

# In the footsteps of Annabella Boswell

## at Port Macquarie



A boardwalk allows visitors access to Lake Innes Ruins.

*What a lovely afternoon that 29<sup>th</sup> of January was! There had been some rain in the early morning, and now as we walked up the wide approach the air was cool and fresh, laden with the sweet scent of roses and heliotrope, the leaves of the evergreens glittering in the sun, and a thousand gay flowers lending brightness to the scene. At the right hand the ground sloped away, and at the foot of the slope lay the lake, calm and bright in the glad sunshine. It was a lovely scene, and often as I have looked on it since with admiration, it never seemed fairer to me than it did on that day.*

So, years later, wrote Annabella Boswell, as she transcribed the journal she penned as a teenager in 1843, describing the day she came to live at Lake Innes House, Port Macquarie, New South Wales. She was to remain there for nearly five years, leaving Lake Innes in December 1848.

Annabella's uncle, Archibald Innes, was a successful entrepreneur in the Port Macquarie district. A former Commandant of the penal settlement there, he saw the region's potential as a gateway to the New England region. He took up land once the area was opened to free settlement in 1830, and set about building a grand colonial mansion, Lake Innes House, constructed between 1831 and 1838 by assigned convict labour. Its distinctive bricks were made from clay on the estate. The Lake Innes Estate, in addition to Innes's house, boasted a home farm, where poultry and pigs were raised, and lucerne, corn and oats were grown. There was also an orchard and a vineyard. Innes's magnificent stables could hold 30 horses.

Annabella Boswell (née Innes), was born on 16 September 1826 at Yarrows, on the Bathurst Plains, the eldest daughter of George Innes and his wife Georgianna neé Campbell. The Innes family had settled on Yarrows, one of the first land grants in the district, in 1823. The family moved north to Glen Alice, a cattle property at Capertee, in 1834. Annabella was educated in Sydney and by governesses on Glen Alice. In 1839 the family moved again, this time to Lake Innes. George died soon after and the family moved back south, sold up Glen Alice and, after two years at Parramatta, resettled at Lake Innes.

Annabella was connected by marriage to the intellectual aristocracy of colonial NSW in the 1830s and 1840s. By disposition she possessed a strong spirit of inquiry, which was enhanced by her relationships with members of the Macleay family of scientific collectors and botanical artists – Margaret Innes, Archibald Innes’s wife, was the daughter of NSW Colonial Secretary, Alexander Macleay, Secretary of the Linnean Society in London from 1798 to 1825, Fellow

*it was removed. There were two silver wine coolers with light wines, and branch candlesticks with wax candles, and four silver side dishes: we had two soups and an immense variety of dishes. Bruce [the piper] and the butler waited, and we had four footmen in livery. I felt quite dazzled, as I had never been at so splendid an entertainment before.*

However, this high living did not last, as Archibald Innes plunged deeper and deeper into debt. His business ventures, such as a road to New England, failed. The depression of the later 1840s brought an end to Innes’s career as an independent businessman, and he became a gold commissioner and police magistrate. Lake Innes House remained in family hands for some years, then had a series of owners until, in 1905, a bushfire swept the property. It became prey to vandals and fell into ruin, and in 1984 came under the control of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW.

Annabella Innes married Patrick Charles Douglas Boswell (1816–92) at Newcastle in June 1856. Boswell was employed in the Bank of New South Wales as an accountant,



Holes in the exterior walls of the Lake Innes House stables allowed owls to fly in to catch rats and mice.



Bricks made by convict labour from clay on the Lake Innes Estate, and baked in ovens on site.

of the Royal Society, and an enthusiastic promoter of the establishment of a museum in NSW. The Australian Museum began its life in 1827 in the Colonial Secretary’s office.

Annabella’s journal contains many references to finding new examples of native plants in the Port Macquarie area, and her delight in making watercolour paintings of them. Over a fortnight she meticulously recorded the nightly appearances of the Great Comet of March 1843. Lake Innes House itself was the last word in luxury, and was maintained by a large staff, including a Scots piper. The day-to-day life of the House, and the lavish events held there, were recorded faithfully in Annabella’s journal. Her description of a dinner party held on 22 June 1843 during Alexander Macleay’s visit for an election gives a vivid impression of the grand lifestyle at Lake Innes House:

*The table presented a splendid appearance, being laid very handsomely for eighteen persons. The épergne was quite beautiful, and when placed in the centre of the table the flowers were as high as the lamp. I must own I was rather glad when*

later becoming a manager. In 1864 the Boswells travelled to Scotland and, after inheriting the family estate, Garrallan, Patrick resigned from the bank in 1865. Annabella died at Garrallan on 25 October 1914.

