

LEARNING ABOUT Longford

Late in 2009 the new gallery, *Creating a Country*, will open in the space now occupied by *Nation*. Visitors to *Creating a Country* will encounter stories about the historical and contemporary experiences of people within places. Throughout the gallery, ten big historical themes will be explored, each in relation to the particular histories of four individual places. The focus on place within the new gallery is presenting many opportunities for the National Museum to work closely with individuals, local museums and community groups across Australia.

The town and district of Longford in northern Tasmania, just south of Launceston, will feature in *Creating a Country* as one of the four places explored in a module called *Extending the Farmlands*. This exhibition module will reflect on Australian agricultural history, in relation to four places across the continent, by considering the introduction, operation and legacy of the 'yeoman ideal', an imported belief in the virtue of agriculture and the civilising role of farming communities. The other three places to be featured in this module include Wagga Wagga in southern New South Wales, Carnamah in the northern wheatbelt of Western Australia, and Keith in the southeast of South Australia.

During the colonial period, nostalgia for the lost agricultural landscape of pre-industrial Britain underlay settler efforts to transform the land. In the Longford district, tourist guides direct the attention of visitors towards the local landscape of hedgerows, Georgian villages and church spires, the material expression of an imported vision. It seems the fertile soils bordering local rivers, and the relatively high and reliable rainfall, enabled settlers to partly recreate the pre-industrial cultural landscapes of rural Europe. Elderly eucalypts, occasionally glimpsed beyond the hedgerows, are a surreal and unsettling reminder of an indigenous nature and history subdued but still present.

I visited Longford in July last year. There's something about the damp cold of northern Tasmania in midwinter, a heaviness and penetrability that makes it hard to escape. Fortunately, the cold was more than offset by the hospitality and helpfulness of the locals! It is a privilege and a delight to visit a place like Longford and to begin building relationships with local people. Based on a shared interest in local history and a shared attentiveness towards local particularities, a fruitful collaborative process begins. By generously giving their time, stories, opinions, photographs, memories and objects, people in the Longford district and elsewhere across Australia are working hard, with Museum staff, to create the new gallery.

Yeoman idealism, the focus of the *Extending the Farmlands* module, is strongly expressed in some of the works by the renowned landscape artist John Glover, who had established a farm in the Nile River valley, east of Longford, in the early 1830s. Art historian John McPhee believes Glover painted 'to assure those in England that the colony offered the prospects and comforts of home.' At a time when the horror of settler encounters with Tasmanian Aborigines was widely known, Glover's famous depiction of his convict workers bringing in the harvest, *My Harvest Home*, bolstered faith in colonisation and the ability of land to instil virtue, McPhee argues:



Terence Talbot, Rodney Westmore, Maureen Maddock and David von Stieglitz outside the Nile Chapel, July 2007. John and Sarah Glover, and other members of the Glover family, are buried in the Chapel yard.

The view is into the setting sun, which casts long shadows towards the viewer and, here again, the suggestion is of the triumph of Europeans in this foreign land. Several of the farm workers wear the distinguishing red waistcoat of the convict, a reminder not only of the character of the colony and of Glover's labour force, but also of the commonly-held belief that man can also be improved through work, especially rural labour.¹

During my time in the Longford area, three very knowledgeable local historians Terence Talbot, Maureen Maddock and David von Stieglitz, and the owners of the Glover family property *Patterdale*, Rodney and Carol Westmore, kindly took me on a tour of *Patterdale* and other sites associated with the Glover family. The double storey farmhouse built by John and Sarah Glover still stands. In true Tasmanian style, the house appears little changed beneath the many coats of paint, an extraordinary historical document awaiting investigation.

As we traipsed through the paddocks of *Patterdale*, Rodney Westmore showed me an old double furrow horse-drawn plough resting on the hillside. The plough is one of several redundant farming devices on *Patterdale*, a rusting collection that records relentless processes of agricultural innovation and obsolescence. The plough, stamped 'Mitchell & Co Melbourne', probably turned *Patterdale* earth in the 1890s. Rodney and Carol Westmore have generously offered the plough to the Museum for display in *Creating a Country*. We also plan to display wheat and poppy seed grown on *Patterdale* by the Westmores.

The *Patterdale* plough relates well to our focus, within the *Extending the Farmlands* module, on the yeoman ideal and the moral associations of agriculture. Traditionally,

western culture has bound the act of soil cultivation to notions of morality and civilisation. At the opening of the first 'Exhibition of Live Stock, Implements, and Machines' held by the recently formed Northern Agricultural Society at Longford in 1858, Sir Henry Young, Governor of Tasmania and Patron of the Society, addressed the crowd. Yeoman idealism infused his remarks. 'The cultivation of the soil', Young said, 'and the raising of stock, are the surest foundation on which industrious people can build their hopes of independence, and of a reasonable competency of reward'. In the interests of a stable and prosperous colonial society, Young suggested landholders give their ploughmen 'comfortable cottages' and a small area of land:

Nothing would conduce more to the manly independence which it is desirable to promote, and is easy for an industrious rural population to command, than that every father should live in a house of his own. The neat cottage, the bright flowers, the useful vegetables, the well-stocked orchard, the help-meet wife, would entitle him to feel that he had social rights and duties which entitled him to respectability in his neighbourhood, and were inducements to acquit himself well of his responsibilities. In fine, the duties appropriate to the tiller of the soil entitle him to rank as one of nature's nobility.²

Just recently, in 2002, the Northern Agricultural Society changed its name to the Longford Show Society. Four years later the Society celebrated its 150th birthday. The organisation is one of the oldest show societies in Australia. Country shows are a familiar expression of rural culture, an

enduring legacy of the yeoman ideal. During my visit I met with the Longford Show Society president Roger Freeman, secretary Judy Freeman, and Bob Pitt, an active member of the Society. Roger, Judy and Bob had prepared for my inspection an extraordinary array of old documents, photos and objects relating to the history of the Society.

The Longford Show Society has kindly given the National Museum one of three painted wooden signs made to publicise the 2006 Longford Show. Other items associated with the Longford Show which we plan to display in *Creating a Country* include jams and preserves exhibited at the 2008 show, and objects associated with sheaf-tossing competitions held at Longford shows in the 1960s and 1970s. The inclusion of stories and material culture from more recent times will suggest to visitors that the particular character of places, and the lives that people are living today within those places, are shaped in profound ways by the dynamics of history. Perhaps a heightened sense of how we are all personally embedded with places, ecological systems, stories and time, may be one especially valuable outcome of visiting *Creating a Country*.

George Main
Curator
Gallery Development

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- 1 John McPhee, 'The Symbolic Landscape', in D Hansen (ed.), *John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 2003.
 - 2 'The Address of His Excellency Sir H. E. F. Young', in *Northern Agricultural Society*, annual report, Longford, 1858.



Longford Show Society president Roger Freeman, secretary Judy Freeman, and council member Bob Pitt, Longford showground, July 2007. The painted sign in the background is one of three made to publicise the 2006 show.



Double furrow horsedrawn plough, Patterdale, July 2007.



Macquarie River valley, Longford district, July 2007. Photos: George Main