



# SAVING OUR SPIRE

ROSEMARY ANNABLE

*This article appeared in the July 2009 edition of Parish Connections, the newsletter of St James' King Street*

The spire of St James' Church has been re-coppered only once since it was originally constructed in 1822 and now it is time to do it again. After 115 years of exposure to the Sydney climate and the southerly busters the 1894

copper cladding, the work of the Wunderlich firm (best known for their pressed metal ceilings, of which the church also has an example) is to be replaced. The new sheeting will be to the same design as the present spire, but the completed work may give some of us an initial shock – and perhaps a sense of loss – when its familiar green colouring is replaced with new copper. There will however be a notable remnant of the shade we are so used to, in the form of the existing ball and cross, which are to be retained. These elements are original and will be repaired in situ. Photographs taken from the crane used during a recent inspection of the spire reveal the broad arrow Board of Ordnance mark, used during the convict era, that identified the copper as government property. Nathaniel Ewer, a whitesmith and an emancipated convict, who was chosen by architect Francis Greenway to undertake the original coppering, could little have imagined that his work would today be a valued heritage item and part of a building of state significance.

Working at a maximum height of 165 feet (50m) above ground, safety is, of course, of paramount importance, although this was not given much consideration when the church was built, or in the later 19th century. The scaffolding will extend around all three sides of the tower with the addition of two scaffolding towers on the north and south sides of the building with bridging beams that are required to span the roof in order to scaffold the east side. The whole of the covered courtyard will be required to accommodate work sheds, offices and storage areas and the sail covering will be removed and stored while this is taking place and then replaced. The loss of the courtyard will involve some disruption to our normal activities but we hope that parishioners will understand the need to provide these facilities to ensure that the work is done as efficiently as possible.

This stage of the work will also include repairs to the stonework, to the tower windows and louvres, repointing brickwork and making everywhere birdproof. As it will be

many years before the whole of the tower and spire is once more in scaffolding, it is important that all of these repairs are carried out at this time.

Our immediate neighbours are today the same as they were when the work was last done. We can only hope that they will be a little more understanding about noise than their predecessors. In an account of the 1890s work the builder, J M Pringle wrote:

*... one day, looking down, we saw toiling up the old ladders a stout figure dressed in official blue. Reaching the platform on which we stood, his face moist with unwonted exercise, he delivered the startling message that he had instructions unless we promised forthwith "to stop that hammering", to bring us before court.*

What the judge who had sent the court official up the ladders did not know (and neither did the general public) was that the spire was out of perpendicular and was leaning towards King Street and the court house. Fortunately this is not the case today and the work carried out on the interior of the spire late last year has ensured that all of the timbers and fixings are sound.

Our main contractors are The Sydney Restoration Co. who undertook the work on the interior of the spire, with subcontractors Jasper Swann, stonemason and ARC roofers, under the supervision of our heritage architect Letizia Coppo-Jones of Design 5 Architects. It is anticipated that the work will be completed by Christmas.

For many years the ball and cross at the summit of the spire were a navigation mark for shipping and also the first visible Christian symbol seen by travellers as they entered the harbour. Our high-rise neighbours have long since obscured the view of St James' but we hope that this work will ensure that these symbols of our mission and meaning will continue to be another sort of navigation mark for generations to come.

The parish acknowledges with gratitude: the work of the Appeal Committee under its foundation Chairman the Honourable Moreton Rolfe QC; donors to the National Trust Appeal; the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation Ltd; the Department of Planning Heritage Council; and the City of Sydney for their financial support.

It is important that we now redouble our efforts to provide sufficient funds for this project and for future stages of the work, which include a new slate roof.

Donations to the Appeal Fund are tax deductible and cheques should be made out to the: National Trust of Australia (NSW) St James' Church King Street Conservation Appeal.