

3rd Australasian Engineering Heritage Conference 2009

Sydney's Darling Harbour: Two Centuries of Industrial Development, Decline, Transformation and Interpretation

Dr Wayne Johnson

Senior archaeologist, Heritage & Design division, Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority

SUMMARY: For much of the past 200 years the history of Darling Harbour has been embodied in the ships which used it, the shipyards and wharves along its shores and the myriad of factories and warehouses that grew up in the surrounding streets. In the nineteenth century the Harbour was a centre for change and particularly for the introduction of Industrial Revolution technology. It was here that the first steam engine in Australia started work in 1815, here the first iron hulled ship was assembled and here the colony's first foundries belched smoke along its shores, as did the first steamship to be launched. Other important firsts were the Australian Gas Light Company's gasworks, fired up on Queen Victoria's birthday in 1842, and in the next decade Zöllner's galvanizing plant, an important innovation in a country that was to find more ways to use galvanized iron than any other. In 1855 the railway line that ran from the old Central Station along the Ultimo foreshore was part of the first line in NSW. In the 1880s the first hydraulic pumping station in NSW opened and remnants of it still stand as part of an hotel. Around the turn of the century the Ultimo Power Station supplied electricity for Sydney's first electric trams and its neighbour in Pyrmont supplied power to Sydney households through the first reticulated grid.

The Second World War stimulated trade and industry but by the time it ended the coastal shipping trade had disappeared and many industries around the harbour were decaying. This process continued after the war and, although the rail yards continued their growth for a few years, in 1984 the last goods train steamed out of the yards and the industrial history of Darling Harbour was ended. The same year however marked the start of a new era when construction started on the new entertainment and retail precinct which is now the focus of Sydney's leisure scene.

This talk will focus on rediscovering a lost history, and the means of integrating that history into the built environment, along with the adaptive reuse of industrial structures in the vicinity.