

**Submission in Response to the Newcastle East End (Draft) Tourism Strategy  
6 June 2003**

**Prepared By Dr Erik Eklund on behalf of the University of Newcastle Coal River Working Party**

**Coal River Working Party**

In recognition of the importance of the site, and the need for a better scientific and historical understanding of the area, the University of Newcastle has established a Coal River Working Party. The object of the Working Party is to channel University expertise towards researching, uncovering and publicising Newcastle's colonial past. There is an urgent need for a multidisciplinary approach to this issue with staff from engineering, geology, history, geography and leisure and tourism involved along with community and stakeholder representatives. The Newcastle East End Draft Tourism Strategy is a vital interest to us and engages with many of our professional interests.

**Principal Concerns**

**1. The study's brief and principal focus perceive Newcastle's history and heritage solely through the lens of tourism and economic development**

Internationally and nationally-recognised definitions of heritage, such as the Burra Charter, underline the social and cultural benefits of heritage conservation. Communities benefit from a recognition of their origins. Heritage helps people understand more about the communities in which they live. It helps them develop shared meanings. Our role as local citizens and custodians is to look after it properly, not just to benefit from its effective commercialisation.

**2. In the context of significant inner-city redevelopment, the loss of heritage buildings and sites of significance, the attempt to 'tack on' a concern for heritage is doomed to failure**

Given the significant redevelopment of the area broadly in the terms of the study's boundaries, it is difficult to reconcile a concern for heritage tourism with the continual loss of significant heritage assets and the way in which key vistas such as the open spaces along the Harbour Foreshore have been compromised. It is necessary to integrate the concern for heritage (not just for tourism but for social and cultural reasons) with Council's approach to development and development consent in the area.

**3. Even within the narrow focus on tourism and economic benefit, the study fails to highlight important Australian and international examples of the effective redevelopment of heritage precincts in major regional cities, and working ports**

The plan fails to consider the redevelopment of places like Port Adelaide, and Fremantle, two significant working ports with a strong heritage theme. It fails to consider the examples of mining heritage tourism, embodied in towns such as Mount Isa, Broken Hill and Mount Morgan.<sup>1</sup> Richmond Main colliery is not adequately covered. New railway heritage developments are going ahead at Midland in Western Australia and The Workshops Rail Museum at Ipswich in Queensland.<sup>2</sup> These are both major projects with significant state and federal government support. On the international front, the plan overlooks cities and towns from which Newcastle has much to learn. 'Castlefield' in metropolitan Manchester is an innovative urban heritage precinct based around the former Roman site and later eighteenth century canals.<sup>3</sup> Pittsburgh, once the world's largest steel city, has undergone a radical transformation, and industrial heritage tourism is one part of its overall strategy, exemplified by the "Rivers of Steel Heritage Area".<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that these are all tourist success stories, but simply to underline the significant absence of highly-relevant Australian and overseas examples from places which have strong parallels with the Newcastle experience. The discussion of 'tourist destinations' and 'heritage tourism' on pp.4 to 7 is thus flawed.

Furthermore, there were no surveys or interviews with people who have *actually* visited the sites under consideration. This is a remarkable omission, and one that further underlines the unbalanced methodology of the plan.

By not interviewing visitors, and by not addressing the views of residents, we are left with a plan which has an inordinate focus on the built environment. Without a sense of how people perceive this area, or their own associations with it, the view of heritage that we are left with is one that focuses on buildings alone. This presents heritage as a disembodied physical concept with no strong links to social and cultural contexts. Most serious heritage practitioners would find this a significant flaw.

### **3. The ‘Coal River’ theme, which the plan aims to elaborate (p.1), is nowhere effectively addressed**

Despite a clear statement of intention, this theme remains undeveloped. Mention is made of the 1999 Newcastle Parks and Playground Movement report, authored by Cynthia Hunter, but overall it is not possible to elaborate the theme because the fundamental research is yet to be done in a scholarly and systematic way. It is not possible to assess the tourism potential of the area, before we understand more about its history, the way Newcastle people relate to it, and begin to piece together how it can be conserved, and interpreted. This is not so much a failure of the study, for its brief was quite specific, but fundamental research on Newcastle’s history and heritage needs to be done *before* this kind of market assessment can be made.

### **4. Quality Control on Heritage-related reports commissioned by Council**

The omissions and flaws outlined above could have been identified by a Council-appointed Heritage Advisory Group at a much earlier stage. The flaws in the plan suggest that Council has not received value-for-money in this particular case. There is regional expertise, in the University of Newcastle, local professional historians and heritage activists, that can be utilised. This diverse and talented grouping (including the Coal River Working Party) should be more effectively harnessed by Council.

### **Conclusion**

We see much that is to be commended in the draft plan. The emphasis on the need for further research, on uncovering key aspects of our convict and colonial past, and eminently sensible recommendations such as consistent signage and improved interpretation (p.8) is valuable. We are encouraged that Council is making an effort to address these issues and that heritage is being seen as an asset that we can build upon.

The plan itself has some serious omissions, and methodological flaws as outlined above. More fundamentally, the assumption of those who commissioned the plan and those who wrote it is that a heritage-based tourism industry is a product of market analysis and more effective tourist promotion. By contrast, we argue that Newcastle’s history and heritage can only be strengthened by fundamental research, by a Heritage Master Plan, as recommend by the Coal River Prospectus prepared by the Newcastle Parks and Playgrounds Movement, and by great ideas and inspirational leadership.<sup>5</sup> Once these fundamentals are in place we can begin to address the issues of market, promotion and tourism.

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<sup>1</sup> On Mount Isa, for example, see E. Furniss, "Timeline History and the Anzac Myth: settler narratives of local history in a North Australian Town", *Oceania*, June 2001, vol.71, pp.279-85.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.swan.wa.gov.au/tourism/midland/>; B. Oliver ed. *Papers in Labour History No.25 – The WAGR?Westrail Midland Workshops*, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, September 2001 & <http://www.qmuseum.qld.gov.au/campuses/theworkshops.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Pal Pickering, 'Conserving the People's History: lessons from Manchester and Salford', *Humanities Research – Museums of the Future/The Future of Museums*, ANU, 2002, pp.51-58.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.riversofsteel.com/articles/postgazette4.asp>

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Hunter, *Prospectus – Newcastle's Coal River Historic Site*, Newcastle: Parks and Playgrounds Movement, 1999.