

## John Rae's Newcastle "A Timepiece of History"

*By Ann Hardy (Bach.SW CSU)*

John Rae's watercolour from Newcomen Street has been a particularly important historical sketch documenting Newcastle's streetscape in 1849. The image shows the Wesleyan Church which once stood in Newcomen Street, as well as the elevated military barracks and Former Military Hospital. These military buildings still exist today on the 'James Fletcher Hospital' precinct. Unfortunately there are not many other early artworks of this vicinity near the hospital. Instead many of the early artworks of Newcastle are of the harbour area and Nobbys headland.



John Rae (watercolour painting 1849) Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

John Rae's watercolour painting of Newcastle was exhibited at the Calcutta International Exhibition in 1883, with some of Rae's other sketches of the Colony. There were five panoramic sketches in all exhibited, and these were from 6 to 13 feet in length depicting areas in New South Wales. These panoramic sketches were shown alongside more contemporary photographic images taken by John Rae. The exhibition of watercolour paintings and photographs demonstrated the contrast between the two mediums, as well as showing the strides that the Colony had made in the intervening years (1849-1880). The well known watercolour painting of Newcomen Street was placed side by side with Rae's photograph of Newcastle, taken between 1875 and 1880. The contrast shows the development that had occurred during the thirty-one year period. Rae was able to capture the rapid growth of Newcastle in the mid 1800's by using his talent for sketching as well as his later passion for photography.

During a visit to the Mitchell Library in Sydney in late 2005, I unexpectedly came across Rae's panoramic photograph of Newcastle which had been described in *Mr Rae's Sketches of Colonial Scenes in the olden time* (1888). This was the photograph that had accompanied Rae's well known watercolour painting of Newcomen Street in exhibitions in the late 1800's. When this photograph was found in the archives at the library, it had not yet been acknowledged as being of Newcastle, nor had its significance been documented by the library regarding its association to the earlier watercolour painting of Newcastle, by Rae. It is remarkable to think that this photograph had been hidden away for the past century, and was very well conserved.

An article (*Mr Rae's Sketches of Colonial Scenes in the olden time*) also found in the album where the photograph was uncovered, verifies that this is Rae's photograph and also of its association with the earlier painting of Newcastle.



John Rae's Panorama of Newcastle- Dixson Library, State Library of New South Wales.

