

bringing trust properties to life

By Kim Carter

In a historic 1930s garden, the circus has come to town and families watch in delight as acrobats, clowns, jugglers and fire eaters work their magic amongst the daffodils and bluebells. At a beautiful art gallery, once owned by a famous Australian artist, hoards of children laugh hysterically as one of Australia's best-known children's illustrators gets them drawing up a storm. Meanwhile, Highland dancers in colourful tartans execute a difficult sword dance in the shadows of a stately Georgian mansion while stallholders exhort visitors to try the Scottish shortbread on offer.

The circus, children's literature festival and Scottish day out are just three of many events now organised by the National Trust of Australia (NSW) on a regular basis. Such events are at the heart of an ongoing effort to bring the Trust's properties to life, and appeal to a younger audience.

'We know that being a static, "no touch" house museum is no longer enough to bring in the crowds and that you need to bring history alive to people to make it meaningful', said Museums and Properties Director, Richard Wesley.

Energetic staff and volunteers have put heart and soul into coming up with ideas to bring in the crowds, taking an approach that combines the traditional living history of each property with interactive learning or just pure fun in a historic setting. A mix of everything from school programs and ghost tours to farm days and jazz festivals is beginning to bear fruit.

Every property has a unique appeal

At Old Government House in Parramatta, the staff have capitalised on the Scottish heritage of the property by organising *Autumn in the Highland Manor*, a day that celebrates the Scottish culture of Lachlan Macquarie, the preeminent Colonial governor who lived there from 1810-21. Monthly ghost tours, complete with lantern-carrying guides, spooky cellars and tasty suppers also highlight the heritage of the house in a fun, decidedly ghoulish way.

For children brought up in the PlayStation era, who might look askance at visiting 'some old house', Old Government House and Dundullimal Homestead in Dubbo have created educational programs to foster an appreciation of history. OGH's *Slates and Chamberpots* provides youngsters with a

colourful insight into the lives of primary school-aged children in the early 1800s and the daily goings-on of the masters and servants who lived and worked at Old Government House. Dundullimal Homestead offers the *Two People One Place* program to explain the significance of the homestead's area to both Aboriginal peoples and Colonial squatters.

At Experiment Farm Cottage in Harris Park, an innovation a couple of years ago was an annual jazz day to encourage people to bask in the beautiful grounds while listening to some of Sydney's finest musicians – and also enjoying the chance to tour the 1840s Colonial bungalow, furnished as it would have been at that time. A heritage garden tools show, a fitting event for a property that once was an agricultural experiment in survival, brings in gardening lovers as well.

Just over an hour west of Sydney, the Norman Lindsay Gallery at Faulconbridge has a ready audience of art lovers, but it has expanded its appeal through an annual jazz festival and opera night. Now in its sixth year, the Norman Lindsay Children's Literature Festival (dreamed up to celebrate the somewhat controversial author of *The Magic Pudding*) brings in thousands of would-be writers and children from as far away as Canberra to take part in workshops given by Australia's finest children's writers and illustrators. Tapping into the spirit of Lindsay's voluptuous nudes, the gallery now also features an annual life drawing course in January.

The week-long event brings in budding and more experienced artists to learn from the

experts and to seek inspiration in the beautiful gallery and grounds', said Property Manager Amanda Trevillion.

The four seasons

Everglades Gardens, Leura, has always been a haven for gardeners and garden lovers, but now has a terrific range of events to bring its gardens to life for everyone. Four major events are organised each year to capitalise on the seasonal blooms and to introduce visitors en masse to this magnificent estate. A spring 'Cirquinox' circus event brings in families eager to see amazing local circus talent perform in dramatic settings above the world heritage-listed Jamison Valley while showcasing the tulips, daffodils and bluebells. 'We attract people who wouldn't normally come to the garden with these events', said Manager Harry Ostendorf.

Dramatic autumn colours in the garden are highlighted with an Easter festival that focuses on craft and bonnet parades. In winter and summer, there are solstice events to mark the longest and shortest days of the year, featuring local musicians, dancers and other performers plus great food made by volunteers in the tea room. In addition, a landscape drawing class brings in artists every summer.

