Making what’s old new again
Bridge Street Plan Room 1828–2007 and beyond

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Life is fast paced. Everyone is busy racing towards the future at such a speed that too often we forget to take a step back and remember how the life we know today began.

Australia is a relatively new country but our history is steeped in bravery, hardship, physical labour, sacrifice and strength of character.

The early settlers overcame many adversities with the meld of their varied talents and skills giving birth to the unique culture we enjoy today.

An important part of this history is the journey of discovery in all its many phases.

Starting with the original settlement of makeshift ‘shanties’ to the formalisation of land titles where settlers and squatters were allocated land parcels throughout the different charted areas of NSW.

And evolving over the decades into the mix of old and new architecture that exists today.

The 21st century has seen many of NSW’s original buildings ‘lost’ amongst the modern steel and glass skyscrapers.

However, once the grandeur and elegance of our old buildings is noticed, it is obvious they still retain the beauty of the early 19th century.

From early settlement, land was a valuable commodity and this is no different today. The practice of keeping records of land ownership began, when settlement was new, with the 1792 Land Grant Registers.

Today, much of the processing of survey plans and title documents is enhanced by technology, with land and titling information available electronically.
These first Crown Plans defined roads, leases, licences and grants affecting Crown land, or any land that was being alienated from the Crown.

King George III of England instructed Captain Arthur Phillip, the first Governor of the new colony of NSW, to start granting Crown land.

In 1787, the first Surveyor General for NSW, Baron Augustus Alt, was appointed in England and given the task of measuring land grants for the emancipated convicts, soldiers and settlers when he arrived in NSW with the first fleet.

Recording these measurements created the first Crown Plans.

These Crown Plans defined roads, leases, licences and grants affecting Crown Land, or any land that was in the process of being alienated from the Crown. The Plans also recorded the journeys of exploration undertaken by the early explorers.

From 1788 the Surveyor General became the custodian of these Crown Plans with a number of important historical changes and evolutions occurring from this time and continuing through the 19th and 20th centuries.

In 1825 a general survey of the colony was ordered, which included dividing the colony into Counties and Parishes, and the system of selling Crown Land was introduced.

In 1828 a room was set aside in the Surveyor General’s office for the arrangement of all maps in alphabetical order and to better preserve the order of maps, a system that was essential for accurate and easy reference.

From 1828 the practice of allocating small and large numbers to each map commenced so that plans could be more specifically identified.

All maps and plans were assigned an area number (small number); they were then distinguished by a plan number (large number), a system that is similar to the one used today.

In 1829 the Limits of Settlement was established to curb unauthorised occupation of land by ‘squatters’. The area within the colony of NSW available for settlement was restricted and the settlement limits were defined by 19 counties.
In 1831, free grants were abolished with all sale land having to fall within the 19 identified counties. Squatters, however, continued to reside outside these counties until they were given long term leases or offered the opportunity to purchase the land.

1836 saw the introduction of Grazing Licences for Crown lands outside the 19 counties.

In 1847 orders in Council abolished the Limits of Settlement and divided the colony into three districts: settled, intermediate and unsettled.

By 1848 NSW was divided into the 141 Counties that still exist today, and 7,515 Parishes. These Parishes were then divided into land parcels (Portions), most of which were defined by plans of survey and catalogued as Crown Plans.

In 1856 the Department of Lands and Public Works was created which, in 1859, changed with the Department of Lands becoming a separate entity.

The 1861 Robertson Land Acts introduced a new system of land occupation that reduced the tenure of pastoral leases and made all Crown Land, including pastoral leases, open to free selection without survey (conditional purchase). These Acts determined the land system of NSW until 1884.

In 1863 the Torrens system of Title became effective in NSW under the Real Property Act of 1862, with a single folio concept introduced for recording government guaranteed land ownership, replacing the more cumbersome common law with its chain of titles and no guarantee.

In 1884 the Crown Lands Act divided the state into three territorial divisions: Eastern, Central and Western. The Department of Lands was decentralised to become the present system of regional offices and Local Land Boards.
In 1891 the Lands’ building in Bridge St Sydney was completed. Designed by architect James Barnet, who also designed the Sydney GPO, it was built of sandstone and became the home of early map making in Australia. An area on the third floor was set aside for the filing and preservation of plans with steel doors installed for security and to provide a fireproof environment.

