



Chris Tobin's healing eucalyptus smoke entices visitors into the culture room at Woodford Academy

# RECONCILIATION IN TRUSTED HANDS

Words by Ellen Hill, Photographs by David Hill

*Situated on an ancient Darug pathway, old sandstone buildings that once symbolised imperialism are now vehicles for reconciliation.*

The scent of eucalyptus smoke lures passers-by to the sandstone structures of Woodford Academy in the Blue Mountains. It cuts through the scratchy smells of vehicles and asphalt, casually curls around doorways, clings to walls and seeps into rooms, cleansing and clearing generations of misunderstanding, fear, pain and hatred. The eucalyptus smoke weaves together the ancient culture of Australia's first peoples and the might of British

imperialism as it sends tendrils into every room, slides between cobblestones and soaks into the trees.

For the first time in 200 years, local Aboriginal people feel comfortable entering the Woodford Academy property in the central Blue Mountains. The oldest collection of European buildings in the Blue Mountains has long stood on an ancient pathway near a traditional stopping place, a stoic symbol of disrespect for Indigenous culture and the suppression of its people. It is ironic, then, that the first and





Woodford Academy's interior



Woodford Academy's timeworn flagstones

only Aboriginal space for Darug people to share culture, heritage and knowledge with visitors is in a sandstone room at Woodford Academy.

The Woodford Academy site was first used by Europeans as a colonial road-gang encampment before Thomas Pembroke was given a land grant in 1831 on which to establish an inn. Since then, the Woodford Academy property has operated as a private hospital, a guesthouse and a Victorian-era country retreat for wealthy Sydney merchant Alfred Fairfax, who expanded the property to a 90-acre estate.

Distinguished scholar John McManamey leased the property in 1907 and operated an exclusive school – Woodford Academy for Boys – until 1925, then a co-educational day school from 1929 to 1936.

After his death in 1946, McManamey's daughters Jessie and Gertrude lived on in the building, selling off portions of the property for income. Jessie died in 1972, and Gertrude, who bequeathed the property to the National Trust in 1979 and lived there until 1986, died in 1988.

Created by well-known Darug man Chris Tobin after a 'quite beautiful' outreach between the Woodford Academy management committee, Chris's sister Jacinta and Darug elder Aunty Carol Cooper, the Aboriginal culture room features Tobin's original artworks and a music composition by Jacinta.

Tobin himself attends the property's regular open days to talk with visitors. Healing eucalyptus smoke entices them to the culture room.





Woodford Academy

'I love that the oldest collection of European buildings in the mountains has a place for the oldest continuous culture on Earth,' Tobin says.

'It demonstrates that the National Trust has a respect for Aboriginal culture. Certainly, it demonstrates that the local people, who are the ones I care most about, have that respect for Aboriginal culture. This would not have happened unless they had generous hearts. If I had to insist or convince them, I wouldn't be here.'

The room is a visiting place to meet an Aboriginal person from Darug country, and to learn and share culture and history as part of reconciliation.

Much of the history and culture is lovely and gentle. Aboriginal culture is egalitarian; people were healthy, happy and family-oriented, and worked as a team. Homelessness, class and poverty were unknown; there was no army, no empires, no slavery, no fences.

Some of the history is uncomfortable and painful. Visitors will see a small depiction on a wall-hanging in the corner of the Battle of Richmond Hill in the nearby Hawkesbury area in 1795, where Darug people fought to defend their land from colonial troopers.

'We didn't want to jam it in people's faces, but it's there if people want to talk about it or learn about it,' Tobin says. 'I would feel like I was lying to people if I didn't have it there.'

Through his talks to school children, appearances at community events and meetings with visitors to the culture room, he aims to 'overturn the presumption that Aboriginal culture is a primitive culture – it's an ancient culture.'

'I can't think of a better chapter in the story of this place than to have the story of the Aboriginal significance of this area incorporated into the Woodford Academy story.'

Raised as a white Australian identifying with the Irish immigrant side of his family, Tobin's personal reconciliation

journey began when he learned of his Aboriginal heritage in his early 20s.

'My mother remembers as a girl asking her mother, a couple of times, whether they were Aboriginal, and she got told "No," although my Nan clearly knew.'

'There's a story of my mother coming home from a dance in tears because all the boys called her "that old black magic" and were singing that song, but my Nan always denied it.'

Denial was often considered the safest option for Aboriginal people who appeared white in the days of the Stolen Generations.

'My mother was brought up racist, thinking Aboriginal people were dirty, lazy and untrustworthy, so to get her head around that was a real journey for her. I remember once a fella came around to fix her water heater and said, "What nationality are you?" and she said "Australian". He said, "What's that other mix in there as well, though?" and she said, "Oh that? Aboriginal". That was the first time she acknowledged it. I was really proud of her.'

Sitting on an ancient Aboriginal pathway in the middle of the Blue Mountains, and steered by a volunteer team of well-connected younger professionals, Woodford Academy has become a model example to other National Trust properties of how to engage communities, including local Aboriginal communities, find new relevance in a modern society and become financially viable.

It offers not only a unique glimpse into colonial life in the Blue Mountains, but also an insight into the modern Blue Mountains community through interpretive displays, artist residencies and site-specific arts events.

National Trust CEO Brian Scarsbrick says that the heritage agency 'understands and appreciates the value of engaging regional communities in reconciliation and acknowledging our nation's shared history'. ◦



Woodford Academy