Down the road at the Woodford Academy, an energetic volunteer committee's creative ideas have attracted people from around the country



Halloween at Saumarez Homestead



Magic came to Woodford Academy when Dumbledore and other Harry Potter characters kept young visitors spellbound with a potions class and other tricks and treats

to the oldest building complex on the Blue Mountains. The Academy has held exhibitions showcasing aspects of the Darnell Collection, a fabulous vintage clothing collection belonging to a Blackheath resident, attracting a new group of interested visitors, says Chair of the Friends of Woodford, John Leary. More recently, it capitalised on its history as a boys' school by co-hosting a Harry Potter event with a local bookshop. The Woodford Wizard Academy, complete with a potions class, colourful characters and Potter book showbag was a sell out.

Becoming a highlight in a popular community event is another way house museums can engage visitors. For example, most Trust properties open free of charge on Australia Day. Dundullimal Homestead in Dubbo invites the community to come along with free entry, hayrides and a sausage sizzle.

A few years ago, the staff and volunteers at Miss Traill's House in Bathurst teamed up with the Bathurst Spring Spectacular, a well-regarded gardening event which showcases private gardens around the city. Miss Traill's House became the *House of Flowers*, bursting with floral creations that transformed the interior of the 1845 Georgian Colonial cottage. Each room featured an imaginative floral design created by artists, florists and floristry students, and a massive plant stall helped bring the garden enthusiasts along.

In recent years the Trust has been also been working to generate increased local interest, in addition to attracting tourists. With the high petrol prices hitting the regions hard, Dundullimal Homestead is remaking itself as a wedding destination for brides and now holds regular high teas for locals. 'We want to be less dependent on the casual tourism dollar and find we can get more guaranteed income through weddings and special events for locals. This way we are part of the local community,' said Dundullimal Manager, Ann Brandon.

Christmas events are usually a winner for historic properties' local communities with candlelight tours, Christmas cake and antique Christmas decorations some of the attractions. A number of years ago, Miss Traill's began offering a traditional *Night Before Christmas* event. Now a town favourite, it draws over 500 people to sing carols and tour the house's splendid Victorian Christmas finery by candlelight. Children enjoy a scavenger hunt, craft activities and a visit from Santa.

In Sydney, the now-famous Lindesay Christmas Gift and Antique Fair showcases an elegant Trust mansion in Darling Point that is not regularly open to the public, while generating revenue for the upkeep of the 1834 harbourside villa. It features over 60 stallholders from New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia offering unique wares in a heritage setting in the run up to the festive season.

While most of the Trust's house museums have been creating events that resonate with the time period of their property, the staff at Saumarez Homestead in Armidale decided to innovate last year and appeal to contemporary sensibilities by holding a Halloween party to encourage more families to visit the venerable homestead.

'The homestead lends itself to a fun, spooky atmosphere in the evenings', says Property Coordinator, Lynette Ross. 'We think Halloween and heritage go hand in hand.' The event attracted more than 150 children and there were comments from families about coming back to see more of the homestead in the future.

Teatime, Edwardian style

At Tomago House, an 1840s Victorian estate in the Hunter Valley, the volunteer-run committee that oversees the property hit on the idea of organising Edwardian winter teas centered on a

presentation by a writer. 'We are trying to recreate the atmosphere of the house as it would have been in Edwardian times and to give people a bit of a theatrical/cultural experience', said Tomago volunteer, Marjorie Biggins.

The stage is set with Aspidistra leaves, sherry, a framed picture of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, a fire snapping merrily in the drawing room grate and a writer conscripted into talking about his or her work. Volunteers garbed in black dresses and white aprons evoke the time period, and duly wheel in tea trolleys heaped with cucumber sandwiches, fairy cakes and scones.

A detective novel writer, scriptwriter and head of the local Jane Austen Society have generously given their time and the teas are sold out well in advance.

Short-stay accommodation

To encourage visitors to stay overnight, the National Trust has recently begun a program of short-stay accommodation at its properties. A self-contained cottage opened at the Norman Lindsay Gallery last year and Cooma Cottage in Yass and Armidale's Saumarez Homestead are planning to follow suit. The Cooma Cottage short stay will transform a shepherd's cottage into a charming short-stay site, to enable visitors to experience the fascinating former home of explorer Hamilton Hume.

For more on events at properties, see the events calendar in each issue of National Trust Magazine and check the regular National Trust e-news available on the Trust's website. Sign up to receive the e-news free of charge. See <http://www.nsw.nationaltrust.org.au/e-news/>

Kim Carter is the National Trust's PR consultant



The magic of Cirquinox, Everglades



Teatime, Edwardian style at Tomago House