The 1913 Crown Lands Consolidation Act amalgamated many small Acts into one, introducing templates to simplify plans.

1949 saw the introduction of the Survey Coordination Act. All future survey plans had to connect to permanent marks placed by government surveyors in specially gazetted areas.

This survey control created the basic framework for quality land information systems and helped future spatial and economic development.

In 1963 all Crown land parcels identified for a specific purpose (i.e. for subdivision or disposal) had to have a Deposited Plan of survey. This defined the parcel for lodgement and registration in the Registrar General’s Department. However, miscellaneous and Road Plans continued to be catalogued in the Bridge Street Plan Room.

The 1970s saw the appearance of electronic distance measuring equipment (EDM), followed later by the laser which simplified the way survey calculations were undertaken.

In 1975 the last plan was drawn by hand and the system of cataloguing of Crown Plans System ceased to exist.

From 1977, the microfilming of original Crown Plans commenced.

In 1983 it became compulsory for all Crown Plans to be lodged as Deposited Plans at the Registrar General’s Office.

In the 1990s, the introduction of Global Positioning System (GPS) satellites became more widely accepted and relied upon for surveying.
The Bridge Street Plan Room currently holds the State’s collection of approximately one million hard copy records that date back to the commencement of European settlement.

This includes parish maps, charting maps, survey plans and survey field notebooks.

The significance of this collection is the unique survey and land status information it contains which enables these Crown Plans to be used as an essential resource in the planning and land management for NSW.

In the past, the only way to access Crown Plan information was to make a copy directly from the original hard copy plans. In 1977 most of the Crown Plans from the Bridge Street Plan Room were captured on black and white microfilm.

However, these microfilm records may be incomplete, of variable quality and may fail to convey vital information available in the original colour hard copies.

Many of the Crown Plans are now more than 150 years old and their physical condition has progressively deteriorated. In some instances, where degradation is particularly advanced, there is the risk of permanently losing priceless intellectual property contained within the plans.

The significance of this collection is the unique survey and land status information it contains.
In order to ensure that high quality digital colour copies of the State’s Crown Plans are always available, Land and Property Information (LPI), has commenced a project to progressively move these plans to Bathurst for colour scanning.

Once scanned, they will be archived in a temperature controlled environment at State Records in Kingswood.

The process being undertaken by LPI for preserving, scanning and offering online access to Crown Plans incorporates:

1. Conservation work
   A qualified conservator has been appointed to progressively carry out the more complex assessment and conservation work in order to stabilise, restore and preserve the more fragile documents prior to scanning.

2. Scanning and metadata collection
   Once conserved, the Crown Plans will be progressively scanned to create digital colour copies. At the time of scanning, additional metadata about each plan will be collected, including a description, unique identifier and date of origin.

3. Electronic access to Crown Plans
   A data repository will be created in order to electronically store and manage the digital copies of the Crown Plans. Customers will be able to view and print Crown Plans online.

4. Archiving
   The original hard copies of the Crown Plans will then be progressively transferred to State Records for permanent archiving.

5. Ongoing service delivery
   LPI will endeavour to ensure minimal interruptions during the scanning/archiving process.
The scanning of Crown Plans, including copies residing in regional offices of the Department of Lands, will benefit a wide range of Crown Plan users including surveyors, land owners, the conveyancing industry and government agencies.

It also means that Crown Plans will be preserved as a legacy for the broader NSW community.

It will take a few years to scan and convert all the original plans to digital image files but during this process, copies of the microfilm plans will still be available.

Our aim is to offer online access as soon as possible so reproduction quality copies of plans can be viewed and/or printed. Online access of images of original Crown Plans will mean remote access and faster service delivery response times, allowing multiple users to view and print Plans.

If you would like more information about the history of Crown Plans, the status of scanned plans and their online availability, please contact Eric Sharpham, Senior Project Manager on 02 9236 7647 or email him at eric.sharpham@lands.nsw.gov.au or info@lands.nsw.gov.au.