

National Trust Day Trip to Ormiston House

Friday 3 March 2006

It had to happen eventually! We have been so lucky weatherwise for our bus trips so far, but for our trip to Ormiston House and Mt Cotton we drew a rainy day. Not that it stopped us from enjoying the day but it did prevent our strolling in the lovely grounds of Ormiston House and appreciating the views from the Mountainview Herb Café.

Captain, the Hon Louis Hope, younger son of a Scottish nobleman, John Hope, 4th Earl of Hopetoun, came to the Moreton Bay Settlement in 1848. The exact date at which Ormiston House was commenced is unknown but it is known the family was in residence by 1862. Built of brick, over three stages, the house enjoys an enviable position overlooking Raby Bay and Stradbroke Island. The Slab Hut, built from pit-sawn logs with hand-wrought nails, was built in 1853 and was probably used by Louis while he worked his farm at Kilcoy and commuted, on horseback, between the properties when the house was being built. The hut is in excellent condition and was later used, with additions, as the kitchen for the family and servants. Maids' quarters and storerooms were added later. Capt. Hope brought out skilled workmen from Scotland for construction of the main part of the house and wood for the verandah columns was shipped to England to be turned. The shutters, French lights, doors and fireplaces are made from red cedar. The grounds were extensive and were planted with azaleas, camellias, magnolias, hibiscus and other plants from around the world. Many of these, together with a fine avenue of bunya pines, still survive. An air of graciousness and tranquility was enhanced by the addition of bird baths, garden seats, statues and a magnificent fountain. Restoration of the gardens has been a formidable task, lovingly undertaken by the members of Ormiston House Advisers and Friends Committee. We will have to return when the weather is kinder to properly enjoy the grounds.

Capt. Hope was an excellent example a 19th century aristocrat – confident, commanding, stout-hearted, fair and God-fearing. It was expected that, on Sunday, all family and staff would attend the little church he had had built nearby and, if the Minister was unavailable, Capt Hope himself would take the service.

The Captain was also a man of vision and early saw the potential for a commercial crop of sugar cane in the new State of Queensland. Although others had experimented with growing cane, including a crop raised in the Brisbane Botanical Gardens in 1847, Capt Hope was the first to have a sugar mill designed, built and imported specifically to process a crop. In 1862 he planted 20 acres on his 1700 acre estate and, in 1864, he made history when he crushed his first cane and produced 3 tons of sugar and 15 cwt of molasses. The following season he produced enough to sell 1 ton at auction in Brisbane. Hope left the sugar industry when his mill broke down and he was unable to honour his contract to crush a neighbour's cane. The neighbour sued and won compensation and, in spite of an appeal, the Captain was held liable.

Other evidence of Capt Hope's embrace of innovation is installation of the house's own sewerage and hot water systems, gaslights, running water and a bell-pull system. The home is now owned by the Carmelite Nuns, who purchased the property with a view to demolishing the house and building a new Monastery on the site. When the nuns realized the historical and cultural value of the building, they sacrificed the superb location and views from the centre of the estate and erected their monastery to the north east. They have promised that the house will always be preserved.

On such an inclement day, lunch was eagerly anticipated and we were not disappointed. The Mountainview Herb Café at Mt Cotton provided us with large slices of homemade quiche, accompanied by a delicious salad with lots of unconventional herbs and edible flowers and their own special dressing. Dessert was chocolate mudcake with cream. Lavender products and homemade preserves – and their special dressing – were available for purchase.

Again thanks go to Valerie May for all her hard work and planning. A most enjoyable day!

Jane James