

## Bus Tour—ARMIDALE and INVERELL

What a packed itinerary Valerie had mapped out for the lucky group on our late May trip to Armidale and the northern area of the New England Tableland! To go into detail of all the places we visited would make this article far too long for the space I have at my disposal, so some places will be mentioned but not covered fully – which does not mean that everything we saw did not leave us fascinated and wishing we had time for more than a cursory inspection of the collections and history on offer.

In beautiful autumn weather, our first stop was at Bestbrook Mountain Resort at the top of Cunningham's Gap for morning tea and a demonstration of whip cracking. By lunchtime we had reached Glen Innes and were ready for the delicious home-made soup the ladies at the Museum and Archival Research Centre provided. This is essentially a Folk Museum, housed in what was formerly the Glen Innes District Hospital and has an amazing array of memorabilia covering all aspects of life in the area over the last 170 years. On arrival in Armidale we picked up our Scottish guide (complete with kilt) who led us through the town and up to Centennial Parklands, the site of the Standing Stones and venue for folk festivals through the year. Dinner and overnight accommodation were at the Armidale Motel, where our hosts made us very welcome and the meals were excellent.



Day Two saw us up early to pick up Dianne, who was to guide us around the city – a very enjoyable drive, enlivened by splashes of colour from the trees that had not yet lost all their autumn leaves - pointing out places of interest and filling us in on the history of the district. This is where we learned the significance of "The Beardies," a term which crops up regularly in the area. The first white men to visit the area, after John Oxley, were two stockmen named Wm. Chandler and John Duval who were so knowledgeable about the area that newcomers were told to "look for the beardies" who would be able to help them find their land. Obviously, they felt no need to shave in that isolated region, hence the nickname. We visited the Aboriginal Cultural Centre, a new and very well set up building which was very interesting.

Then on to the old Armidale Railway Museum for morning tea and a talk on early railway history from a very enthusiastic George. After that we drove to the University of New England to view "Boooloominbah" the magnificent home of one Frederick White, a wealthy pastoralist. Built in 1888, it was home to Fred and his wife, Sarah, and their 7 surviving children. When Fred died, Sarah continued to live in the home until her death in 1933. This was in the midst of the depression and none of the family was inclined to take on the huge house and its upkeep. T.R.Forster, a son-in-law of Fred and Sarah, bought the house from the family and donated it to the Government of NSW to be used as part of a proposed University. Initially opened as a branch of the Sydney University, the University of New England was declared a separate entity in 1938 and has not stopped growing and expanding since that time. We dropped Dianne at the Information Centre and headed to Saumarez Homestead, probably the highlight of our trip.

Saumarez is owned by the National Trust of Australia (NSW) and was once a pastoral property covering some thousands of acres, now reduced to 10 hectares. The imposing Edwardian mansion was built by Francis White, cousin to Frederick. Frank and his wife, Caroline, also had 7 surviving children. At its peak, Saumarez was virtually a self-contained village with a huge staff, a number of outbuildings (of which 20 remain), poultry yard, stables, slaughter house, dairy, staff cottages, etc.



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The house was built in two stages; the original, single storey building in 1888 with the upper storey added 18 years later. When the last daughter died, most of the land was sold off and the house was presented to the National Trust in 1984. The original furniture and furnishings are intact and Mary White's delightful garden is still maintained. As with all these historic properties, the National Trust is finding the maintenance very costly and they are always looking for funds to continue looking after this important piece of Australian history. We enjoyed a fresh, light lunch at the visitors' centre and two volunteer guides gave us a wonderful, comprehensive tour of the house and estate.

As if that weren't enough, before returning to the motel for dinner, we visited

the McCrossins Mill Museum at Uralla to view the Thunderbolt Gallery and a tribute to the Chinese who flocked to the area when tin was discovered. The Thunderbolt Gallery is a series of 9 paintings by Phillip Pomroy depicting the capture and death of the infamous bushranger. We were treated to an amusing and dramatic account of the event by Kent, one of the Gallery volunteers.



Day three took us to Inverell to inspect the National Transport Museum, where we had another homemade morning tea and time to browse and enjoy the fine cars and memorabilia on show. After a stop at Olives of Beaulieu to sample (and buy) some delicious olive oils and jams, it was on to the Sapphire Tea Gardens for lunch and a look through their craft and antique stores. The afternoon was taken up with a fascinating visit to the Inverell Pioneer Village and a call on the Woodturning showroom where the art of didgeridoo making and their individual sounds were explained to us. Overnight was at Top of the Town Motel, Inverell, where we were again looked after very well.



Our final day found us visiting the Dejon Sapphire Centre, where we were offered another homemade morning tea and told something of the history of the district sapphire mining and shown the beautiful colour of Inverell sapphires. A short stop at Glen Innes and then on to our last call at Ballandean Estate Winery for a delicious roast beef lunch and another short stop at Vincenzo's store for fruit and some Italian delicacies.

We were home by 7.15 p.m., all tired but happy with our wonderful trip and its store of memories. Our heartfelt thanks to Valerie May for her usual skilful planning, attention to detail and unflinching good humour.

*June James*

