

ARTISTS' BRIEF

SORDID TALES OF CHIPPENDALE

Chippendale's reputation for crime was formed early on in the Colony's history. In 1817, while protecting his land from starving potato thieves, William Chippendale shot dead a convict on his land, and although he later regretted the action, his action precipitated a wealth of sordid crimes in the small inner city suburb that bears his name.¹

Yet even prior to this, murder had marked the suburb. One of Sydney's first murderers was a man called Pemulwuy. An Aboriginal resistance leader, Pemulwuy killed his first colonist in 1790, and speared a convict near the Brickfields (now Chippendale) in 1795. He was eventually apprehended and killed in 1802, by a man called Henry Hacking, quartermaster of HMS Sirius, the First Fleet's flagship.

Chippendale belongs to the infamous 'Horseshoe' of densely-populated suburbs that in the early 20th century were no-go zones for respectable Sydneysiders. Cowering in the shadow of more respectable suburbs, Chippendale was an industrial area that was home to the poor and purveyors of illicit activities.

Drugs, prostitutes, gamblers and even transvestites were routinely recorded on the NSW Criminal Register. The action took place in the streets and numerous hotels, brothels and bars that were dotted throughout these inner suburbs.

The reasons for Chippendale's sordid history can be explained in part by the cheap, mean housing that attracted the poor who could not afford better. Much of the housing was rented, with occupants vulnerable to the changes in fortune of the emerging economy. In 1851, for example, London-Lane (later Linden Lane, since swallowed up by the brewery) was infamously dire. A correspondent to the Herald remarked at the time that some London-Lane houses were without tenants because the lane was so notorious that it was 'shunned by all who [could] do so.'²

Telling are advertisements for 1840s and 50s subdivisions, such as Solomon Levy's old Chippendale Estate, roughly between Abercrombie Street and Botany, which describe the place as "This most splendid estate ... lively and picturesque in the extreme ... most salubriously

¹ Shirley Fitzgerald, *Beneath The Factory Wall*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 2007, p13.

² *Ibid*, p27.

situated for health.” The reality was far from ideal, with cramped houses, and the fact that water and Chippendale were by then synonymous, with flooding of low-lying areas.³

Various forms of pollutants from the many factories in the area also added to Chippendale’s woes. In the mid 19th Century, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company’s practice of burning bones for charcoal-aided filtering and allowing waste to drain into the old Cooper’s Dam created ‘sickening’ conditions for locals, who despised CSR. Complainants to the City Council described it as “poisonous ... intolerable ... obnoxious ... offensive in the extreme,” and rejoiced when CSR moved to Pyrmont in 1879. Local butchers also illegally slaughtered animals, adding blood and offal to the already stinking mix of sewage and dairy run-off. Later the stench from the brewery created concern. In the 1870s, it was noted that Chippendale was one of the unhealthiest locations in Sydney.⁴

Some of the inhabitants of this emerging Chippendale were equally unsavoury. Mary O’Shea, known as Pig Mary, would regularly pick through the mud of the creek in search of offal and offcuts from the slaughterhouses that lined the area. These finds would feed both Mary and her pigs, which in turn would be slaughtered at the creek. Another colourful local was the rat catcher called Billy Foset, who reached into the wall on Parramatta Street and extracted the rats with his bare hands.⁵

Yet another infamous character was Robert Cooper, property developer and owner of Cooper’s Brisbane Distillery, built in 1825 and a landmark on the early colonial landscape. Cooper was a convict who was pardoned in 1818 and began distilling on South Head Road the moment Macquarie legalised the distilling in 1822. Cooper established a reputation for a tempestuous lifestyle. He was addicted to manipulating men and institutions and was in and out of the bankruptcy courts. Various descriptions of him as “a cheerful intelligent man with twinkling eyes” and by a contemporary as “a bloated lump of flesh and very vulgar”, some of the houses Cooper built still stand in Elim Place, off City Road.

Despite his foibles, Mr Cooper also encouraged fun and games on the dam behind the distillery. One notable pastime was attempting to catch a greasy pig. Catching the pig required a great amount of agility, as there was a chance that participants could get seriously injured if not killed.

Latter day Chippendale has its own sordid tales, including the renowned Chippendale murder in 1981 of Warren Lanfranchi, documented in the ABC production Blue Murder.

³ Shirley Fitzgerald, *Beneath The Factory Wall*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 2007, p31

⁴ *Ibid*, pp45-46, 98.

⁵ *Ibid*, p27.

In front of a kindergarten in Dangar Place in Chippendale, which today is home to the Pine Street Creative Arts Centre, police detective Roger Rogerson shot dead Lanfranchi. Lanfranchi was a notorious heroin dealer and stand-over man who, along with various unsavoury mates, also frequented the nearby Broadway Hotel on the corner of Abercrombie Street.

Rogerson gave flavour to the local in 2008, when he said that “Dangar Place was then a grubby inner-city lane full of derelict factories. Now it has beautiful townhouses and apartments and luxury cars are parked where old bombs were abandonedIn the old sandstone gutter where Lanfranchi fell dead someone has scratched an X.”

Today, the gentrification of inner-city Chippendale has lead to the decline of industry and introduced a prosperous new era for the embattled suburb. Modern-day Chippendale is an emerging gallery district, and will soon be home to the slick new Frasers Broadway project, designed to provide high quality office space, housing and a large parkland area on the old Carlton United Brewery site.

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