

Don Bank, the cottage they had long admired. Their grand-daughter Nell later recalled that ‘Grandmother really loved the place and Grandfather said when we are married I am going to save up and buy that place for you’. James finally bought Don Bank in 1903, but at that stage Johanna White felt she was too old and frail to move from their James Street address. The house was rented until 1914 when Thomas White and his new wife Catherine took up residence. The Whites raised three daughters at Don Bank. The family forged close ties to the Sisters of St Joseph convent and school in Mount Street. They attended mass at St Francis Xavier’s Church above Lavender Bay and St Mary’s Church on Miller Street. The girls went to secondary school at Monte Sant’ Angelo College - a short walk away. After Thomas died, and daughters Gwendoline and Nell married and moved away, Catherine White and her unmarried daughter, Kathleen, lived at Don Bank until Catherine’s death in 1974.

FROM COTTAGE TO MUSEUM

It is due to the long ownership and occupation by the White family that Don Bank survived the redevelopment that transformed North Sydney’s business district from the 1960s. As these changes took place the significance of the property became obvious to the North Shore Historical Society. With Catherine’s death, they lobbied for the house to be bought for the public. The Don Bank Trust was formed in 1977 to work with the Historical Society and North Sydney Council to buy and preserve North Sydney’s oldest timber building. Pressure to dismantle the cottage and re-erect it elsewhere was resisted and Council bought the whole property and restored the building with assistance from the newly formed Heritage Council of NSW (1977) and the North Shore Historical Society. The cost of buying such prime real estate was offset by the transfer of air space rights above Don Bank to other sites in the central business district. The property is now listed on the State Heritage Register, North

Sydney Council’s Heritage Inventory and is classified by the National Trust.

DON BANK MUSEUM

Don Bank is a museum managed by North Sydney Council’s Historical Services staff. As well as a display telling the story of the construction of the house and its period styles and furnishings, the Museum features an exhibition that explores the history of the cottage and the Catholic connections of the White family. There are occasional temporary displays of photography and artwork.

Volunteers assist with guiding and other tasks associated with the management and promotion of Don Bank and its activities. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer please contact the Historical Services Section at Stanton Library.

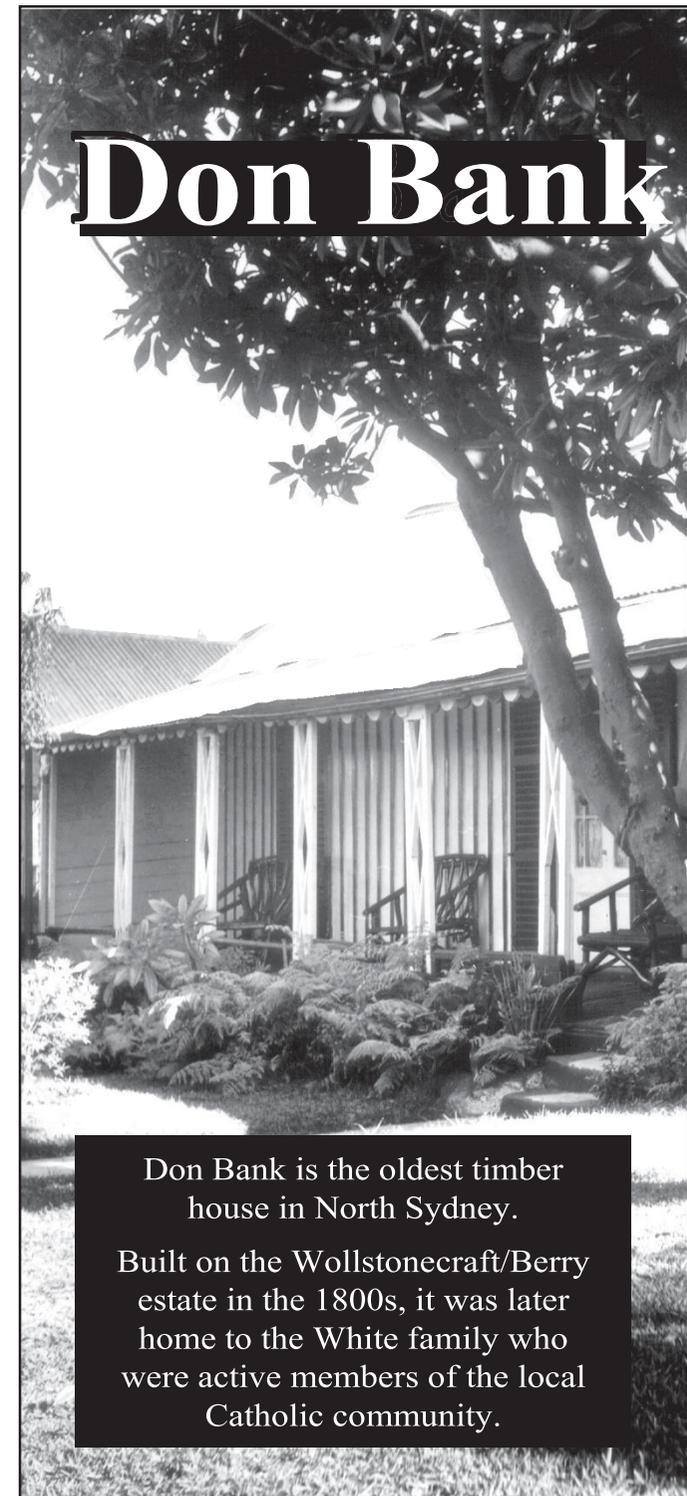
The garden is open 7 days a week from 7am-7pm. Appointments outside these hours can be made for group tours and class visits. Don Bank is also available for regular community group use. Call Historical Services staff at Stanton Library.

