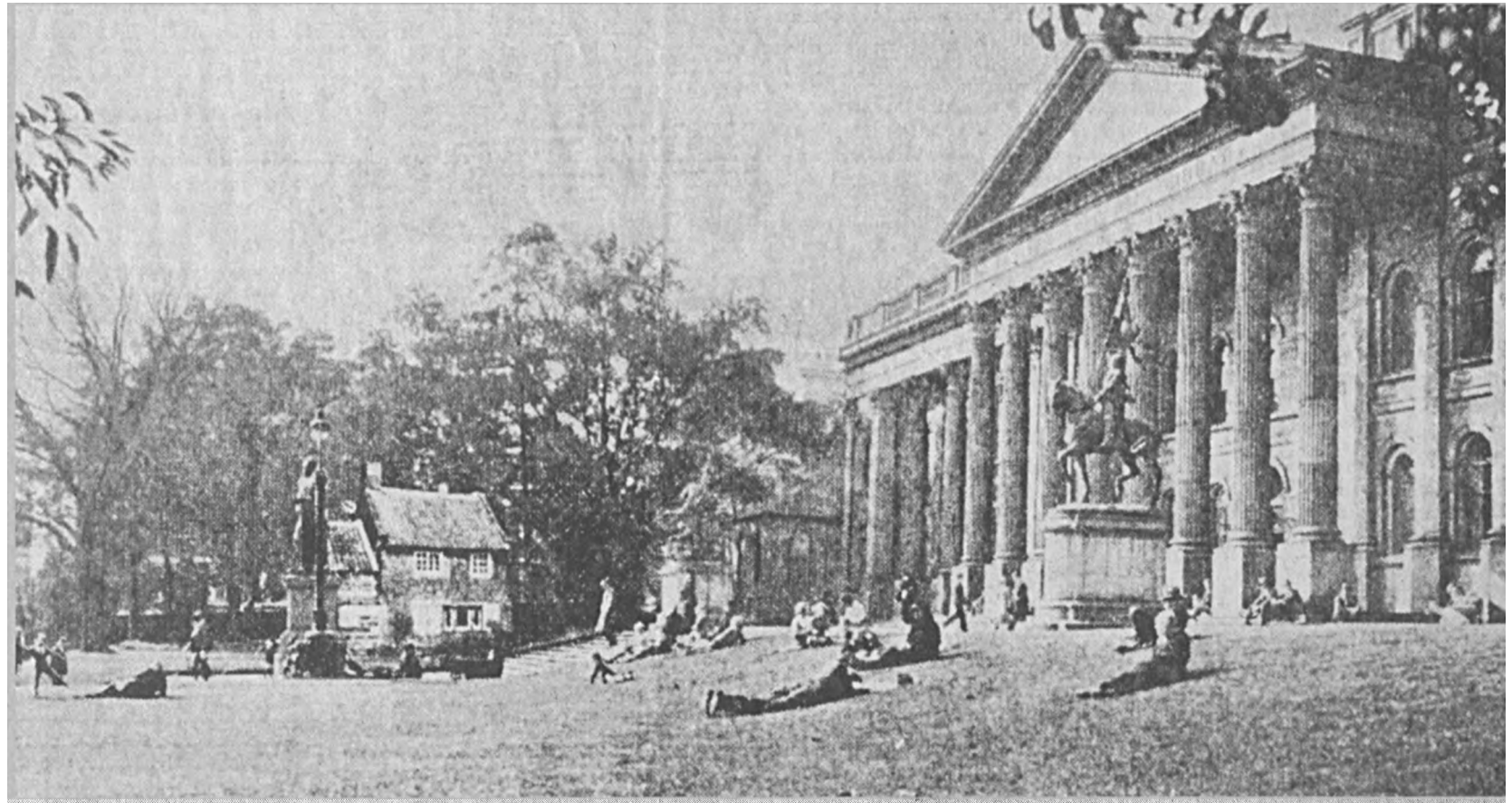
"I became interested in the sentiments that lay behind the project," says Sullivan, "particularly the perceived absence at the time of history in Australia prior to its discovery by Cook and Russell's vision of importing history to Victoria in the shape of the cottage. He wanted it to house what he called 'Cookiana', Cook memorabilia, and to be an inspiration to Australians."

