



Collections eNews

History.
Not as you
know it.

The latest events and information about Museums of History NSW collections, incorporating the State Archives Collection, the Caroline Simpson Library Collection and museum collections

Family History Month



Tracing Family Stories Through the State Archives Collection

August is Family History Month, a great time to explore the records that bring family stories to life. The State Archives Collection holds millions of records that can help researchers trace ancestors and understand their experiences.

1. [Probate packets](#) (1817–1989 with gaps) and [Deceased estate files](#) (1880–1958) can reveal wills, inventories of belongings, affidavits, property details and family relationships. To search, add the first and last name of a person at above links.
2. [Bankruptcy](#) (1888–1929) and [Insolvency](#) records (1842–1887) add depth to family stories by showing financial circumstances. Receipts and invoices may even reveal everyday details such as clothing, food and household goods. Follow the above links to search by name.
3. **Colonial Secretary's correspondence** (1788–1982). In the period covering [1788–1825](#), these papers document early colonial life and include references to convicts, settlers, landholders, government employees and ordinary citizens. Search this and the remaining [Colonial Secretary letters received \(1826–1894\)](#) by following the links and adding a name, place, or event.
4. **Immigration and shipping** records (1788–1922) can show when an ancestor arrived, where they came from and the vessel they travelled on. Our [Immigration and Shipping Guide](#) is a great place to start your research.
5. **Census and Muster** records (1788–1901) list people by name and may include residence, occupation and household details. The [1828 Census](#) is especially useful for locating people in early New South Wales.

Together, these sources help turn names and dates into richer stories about people, places and communities.

Across our collections



Vital Records seminar

To celebrate Family History Month we held a sold-out seminar *Vital Records: Tracing Births, Deaths and Marriages in NSW* at the Western Sydney Records Centre.

During the full-day seminar, guests heard from a range of experts who explored the vital records that underpin family and historical research. Sessions covered the history of birth, death and marriage registration in NSW, the value of church records in filling gaps in civil records, and how divorce records can provide important insights into family histories. Attendees also discovered the wide range of State archives that can help uncover elusive details about deaths and trace people who seem to disappear from the historical record.

The day concluded with behind-the-scenes tours of the Western Sydney Records Centre.

The event was an overwhelming success, connecting passionate family historians with a shared enthusiasm for uncovering and preserving NSW's rich history.



Useful and beautiful – new Caroline Simpson Library niche display

Showcased in the niche opposite the door to the Caroline Simpson Library is a significant recent acquisition – a 'Rossetti' chair, made by the famous London firm Morris & Co.

The chair is an example of the type of affordable yet well-designed late-19th century furniture being produced by Morris & Co, that had a major client in South Australia – the Barr Smith family.

Two hundred Rossetti chairs were shipped back to the Barr Smiths' Adelaide home in 1884, and through a close connection to that family, this surviving chair has been generously donated to the library.

Find out more about the chair and its journey.

[Read more](#)



The Purple Onion: significant early Sydney gay venue

The Purple Onion was renowned for its drag revues and cabaret performances, and is considered to be one of Sydney's first gay nightclubs. However, noise complaints and venue regulation laws made it the target of regular police inspections and reports.

In late September 1963, two police constables, Lythall and Worely, entered the open front door of the recently-opened 'Purple Onion Coffee Shop' at 83 Anzac Parade in Kensington. Inside, a man told them, 'We are a bit late [opening] tonight, the boys are still in rehearsals ... Are you chaps from the Police?' 'Yes, we are from the Vice Squad.' Dormerick (Dormie) McIvor introduced himself. 'I am running the show, come in and sit down.'

Lythall and Worely observed male performers setting up for their show, a revue in which they would be miming songs and doing comedic sketches, dressed as females. The constables' report would be used to try to force the closure of the club.

[Read more](#)



Carpet Manufacturers Limited

Carpet Manufacturers Limited operated one of the first Australian factories to design, dye and weave high-quality carpets locally.