OPENING HOURS (closed January) Wednesdays:
12pm-3pm

ADMISSION \$2 and \$1 concession.

DON BANK MUSEUM
6 Napier Street
North Sydney NSW 2060
Telephone: 02 9955 6279 (answer phone)

HISTORICAL SERVICES SECTION
STANTON LIBRARY
234 Miller Street
North Sydney NSW 2060
Telephone: 02 9936 8400
Email: localhistory@northsydney.nsw.gov.au



Don Bank is the oldest timber house in North Sydney.
Built on the Wollstonecraft/Berry estate in the 1800s, it was later home to the White family who were active members of the local Catholic community.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Don Bank is an early 19th century vernacular timber slab cottage - the only one of its type surviving in North Sydney. It was originally a four-room cottage and there is evidence that suggests that a house may have existed on the site before 1854. Records confirm that, by that time, the land was occupied by a four-roomed dwelling with detached iron outbuildings. It was called 'St Leonards Cottage' - so-named because much of present-day North Sydney was then known as St Leonards. The house was located on a new subdivision of the Wollstonecraft/Berry estate, a large area of land granted to Edward Wollstonecraft in the 1820s and owned by his partner Alexander Berry from the 1840s. As the area was still relatively undeveloped, the cottage on the rise had views of the harbour.

From 1854 until the early 20th century the house underwent many extensions and renovations. The outbuildings were incorporated into the house and later removed. An iron roof was placed over the timber shingles. Rooms were added on either side of the older four-roomed cottage. The cottage was transformed through these changes into a substantial bungalow-style dwelling by the turn of the 20th century - very similar to the house that survives today. Don Bank was owned and occupied by members of the White family for much of those later decades. For these devout Catholics - part of the 'Irish Diaspora' of the mid-19th century - the house was in an ideal location; near their saddlery business on Lane Cove Road and, importantly, close to the Sisters of St Joseph in Mount Street and the many Catholic schools and churches in the area.

DON BANK'S INTERIOR

Interior decoration and building fabric also changed as the house expanded during the 19th and 20th centuries. Through its changing history the house reflected the growing prosperity of the region and its inhabitants. It was built when the lower north shore was still something

of a rural retreat from Sydney. The cottage was enlarged as North Sydney's population grew and development within an easy walk to the water became more intense.

The name of the house also changed over time from 'St Leonards Cottage' to 'Don Bank'. This may have happened around 1903 when the White family bought the property. The origins of the name, however, remain a mystery. Interestingly, there is an historic store and residence called Don Bank in Devonport, Tasmania - presumably named after the Don River there. There was a Don Bank Private Hotel in Wellington, New Zealand, in the early 1900s; a Don Bank House in Sheffield, England, in the 1850s; and another in Aberdeen, Scotland around the same time. However, there are no known links between these properties, or the families who lived in them, and Don Bank in North Sydney.

Very little is known about the original furnishings of the house but the changing wall coverings are depicted in the permanent display panel in the front room. In other parts of the house, particularly the two rear bedrooms and the hallway, original fabric is evidenced by the original floors, and by interior fittings such as windows and fireplaces.

The current light fittings throughout were chosen to match the rooms they illuminate. In the drawing and dining rooms the lights are replicas of gaslight fittings. During the process of electrification of lighting in the early 1920s many homes economised and used their gas fittings to house the new electric light. In the hallway, paint scrape evidence revealed the original colour on the walls and the colour is based on this evidence. The kitchen features traditional colours complete with a dado line and lime wash around the old, original fuel stove.

THE GARDEN

In 1854, St Leonards Cottage was described as having 'grounds in front of the cottage which are delightfully laid out and planted with the choicest fruit and shrubs'.

At this time the garden included the grounds next door on the southern boundary and the land along Napier Street up to Berry Street. Subdivision in 1903 reduced the garden to its present size.

It appears that only one of the 19th century plantings survives today - the fine Magnolia Grandiflora which dominates the garden directly in front of the house. Due to the surrounding large-scale developments the garden is constantly under pressure, but with careful tending and plant selection it has been maintained as a Victorian-style garden. The grounds are open daily and used regularly as a place of rest and relaxation in an otherwise busy and crowded central business district.

WHO LIVED IN THE HOUSE

A house's history cannot be told without reference to those who lived within its walls. Don Bank has been home to mainly middle class and skilled tradespeople since the mid-19th century. Some were short-term residents, others spent many years at Don Bank. It is apparent that most of the men were professionals, public servants or businessmen. The female occupants were listed as domestics or housewives. Captain Jenkins was one of the most prominent. He bought the house after he retired from sea life in the 1870s. For a short time he lived in the house with his wife; but after her death he shared the house with his niece, Ethel, and her husband, Albert Lester, a dentist. While living at Don Bank Jenkins worked as a marine surveyor and became a Mayor of the Borough of St Leonards between 1886 and 1889. When Jenkins died in 1903 the land was subdivided and the property reduced to its present block.

THE WHITE FAMILY AND THE CATHOLIC CONNECTION

James and Johanna White were Irish-Catholic immigrants who moved to the North Sydney area in the 1860s. James opened a saddlery on Lane Cove Road (present-day Pacific Highway) - a short distance from