

WOOLMERS ESTATE BICENTENNIAL LAUNCH
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AM
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA, TUESDAY 28 FEBRUARY 2017

Good morning everybody and thank you for inviting Dick and me to attend and share in this launch of the bicentennial program for Woolmers Estate.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land—to pay respect to those that have passed before us and to acknowledge today’s Tasmanian Aboriginal community who are the custodians of this land.

I acknowledge the Honorable Peter Rae, Chairman, Woolmers Estate Foundation Inc.; Mr David Downie, Mayor, Northern Midlands Council; and Mr. David Thomas, Chairman of the Peck Foundation.

As many of you here know, Woolmers Estate was granted to Thomas Archer 1st in 1817; hence the bicentennial program this year. The property continued to be owned by successive generations of Thomas Archers until Thomas 6th, who died in 1994 without an heir.¹

The Estate with outbuildings and ‘museum’ of family items was left by Thomas Archer 6th to a trust to be operated in perpetuity for the benefit of the nation and its people. It is managed by a Board and staff as a not-for-profit foundation.

It is regarded by many as one of the most authentic and unique museums in Australia and was nominated for World Heritage listing along with adjoining Archer family property ‘Brickendon’ having regard to the role they played, and still portray, in the 19th century land grant and convict assignment system.²

¹ Information . provided by Sue-Ellen Groer of Woolmers Estate.

² Ibid

I am informed that events to celebrate milestone this will include the opening of the Nigel Peck Centre, the new \$5.3 million Visitor Centre later this year; displays at the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and an exhibition on convict assignment at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery; a concert by the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra; the annual Rose Festival; a Heritage Tourism Conference; other artistic, musical and activity based events in conjunction with the Northern Midlands Council, National Trust of Tasmania, Longford Primary School and other community groups.³

I think on such an auspicious occasion I should speak briefly about the history of this incredible estate even though many of you here will be very familiar with this history.

Woolmers has a layered history with levels of significance that meet both the very specific criteria for World Heritage listing for its contribution to the convict transportation story, and the National Heritage list for a number of themes, the convict story, development of a rural estate and the collections that have been accumulated during its ownership by six generations of Archers between 1817 and 1994.⁴

The fact that it was owned by the same family for six generations, and the related fact that these six generations appear to have thrown almost nothing out, has resulted in there being an extensive collection of artefacts. Clearly, no one moved out, the next generation moved in and just added to the accumulation of goods and chattels, miscellaneous collections, machinery, vehicles and so on.

Here I have to feel a little bit sorry for the wives of the various Thomas Archers. It seems they had little chance to have a good clean out. And I now feel less guilty about moving out of Valleyfield, at least as old as Woolmers, leaving remnants of only three generations for our daughter to deal with.

The initial grant to Thomas Archer in 1817 was a parcel of 800 acres. The first Thomas Archer (1790-1850) was the most prolific developer of Woolmers

³ Ibid.

⁴ Information provided by Ms Groer.

and during his time he added to the estate through grants and purchases during the 1820s in particular. The estate went from 5 assigned convicts and 10 Merino rams in 1820 to 40 convicts and 6000 sheep in 1826.

At its height the property was 12,000 acres and 60 convicts plus non-convict labourers worked the land growing crops of wheat, barley, oats and potatoes. The 1840s saw an agricultural depression that left Thomas Archer with significant debts. This resulted in the need to mortgage parts of the estate with other properties. However, things could not have been too dire because upon the return of son William from England with qualifications as an architect, a fine Italianate front and Servants Kitchen wing were added. Woolmers was by then one of the largest privately owned properties in the Tasmanian colony.

William's Italianate portico has just been restored thanks to a generous donation from Pieter Huveneers, whose partner Tanis Wilson is here today and who cut the ribbon to open the restored portico.

Upon Thomas's death in 1850 the estate went to grandson Thomas Chalmers Archer whose father Thomas William Archer had died in 1844. As Thomas Chalmers Archer was only 10 years old at the time the property was managed by trustees until 1865. The death of the first Thomas in 1850 saw the beginning of the decline of the Woolmers Estate. The property was cut up and managers appointed as Thomas Chalmers, Thomas Cathcart (1862-1934), Thomas Edward Cathcart (1892-1974) and finally Thomas William Archer (1917-1994) demonstrated little farming interest, lived away from the property or entered into less successful ventures such as apple orchards on a much reduced acreage.⁵

The convict significance of Woolmers lies in its convict labour through the assignment system. During Thomas Archer's period from 1817 to 1850 Woolmers was recorded to engage 51 convicts in 1830, 60 in 1832, 64 in 1833 and 45 in 1845. It was the use of free convict labour that contributed to the prosperity of the estate. Convicts were engaged in agricultural and building activities. Female convicts were engaged in domestic chores in the house, kitchen and laundry.

⁵ Ibid.

The layout of the Estate made a strong distinction between master and servant, something the colonial authorities believed was an important aspect of the reformation of convicts. The grand residence and formal gardens contrast with convict workplaces such as the woolshed, blacksmiths shop, stables and convict chapel.

This failure to throw anything out means that many of the early convict farm workers can be identified from surviving musters, farm diaries and conduct records.

Woolmers contains an outstanding range of buildings, fittings, furnishings and artefacts from the 19th and 20th centuries, including rare collections of botanical slides, photographic slides, books and so on, which reconstruct life over two centuries. Together the records and artefacts make Woolmers a rich source for future study and research.

We are enormously lucky in Tasmania to have retained so much of our built convict heritage. And we are particularly lucky that such a unique place as Woolmers has been preserved and that the Woolmers Foundation has assumed the task of restoring and conserving the estate so that the public and historians can enjoy and learn from it.

And on that note it is my great pleasure to officially launch the Bicentennial Program for Woolmers Estate.

Thank you.