

OLD COURT HOUSE LAW MUSEUM OPERATED BY THE LAW SOCIETY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

PERTH'S FIRST COURT HOUSE AND THE EARLIEST BODY OF LAW ENFORCERS WERE MAKESHIFT. FOR SEVEN YEARS COURT WAS HELD IN A SMALL CHURCH KNOWN AS THE 'RUSH CHURCH', NEAR THE CORNER OF HAY AND IRWIN STREETS. FOLLOWING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SWAN RIVER COLONY, LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR STIRLING WAS THE SOLE ARBITRATOR ON CIVIL RIGHTS AND LEGAL MATTERS, ALTHOUGH HE WAS EAGER FOR APPROVAL TO FORMALLY ESTABLISH A LEGAL SYSTEM.

In the meantime, Stirling appointed eight magistrates and 14 constables to help him deal particularly with servants "whose habits were of the loosest description"¹, aware that he had no official authority to do so. Without approval from the Home Government, Stirling also called for tenders for a purpose-built court house. Colonial Engineer Henry Willey Reveley designed the Perth Court House and it opened in January 1837. That court house still stands, a simple yet elegant Georgian building hidden behind trees in Stirling Gardens in the city and home to one of the few law museums in the world.

In November 2009 the Law Society of Western Australia received an Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Grant from LotteryWest towards an Interpretation and Design Plan for the Old Court House Law Museum. Dr Brian Shepherd and a team of consultants met with stakeholders and developed the Plan, identifying and recommending themes and interpretation approaches to be adopted throughout the building.

In 2010 the plan was completed and in the same year the museum received further LotteryWest funding to begin the staged implementation of the Interpretation and Design Plan. An Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Grant was received to be used towards the production of an audio tour of the Old Court House for a historical interpretation of the law and legal issues in Western Australia including the impact of British Law on Aboriginal people.

Latitude Creative Services are developing an imaginative and lively audio tour for the Old Court House Law Museum. The tour will introduce visitors to the development of the Stirling Gardens and the Justice Precinct, and highlight the significance and changes in use of the space and built fabric over time with particular emphasis on the Old Court House and the significance of its location.

The audio tour will reflect on the architecture as well as the many uses of the Old Court House including church, school, concert hall, meeting place and Arbitration Court. While the audio tour will assist visitors to develop an understanding of and response to the location and changing values in the place, it will also aim to challenge beliefs about law, in particular the impact of British law on Aborigines. Interviewees' comments and sounds will be woven through the production to form an integrated narrative comprising insightful and contrasting views about the meaning of the place from a range of perspectives. The tour will be delivered in selectable chapters and run for approximately 12 minutes. The research phase of the audio tour project is now underway and it is anticipated that the production will be complete by July 2011.

Sarah Toohey, Curator, Old Court House Law Museum

The exterior view of the beautiful Old Courthouse Museum. *Copyright and Courtesy Michal Lewis*
An old jury barrel *Courtesy Old Courthouse Law Museum*