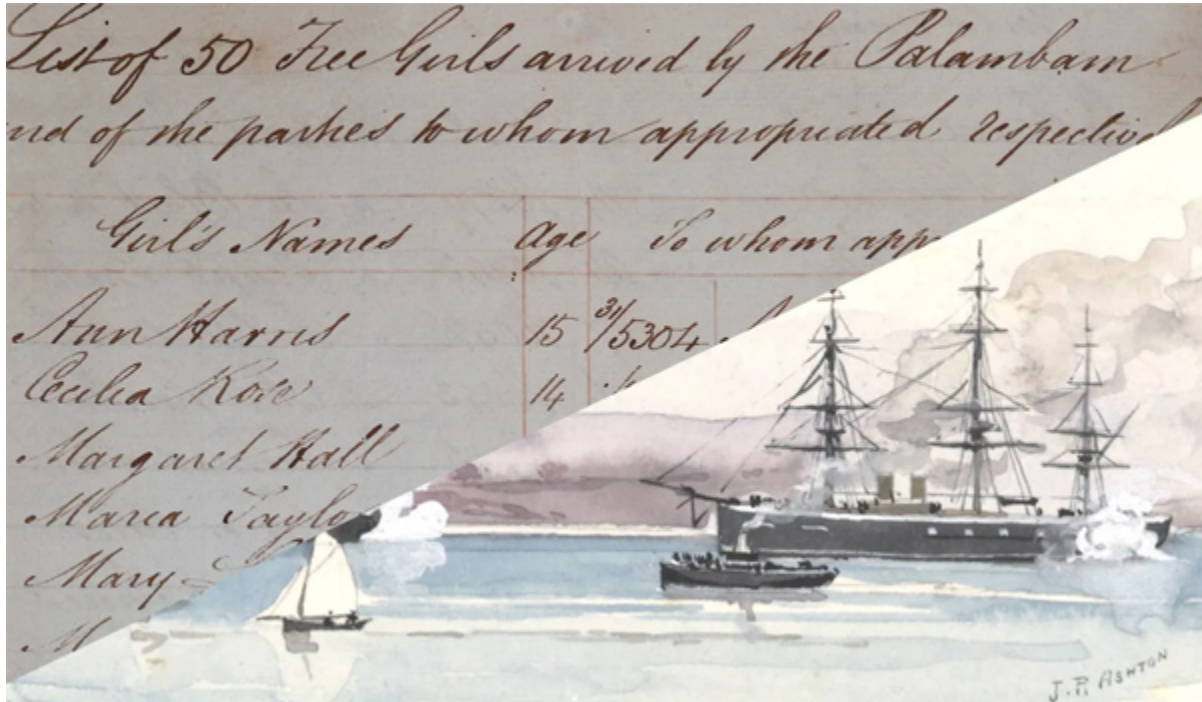
When the company established its factory in the Sydney suburb of Five Dock in 1938, Australia was importing 4 million yards of carpet a year despite being the world's largest producer of the primary raw material for carpet manufacturing – wool.

The Caroline Simpson Library has recently acquired over 120 original carpet designs by John Graham Butterworth for Carpet Manufacturers Limited, together with factory photographs, design sketches, correspondence, colour guides and working notes dating from 1945 to 1947.

Together with the library's existing carpet industry holdings, these items provide insight into the design, manufacture and marketing of Australian-made carpets from the late 1930s to the postwar period.

[Read more](#)

