

**Submission
No 171**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Organisation: Woodford Academy Management Committee

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SUBMISSION TO THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL OF NSW**GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NUMBER 4 - INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

27 September 2016

THE WOODFORD ACADEMY - A CASE STUDY of the positive social, cultural and 'economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism, and their role in supporting the visitor economy in Sydney and regional New South Wales.'

The Woodford Academy, a state significant National Trust property, is the oldest surviving complex of colonial buildings in the Blue Mountains, and is jointly managed by the National Trust (NT) and the volunteer Woodford Academy Management Committee (WAMC). Built originally as a roadside inn in the 1830s, the property has had a multi-layered history, also operating over the years as a gentleman's residence, guest house, boarding house and from 1907-1936 under the ownership of John McManamey as a private school - Woodford Academy. Bequeathed to the National Trust in 1979 by John McManamey's sole surviving daughter Gertrude, the Woodford Academy is today a museum that offers a unique glimpse of colonial life in the Blue Mountains.

It is rare for such a large establishment as the Woodford Academy to have survived intact, through the many, often rapid developments that have occurred since the original building was constructed in 1834. Prominently located on the Great Western Highway, a key transportation route since early colonial days, the Academy's survival can partially be attributed to each of the successive owner's vision for the complex, many of whom altered, extended or repurposed the building. The built fabric of the Woodford Academy as it stands today provides a rare, unique insight into the lifestyles of the people of the growing colony, marking many milestones of development in contemporary Australian history, culture and social priorities.

However, despite being located in one of Australia's most popular tourist regions, like many regional museums the Academy had in recent years struggled to attract visitors. Low visitation rates had resulted in a negative impact on the financial viability of the property and consequently it's ability to remain open for visitors to experience and enjoy. The prolonged construction program of the current Great Western Highway upgrade through Woodford village (2010-2014), which considerably reduced the visibility of the Academy and restricted pedestrian and vehicular access to the site, also had a profound negative impact on the viability of the museum.

The highway upgrade also necessitated the removal of Academy Park opposite the museum, that had served for many years as a rest stop & parking for visitors. **Failure by the RTA to acknowledge the importance of this rest stop for the museum, and to ensure new parking arrangements for the historic property were included in the highway upgrade, continues to be an unresolved infrastructure challenge for the property, that restricts the viability of the museum to develop as a cultural tourist attraction.**

Under the threat of imminent closure by the National Trust, the community organically and whole heartedly responded to the need to ensure this important 'community asset' was not lost. **In order to remain financially viable it was evident to the WAMC that the Academy needed to once again be 'repurposed' to remain relevant to current cultural and social priorities in order to survive.**

The current WAMC, appointed at the November 2012 AGM formulated a new business plan to reinvigorate the Woodford Academy museum, attract a wider demographic of visitors, positively engage with the local community and serve as interpretive centre for local colonial and indigenous history. It was identified by the WAMC that this development of the Woodford Academy as a cultural tourism attraction was compatible with regional tourism industry and economic targets to provide a wider range of visitor experiences that encourage longer stays in the Blue Mountains region.

The WAMC also intuited that the wealth of creative talent that resides in the Blue Mountains could be one of the critical catalyst's for the museum's reinvigoration. In November 2013 select Blue Mountains artists were invited to produce unique, site specific works that interpreted, explored or revealed aspects of the historic building and grounds for the museum's monthly open days. **This innovative brief ensured works contributed an educative and/or interpretative component to the understanding of the many layers of usage and occupation of this historic building.**

The response from the creative community of the Blue Mountains was overwhelming positive. The calibre of work that has been showcased since 2014 at the Woodford Academy is a testament to talents of the Blue Mountains artists. **Highly successful and embraced by locals and tourists alike, the first year of 'Art at the Academy' significantly contributed to a 600% increase in visitation, produced the first balanced budget for the property ever and has successfully forged a reputation for the Woodford Academy as an important cultural hub in the Central Blue Mountains.**



