

A Decade of Historic Bathurst (HB)

by Nick Cowley and Tom Barrett

Historic Bathurst is an apt description of the village but is also the name of its historical society. This reflects HB's purpose and function to preserve and promote awareness of Bathurst's two-century-old heritage, mainly by maintaining and displaying the structures that survive from the village's settler origins.

The present society was created in 2014 in order to manage the recently renovated Bradshaw's Mill. Its work ever since then has focused on three settler-era structures, which are the sole responsibility of HB. HB has undertaken special projects on these three over the past decade, as well as performing ongoing maintenance. None of them would be fit for visits by tourists without the dedicated attention of HB.



Bradshaw's Mill
(Photo: Sue Gordon)

Bradshaw's Mill, rediscovered in the 1960s, requires regular 'gardening' in its grounds to keep it from being reclaimed by the surrounding thicket. HB work parties undertake this work of mowing, pruning, clipping and weeding. The Mill's showpiece, the water wheel which delights every visitor when it begins its hydropower-driven revolutions, needs constant attention from HB to keep it functioning.

The Toposcope is an important guide to the various settler parties' origins and locations, but this role has also made it a prime target for vandals. The plaques bearing the information had all been defaced or stolen by around 2020. HB in collaboration with the Lower Albany Historical Society (LAHS) and Rotary joined forces to restore the monument. Rotary together with LAHS made and installed new plaques made of almost vandal-proof granite to replace the vandalised ones. HB replaced the large information plaques at the front and was responsible for the erection of the stone cairns honouring the Xhosa 'amakhosi' who had lived in the areas adjoining the settlers' locations in the early 19th century.

HB's work at the Toposcope could never have ended there. The venue is not only a cultural landmark but also a popular party spot for all the communities living in and around Bathurst.

The green knoll on which it stands has seen countless impromptu sundowner gatherings as well as nocturnal trysts, not to mention HB's annual Piper at the Toposcope event every Winter Solstice. The inevitable result is that a certain amount of litter - 'mess' might be a better word - is left around the Toposcope week in and week out. HB does most of the cleaning-up that this entails, with its members undertaking regular 'Toposcope Patrols' to keep the venue presentable for its more historically-minded visitors.

The Powder Magazine, on Bathurst's other green knoll, attracts huge interest because of its link to the village's turbulent past and the associated military presence. Visitors invariably feel an urge to see inside the small square building, even though they understand perfectly well that no military relics are likely to be found, let alone any trace of gunpowder. In another highlight of HB's decade, comprehensive information charts about the Bathurst Military Post and the 19th-century conflicts in the area were pasted on the walls inside. Visitors spend a good deal of time inside the Magazine reading these.



April 2023: an HB tour group in front of the Powder Magazine.
(Photo: Zanne Tessendorf)

The charts were the work of historian and HB member Rod Hooper-Box, the fruits of his long and painstaking research on the Bathurst Military Post and associated campaigns. This is a good point to mention the stalwarts who have kept HB and its work on track over the past decade. Tom Barrett has been the Chairman for the entire period. David Forsdyke, the primary researcher and custodian of Bathurst's local history, Gavin Came, Howard Butler, Mike and

Chrissie Craddock, Steve Gibson, Maryna Shepherd and, more recently Peter Sinclair, have served on the committee year after year and been indefatigable in their HB work. A more recent HB member with a taste for long walks, Nick Cowley, has created a Bathurst Historical Trail, which involves guiding visitors to the various landmarks and giving brief introductions to each landmark.

Those landmarks include the village's two settler-era churches, one Anglican (St John's) and the other Methodist (formerly the Wesleyan Chapel). Both still have thriving if small congregations that maintain their respective edifices and grounds, relieving HB of these responsibilities at least. The Historical Trail passes these, as well as taking in a number of settler-era buildings in private hands - the Old Drostdy, the Old Rectory and Wiggill House - as well as the government-run Bathurst Primary School with its settler origins.

Bathurst's most famous settler-era landmark, the Historic Pig and Whistle Inn, needs no attention from HB other than the convivial kind. Its current owner, Gavin Came, is a committee member and in his capacity as proprietor of the 'Pig', never fails to highlight its historical significance - not least with a plaque at the main entrance detailing the Inn's storied past.

Finally, no village can claim to have a rich history unless it has a good unsolved mystery or two dating back decades or centuries. Bathurst has at least two such mysteries (photos, right and below)

* Why does the faded face of the cornerstone of the burnt-out former Village Hall commemorate, in part, "The Coronation of King Edward VII", when that event happened in 1902, whereas the Hall was inaugurated only 18 years later in April 1920, to mark the centenary of the arrival of the settlers?

Cornerstone of the burnt-out former Village Hall





Above: the mysterious BASTA inscription on the more modern Trig beacon at the Toposcope.
(Photo: Nick Cowley)

* And why does the metal beacon near the Toposcope (somewhat newer than Baillie's Beacon at the core of the monument, a stone cairn erected in the 1850s), have an inscription reading BASTA 2"? Could it be anything to do with Bathurst Station, or with Bathurst Survey Trigonometrical Assaying - there is endless scope for guesswork?

Trying to resolve such mysteries is a romantic side of HB's work. The nitty-gritty side of its work is preserving the village's monuments; while the fund-raising and educational side lies in the walks and other tours. The dedicated and passionate members of Historic Bathurst look forward eagerly to continuing these labours of love into HB's second decade.

There are no extraordinary men... just extraordinary circumstances that ordinary men are forced to deal with.

William Halsey, American admiral