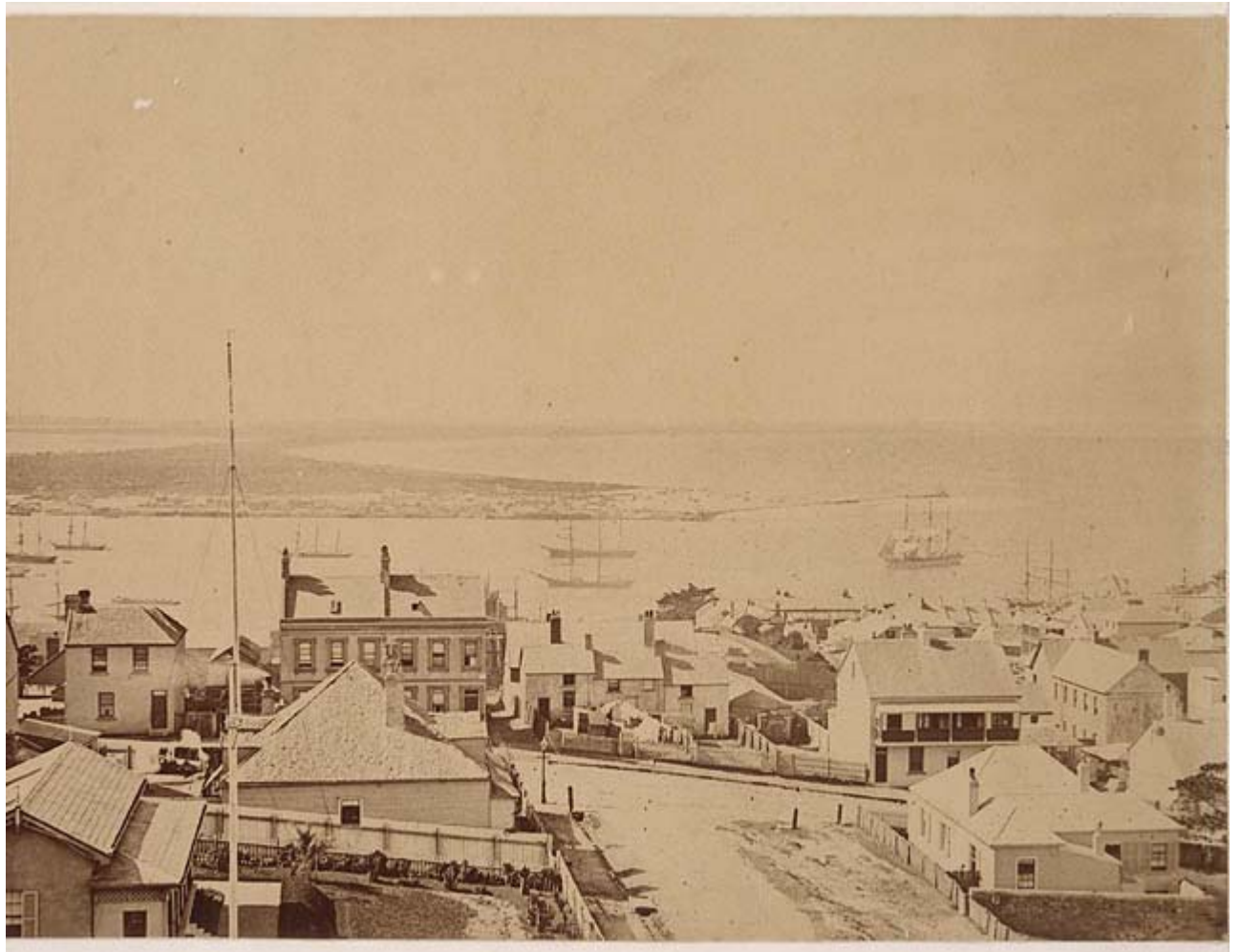
The article also states that Rae's photograph was taken sometime in the late 1870's or early 1880's. The image is not taken from the same aspect as Rae's earlier sketch of Newcomen Street in 1849, but is likely to be from a higher position, such as the Obelisk. Rae often took photographs of other towns from the highest possible vantage point.

John Rae came to Australia from Scotland in 1839, and in 1843 was appointed Sydney's first town Clerk. He later worked in various public works positions, as well as an accountant for the Sydney Railway Company. Despite his busy work schedule he was prominent in cultural activities in Sydney and was a literary writer. Rae was involved in organising the first exhibition of the society for the promotion of fine arts in 1847. In the 1850's Rae became interested in photography, and in a lecture that he gave at the Sydney Mechanics School of Arts in 1855 on the techniques of photography, he advised "I am anxious to make some of you amateurs like myself". The watercolour that he completed of Newcastle in 1849 was developed with the aid of a camera obscura also known as a sketching camera, that he constructed himself. This technique means that it is likely that most of Rae's watercolour paintings are accurate, and therefore reliable when interpreting for historical research. Rae was

ingeniously able to combine his artistic talents with the technical skill of photography. He not only produced something that was aesthetically pleasing, but was also able to record reliably the colonial times of Newcastle.



John Rae's Panorama of Newcastle- Dixon Library, State Library of New South Wales.



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## References

*Mr Rae's Sketches of Colonial Scenes in the olden time.* (1888) NSW Commission for the Melbourne Centennial Exhibition. Charles Potter, Government Printer. Sydney.

Kerr, Joan (ed) *The Dictionary of Australian Artists, Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and engravers to 1870.* Pp.652-654.

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