Webinars



‘Most came because their fare was paid for them’: NSW assisted immigration

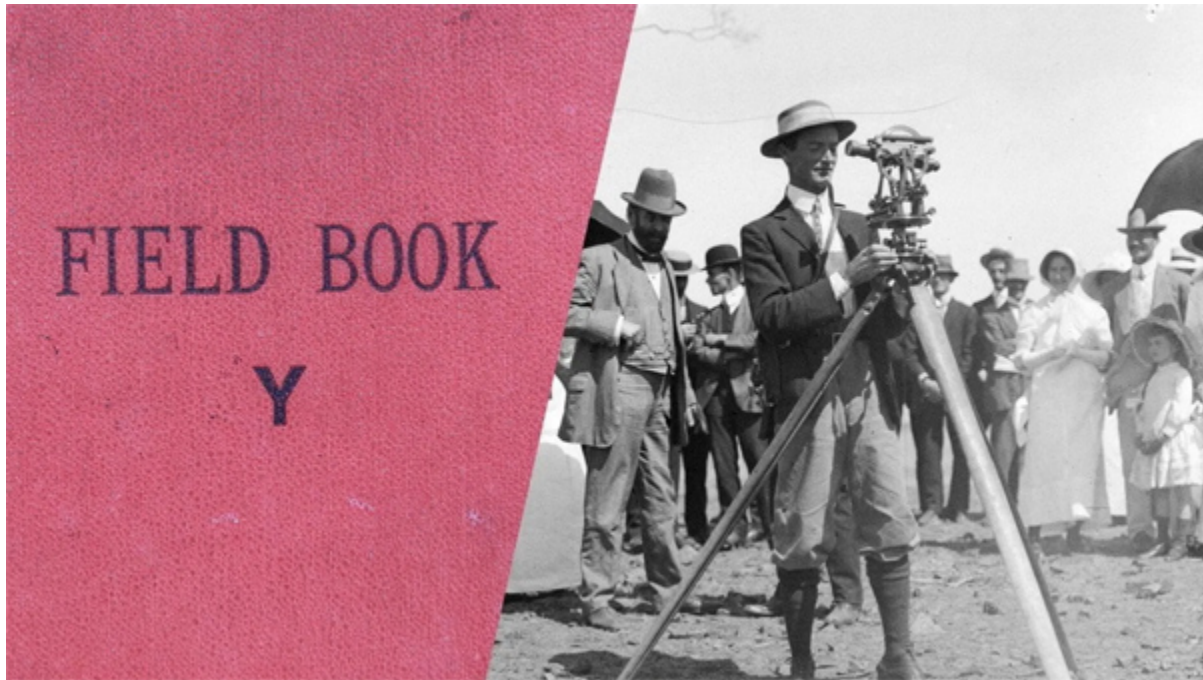
Online, Friday 28 August, 10.30am–11.30am

Free assisted emigration from Great Britain and Ireland was the cornerstone of the rapid growth in NSW's population in the 19th century. Seventy-seven per cent of all immigrant arrivals into Sydney between 1830 and 1890 were 'assisted', a mass movement financed overwhelmingly by funds raised in NSW.

These immigrants would have been aware of Emigration Agents; the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners in London; Surgeon-Superintendents, Matrons and Water Closet Constables on the voyage; the members of the NSW Immigration Board who interviewed them on arrival; and the efforts of the NSW Immigration Agent to ease their passage into the colony. By the standards of the time, it was a highly organised journey and, amazingly, it has left behind a large paper trail of official documents – not just the ships' lists (the delight of family historians), but also the thousands of other pieces of paper that provide a picture of how the system was set up and experienced.

Join us for this webinar led by Dr Richard Reid, to get a glimpse of the treasures in the NSW State Archives Collection that illuminate the assisted emigrant journey.

[Register now](#)