In November 2015 WAMC published 'Art at the Academy', a stunning publication that documents not only the first year of the artworks themselves, but also provides an illuminating insight into the current creative community of the Blue Mountains. **This publication also raises important issues about the financial challenges of heritage conservation in regional areas, and offers an insight as to how collaboration with local artists may assist regional museums to remain relevant as audiences change and evolve.** The book is available for sale at the Woodford Academy shop, online on the National Trust website and at the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, and features a 'MTNS MADE' sticker, a branding initiative developed by Blue Mountains Economic Enterprises (BMEE), the peak regional economic development agency, to promote the creative industries in the Blue Mountains. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.au/publications/art-at-the-academy/>

The publication has also provided the National Trust with a key, evocative artefact that demonstrates positive opportunities for how historic properties can remain both culturally relevant and financially viable.

'A lively new volunteer team at Woodford Academy have turned the fortunes of the property around from 2013-2015, also making it a centre for Blue Mountains artistic innovation. Cutting-edge performances using local talent to interpret the historic complex with sound, light, colour, taste - in new ways not before contemplated. Ghosts provide evening entertainment. The 'Make your mark in history' project, developed to commemorate students of the Academy who fought in World War 1 received a 2015 National Trust Heritage Award.' (NTA, 2015)

Now in its third year 'Art at the Academy' continues to be an important evolving aspect of the Woodford Academy museum's activities, and has assisted the Academy in further activating unused spaces for 3 x Artist in Residence' tenancies. The WAMC has also been approached by the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre to explore creative collaborative opportunities between the two organisations.

Since 2012 WAMC has successfully established new marketing initiatives, education programs that align to the NSW curriculum, research programs, a café (that is also providing work experience for local teenagers) and merchandise. The museum's exhibits have also been updated and a new permanent museum exhibit that provides an important indigenous perspective of local history has been established. Funds raised through WAMC's activities have also allowed for important repair/conservation works to be undertaken and the historic gardens to be rejuvenated.

Diversification, community involvement and well coordinated multiple uses is the key to the survival of the Woodford Academy as a living museum, a community asset and a place of learning and understanding. The success of the business plan has been made possible thanks to the dedication, skills and many hours of commitment from the Academy volunteers (many of whom also work full or part time as well as caring for their families), a strong volunteer base that has grown from 3 to 50+ people, and ongoing support from the National Trust, M&G NSW and the local community. Both the NT and M&G NSW have provided important volunteer development opportunities in areas such as volunteer management and collection conservation practices.

The WAMC is working towards financially supporting a part time position to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the museum and facilitate increased opening hours to realise the economic and cultural potential of the museum. It has been noted that the Norman Lindsay Gallery, also a National Trust property, now an important and established cultural tourism site in the region, was itself also once a volunteer run gallery with limited opening hours. **The WAMC are also continuing to work with the NT & BMCC to try and identify grant funding opportunities to seek a cost effective and appropriate parking solution for the heritage setting of the museum.**

The WAMC note that 'transitional funding' for regional volunteer run museums to employ part time staff, to work with the volunteers, to establish and implement business plans, and engage effectively with the resources currently offered by M&G NSW could be the key to unlocking the cultural tourism and economic potential of many of NSW's currently under valued regional museums and historic sites. The success of the Woodford Academy business plan is testament to the value that both community's and visitors place on our nation's heritage buildings, places and collections. The current challenge is how to re-engage these audiences with these sites. The Woodford Academy has been a positive and current exemplar for the National Trust, as to how successful re- engagement can be achieved.

It is important to acknowledge there is no 'cultural tourism' without 'authentic' & 'unique' cultural experiences. The intersection between contemporary art practice and heritage sites has been proven many times to be a formula for success for cultural tourism - from large scale events such as Vivid Sydney to more intimate 'fringe' events such as those hosted at the Woodford Academy. The WAMC would like to invite the members of the standing committee to visit the Woodford Academy museum to demonstrate the positive cultural, social and economic outcomes that have been achieved by our volunteers since 2012. Our upcoming open days are on the 1st October (Greater Blue Mountains Heritage Trail Open day <http://heritagedrive.com.au/>), 15th October & 19th November 2016, or alternatively we would be happy to make an appointment at a time suitable to the standing committee. Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Kind Regards,

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