Annabella Boswell’s journal was first published in Scotland late in the 19th century as *Early Reminiscences and Gleanings from an Old Journal*. A copy somehow found its way to the Port Macquarie branch of the Bank of New South Wales and was acquired by the Hastings River Historical Society in 1956. It was republished by Angus and Robertson in 1965. One result of its publication was a renewed interest in the Lake Innes ruins, which were excavated by a team led by Emeritus Professor Graham Connah from the late 1990s to 2001.



The 'blue loo', a Wedgwood transfer ware toilet bowl from Lake Innes House, flanked by two Gothic-style fireguards from the House.

I retraced Annabella Boswell's steps to what would have been the entrance of Lake Innes House on a warm spring day in September 2008. I was visiting Port Macquarie to discover more about the stories – and the associated artefacts – of a number of people who had lived in Port Macquarie and had undertaken scientific pursuits, as part of the development of the 'Spirit of Inquiry' module for the Museum's new permanent gallery. Annabella Boswell, with her keen interest in recording the appearance of the Comet of 1843, and her exploration of the local environment in search of native plants to record in watercolour, is the earliest of the scientific investigators of Port Macquarie to be examined in 'Spirit of Inquiry'.

The scene described by Annabella Boswell has utterly changed. Instead of the scent of flowers and the glistening leaves of evergreen exotic trees and shrubs, eucalyptus trees have surrounded the site of Lake Innes House, with an admixture of the exotic plants introduced by Margaret Innes to the locality – lantana, used for hedging, briar roses and Mysore thorn, all now regarded as noxious weeds. Only the glittering lake remains. Instead of a grand mansion, columns of broken brick rear up like jagged teeth where solid walls once enclosed the fine carpets, furniture and artworks that Annabella and her family lived among in the glory days of the House. Open to the sky, the commodious stables that rang to the sounds of hooves on the stone flagging, and the voices of grooms and stable-boys, are now only empty and echoing

walls, pierced by their builders with round holes to allow owls to fly in to keep down rodents.

The site, now called Lake Innes Ruin, has been stabilised and a boardwalk constructed to allow access to visitors on guided tours conducted by the rangers of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales. The vegetation that had all but overwhelmed the site has now been cut back, revealing a maze of remnant walls. Visitors can again walk beside the spaces where Annabella and her family passed their days in the many pursuits she describes in her journal – making clothes and accessories, taking lessons under the tutelage of her aunt Margaret Innes, painting the wildflowers she gathered in long rambles about the district, and arranging flowers for the vases and épergnes that decorated the lavishly appointed rooms of Lake Innes House. The peaceful scene Annabella described is peaceful still, but in a very different way. It takes an effort of imagination to travel back in time to when this site – now so very much a 21st century creation, with its steel bracing to prevent the fragile walls from toppling, its neat boardwalk and interpretive signs – was peopled by the higher social circles of colonial New South Wales, and the small army of servants who attended to their needs.

Back in the town of Port Macquarie, at the Historical Museum, items from the excavation of Lake Innes House by Professor Graham Connah and his team are on display. The star object is the 'blue loo' – a toilet bowl of blue and white transfer ware ceramic, painstakingly pieced together. This



Dressed stone flags in the stables at Lake Innes House show the attention to detail lavished on their construction.



An imaginative reconstruction of Lake Innes House in Port Macquarie Historical Museum.



Stables area detail of Lake Innes House model, Port Macquarie Historical Museum.

luxury item is flanked by two Gothic-style fireguards, also from Lake Innes House. Next to these reminders of the lavish lifestyle possible for some colonial grandees – at least until their money ran out – is a model of Lake Innes House. The gay flower beds, the carriage dashing to the front entrance, the groom riding a fine horse into the stables are all here, and help those of us who struggle to imagine the property in its intact state to comprehend how elaborate and extensive the Lake Innes House complex was in its heyday.

However, it was not these objects that brought me closest to Annabella Boswell and her times. Upstairs, behind the scenes where the museum's volunteers work on the collection, I was brought boxes containing copies of Annabella's journal, photographs of her and, most enthralling of all, two sketch books containing her delicate watercolour paintings of wildflowers, the names and descriptions of many of which appear in her journal. Leafing through these, and reading the comments she wrote on them, and recalling Annabella's accounts of the occasions when she had discovered and painted them, brought me at last into the presence of Annabella Boswell herself.

**Roslyn Russell**  
Gallery Development

Photos: Roslyn Russell

## FRIENDS CURATORIAL TALKS

### JUNE, JULY, AUGUST – GALLERY DEVELOPMENT

**10 June**, 12–1 pm, Roslyn Russell, The 'Spirit of Inquiry' in Port Macquarie

**8 July**, 12–1 pm, Jennifer Wilson, Robe is not famous for Robes: Education and Religion in South Australia 1870s to 1890s

**12 August**, 12–1 pm, Anne-Marie Condé, Lachlan Valley bushrangers of the 1860s