NSW Surveyor Field Books: What Every Researcher Needs to Know

Online, Friday 25 September, 10.30am–11.30am

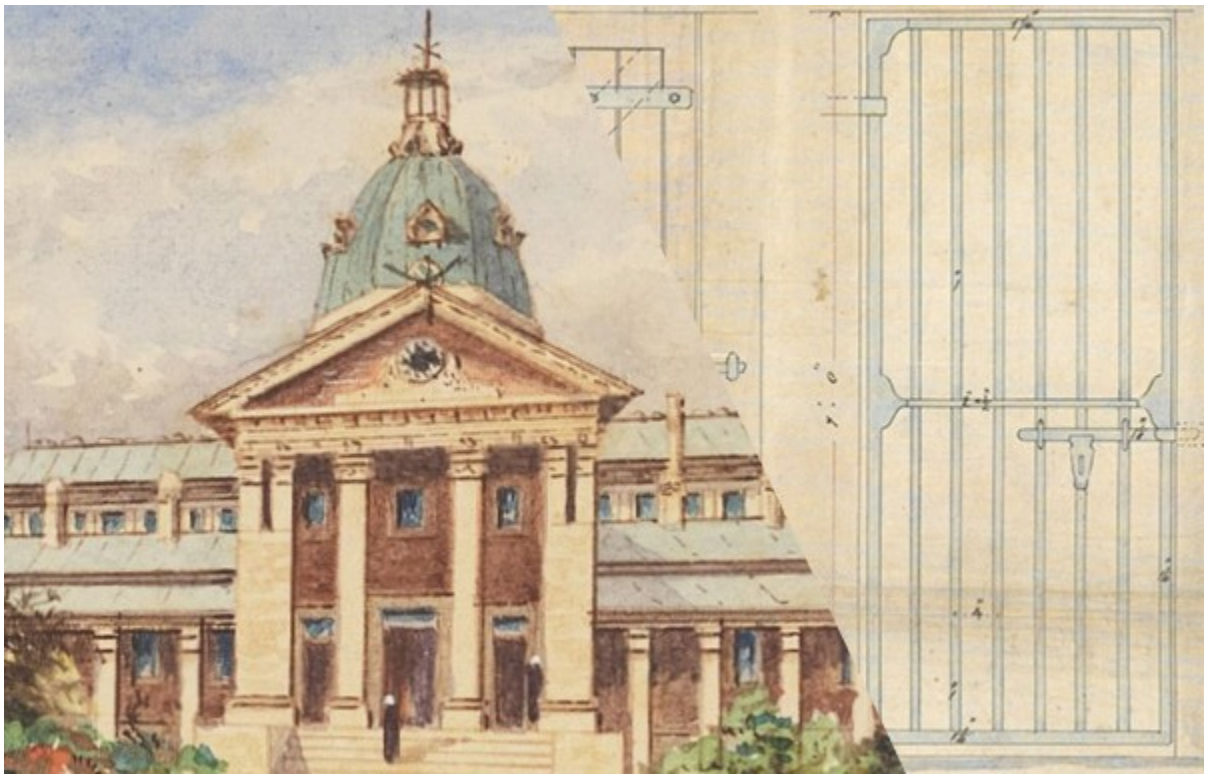
Surveyor field books are an underutilised resource when researching land in NSW.

Created by surveyors when gathering information for the drawing up of Crown Plans, these notebooks are the primary record of a survey and capture everything from the rigours of surveying expeditions to descriptions of natural features and sketches of farms, town allotments and roads.

The NSW State Archives Collection holds thousands of field books submitted to the Surveyor General, dating from as early as 1794 to the 1990s. Join us for this webinar to learn how to access these fabulous records detailing the landscapes of NSW and explore the information they contain.

[Register now](#)

Collections on tour



Outlaws, Mavericks and Rogues: 19th-Century Law and Order

Tamworth City Library, 10 September, 10.30pm–12pm, free entry

Museums of History NSW archivists will be travelling to Tamworth, followed by the Bega Valley and Ballina, for the next instalments in our Collections on Tour series.

Featuring stories of dangerous bushrangers and shocking bigamists, this series of presentations will draw on original material from the NSW State Archives Collection to explore scandalous and criminal tales from each locality through records of the systems of government that sought to impose control on the growing colony.

[Learn more](#)

At our sites



Leaving Only Memories: The loss of Burdekin House

Caroline Simpson Library, The Mint, closes 20 October

Our current display showcases objects and artworks related to Burdekin House, a grand colonial mansion that once stood on Macquarie Street but was demolished in 1933, a victim of Sydney's urban development.

The grand three-storey mansion, built in 1841 for merchant Thomas Burdekin, had long been prized by historians and artists alike as a superb example of colonial architecture. Its demolition became a rallying symbol for the nascent heritage movement – a reminder that progress could result in the loss of some of the most cherished pieces of Sydney's past. Public outrage over the loss of Burdekin House contributed to a movement that would ultimately save other historic sites at risk of destruction, including The Mint and the Hyde Park Barracks.

The display features salvaged remnants of the house itself, as well as artistic depictions created during its heyday and some of the last photographs ever captured of the beloved mansion.

[Plan your visit](#)



The Stories of Us: Researching Family History in the NSW State Archives Collection

State Archives Reading Room, Wednesday 9 September, 10am–12pm, free entry (registration essential)

The theme for History Week 2026 is 'Keeping Stories'. Join us at the Western Sydney Records Centre to hear from our expert archivists about finding your own family stories within the NSW State Archives Collection.