Sullivan came across a letter of Grimwade's in which he wrote that he and Sir Stanley Argyle, the Premier of Victoria, believed the State Library, the building then also housing the State Museum and National Gallery, was a fitting site for the cottage. There was a storm of protest in the Melbourne press, much of it generated by local artists.

"The cottage might look very romantic in Yorkshire, but a whole pile of rubbish cluttering up the lawn would be anything but sentimental," stated John Shirlow, trustee of the National Gallery.

Louis McCubbin, president of the Victorian Artists' Society agreed. "I cannot imagine anything more appalling than the proposed site. It would be incongruous to place a farmer's cottage in front of the classic gallery building."

The cottage was advertised for sale in Great Ayton in Yorkshire in June 1933 as "the childhood home of Captain James Cook". Almost immediately, the suggestion was made in the Australian papers that it be purchased and transported to Victoria, where the coastline at Point Hicks, in Gippsland, was the first part of Australia that Cook saw on his historic voyage in 1770.



Within days, Russell Grimwade met with the Premier and his offer to buy the cottage was accepted. But the owners in Great Ayton were reluctant to allow the building to leave Britain. When the highest local bid they were offered was £300, they changed their minds. They accepted an offer of £800 made on behalf of Russell Grimwade by the Agent-General for Victoria in London, Richard Linton.

In Melbourne, Grimwade was showered with thanks from institutions and individuals. The Historical Society of Victoria praised his public spiritedness and generosity and author Hermon Gill wrote, "Your centenary gift is indeed a great one — you have given something that will be an inspiration for evermore in Australians. That should make Melbourne the soul of the continent. It is a gift that can never be overestimated."

In the meantime, the debate over where to put the cottage when it arrived in Melbourne continued. Alternative suggestions included the Botanic Gardens, the Fitzroy Gardens, Parliament Gardens and the foreshore at St Kilda. Melbourne's Tee Square Club, a group of artists, architects

and "gentlemen who depend for their livelihood upon the exercise of good taste", put forward the notion the cottage should go inside the Museum of Victoria. A decision was reached by December. The cottage would go in the Fitzroy Gardens.

Back in Great Ayton, the cottage was carefully dismantled. The architects' plans showing the individually numbered bricks form part of the current Potter Gallery exhibition. "Attention to detail even extended to the ivy covering the cottage," says Sullivan. "A cutting was propagated and sent to Australia."

The cottage left England in February 1934, packed in 253 cases loaded on a liner, the *Port Dunedin*. At the same time, stone cut from Point Hicks was on its way to Great Ayton to be made into an obelisk marking the site where the home of Captain Cook once stood. The obelisk was a gift to Great Ayton from the Government of Victoria.

When the obelisk was completed, the Great Ayton parish council issued a statement claiming "the weight of evidence that Captain Cook lived at this

cottage seems to be so small that it is doubtful whether he ever visited the cottage during his parents' residence there". Headlines in the Yorkshire press stated, "Parish Council Bombshell for Australia" and "Has Australia been hoaxed?"

The parish council turned out to be right. On 15 October, 1934, when Richard Linton unveiled the obelisk, he spoke of the significance of the cottage to Australians "who will care little whether Captain James Cook ever spent his boyhood there. It will be sufficient for them that it represents what is dearest to all true men, a home, and that it has historical associations with the founder of Australia". Linton added his own conviction that Cook would certainly have visited his parents when they lived there.

On the same day as the obelisk was unveiled in Great Ayton, Russell Grimwade handed the key to the cottage to Sir Stanley Argyle. In an emotional speech Grimwade acknowledged his "pride of citizenship, and all that (the) State and its people had contributed to his life".

**Prime position:** Cook's Cottage as it would have appeared if placed outside the State Library. From *The Argus*, 26 September, 1933.

Picture: The University of Melbourne archives.



## Getting There

The Potter Museum of Art is on Swanston St between Elgin and Faraday Streets. The exhibition, *A Collection and a Cottage*, is on until 3 December, admission free. Opening hours are Tuesday to Sunday, 10am-9pm. Thursday 10am-9pm, closed Monday. A range of free talks will be presented related to the exhibition, including "Captain Cook's Cottage: Importing History" on Saturday, October 28 at 2pm by Lisa Sullivan. For further information, tel: (03) 8344 9148.