From tracing the arrivals of early convict ancestors to uncovering family secrets within court and divorce records, this talk will highlight the various (and sometimes unexpected!) records that you can use to unlock your family history and show you how to get started searching the collection yourself.

The talk will be followed by an optional behind-the-scenes tour of the Western Sydney Records Centre. As this is a walking tour, a reasonable level of fitness is required.

Register now



Convict Sydney Walking Tour

Museum of Sydney, Tuesday 11 August, 10.30am–12.30pm

Join one of our expert guides for a tour of convict Sydney, walking from the site of the first Government House, a place of important early contact between Aboriginal people and the colonists, to the Rum Hospital (now The Mint) and the Hyde Park Barracks, which housed male convicts and was the epicentre of the colony's convict system. Follow in the footsteps of the thousands of convicts who were marched from Sydney Cove up to the Hyde Park Barracks through the Governor's Domain for processing.

Hear stories of convicts' successes and failures, punishments and rewards, as you immerse yourself in the landscape of early Sydney.

The tour includes access to the Museum of Sydney, The Mint and the Hyde Park Barracks.

General \$45, members \$36.

Members get more: Members enjoy a 20% discount on tickets.

Book now

A compelling watch



Designing Your Local: Hotel Plans in the NSW State Archives Collection

House contents have been sold by auction in Sydney for over 200 years. Many of these sales took place in Sydney's grandest homes, with their furnishings documented room-by-room in catalogues produced by local auction houses.

Watch Dr Matthew Stephens looking at the gossip behind these sales, and see auction catalogues, rare books, photographs and treasures associated with some of these magnificent buildings. Matthew also discusses the Caroline Simpson Library's recent acquisition of the JR Lawson Auction Catalogue Collection and how it can be used for future research.

Watch now

1. Portrait of an unidentified family and their dog, date unknown. State Archives Collection, MHNSW: NRS-4481-4-28-[AF00184063]; **2.** Presenters at Vital Records seminar (L-R): Archivist, Laura Daaboul, Angela Phippen, Heather Garnsey OAM, Director, Operations and Service Delivery, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Louise Briffa. Photo © MHNSW; **3.** 'Rossetti' armchair, ebonised beech with rush seat, Morris & Co, England, 1884–85. Caroline Simpson Library Collection, MHNSW. Gift of Clarissa and David Mort, 2025; **4.** Kandy's Purple Onion Menu Cover, 1967. State Archives Collection, MHNSW: NRS-15318-1-[10/53194]-10/53194-[6]; **5.** Distribution of 50 free girls (from the Foundling Hospital, Cork) who arrived July 1831 by the Palambam. State Archives Collection, MHNSW: NRS-906-1-[4/2115]-4/2115.2; NRS-20455-1-1-1-16; **6.** (Left) Cover of surveyor field book, 1932; (right) surveyor at work, c1913. State Archives Collection, MHNSW: NRS-18887-15-5-Y916; NRS-

4481-3-[7/15966]-St4991; **7.** Bathurst Courthouse, 1886; Cell doors, Dubbo Gaol, 1879. State Archives Collection, MHNSW: NRS-20455-1-2-2-12; NRS-4335-4-[Plan949]-PC185/042; **8.** 'Facade, Burdekin House', from photograph album, Thomas J Lawlor, 1933. Caroline Simpson Library Collection, MHNSW; **9.** Portrait of an unidentified family [no date]. State Archives Collection, MHNSW: NRS-4481-4-377-[AF00218252]; **10.** Photo © Katherine Lu for MHNSW; **11.** Bedroom no.2, Bentham, Wybalena Road, Hunters Hill, 1918, photographer unknown. Caroline Simpson Library Collection, MHNSW.

Museums of History NSW



Museums of History NSW cares for, and provides access to, significant historic places, collections and archives in NSW and is responsible for promoting knowledge and appreciation of history. It is a statutory body, principally funded by the NSW Government.

Copyright © 2026 Museums of History NSW

Our address:

Museums of History NSW
The Mint
10 Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia

Western Sydney Records Centre
161 O'Connell Street
Kingswood NSW 2747 Australia

Our website: mhnsw.au