



What's under the floor?

Find out how a
Cultural Heritage
Conservation Grant

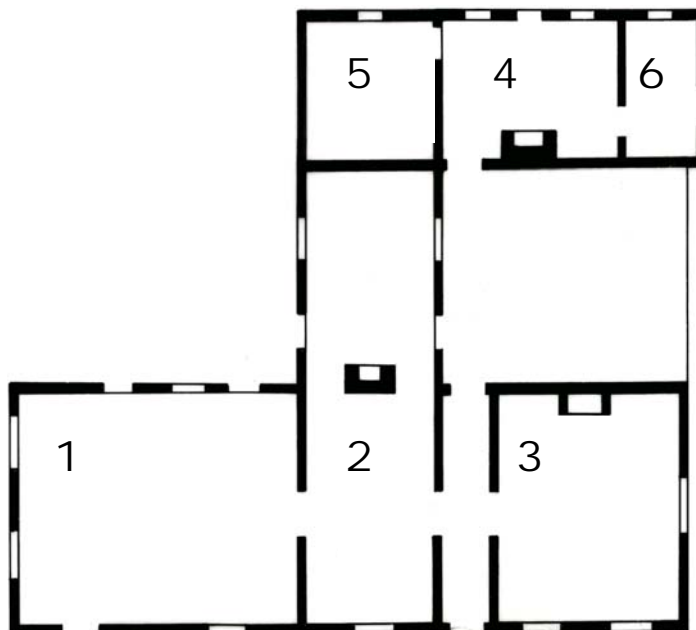
helped to reveal
the Residency's
hidden secrets



You are standing in room 4, the original kitchen. It is part of the oldest section of this building. Rooms 2, 3 and 4 were built between 1854 and 1858 as the Superintendent's Quarters of the York Convict Depot.

It's possible that Room 2 was then only half its present size, ending where the chimney is now and the kitchen, Room 4, a separate building.

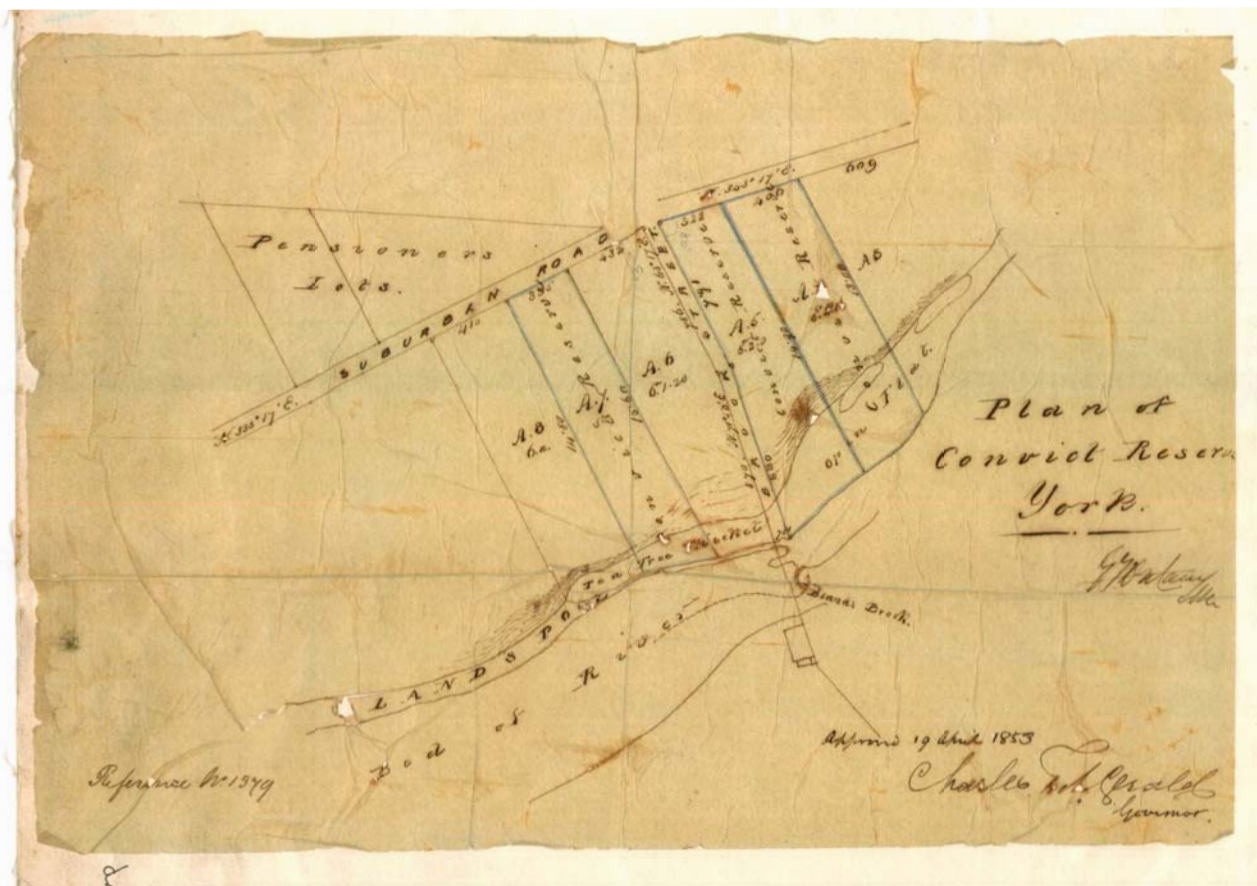
Separating the living quarters from the cooking area was common in early colonial homes. Kitchens frequently posed a fire hazard and were also very hot and unpleasant in summer, with cooking taking place over open fires or sometimes having large ovens.



The first convicts had been sent to York in 1851. At first they were housed in government buildings situated between Avon Terrace and Lowe Street, which soon became seriously overcrowded.

This site was chosen and work started in 1853. The Convict Depot was built on Lots A4 and A5. The Museum building is on A5. It is thought that clay to make bricks for the buildings may have been dug from Lot A7.

Courtesy State Records Office Cons. 3850 .46d



Throughout the other rooms, jarrah floorboards over beams which separate the floor from the soil are found but during the twentieth century, for some reason the kitchen had been re-floored with concrete.

This building, like most of its era, has no damp course. Moisture was rising from the ground and by the year 2000 was causing major damp problems. It was threatening the long-term future of the brickwork.

Fortunately a Lotterywest Cultural Heritage Conservation Grant was obtained in 2005 and then the process of renewing the floor began.

The concrete was removed very carefully and a worn brick floor was revealed.

Although we would have loved to keep it, the bricks were laid onto the soil and unless that soil were removed, the building would eventually have been destroyed by damp.

A thorough photographic record was made to record the floor.



Under the floor the soft loose soil was removed to a depth of approximately half a metre, exposing the stone foundations around the sides....and what no-one had suspected, across the room too!

A dividing wall had once existed. This had matching stone foundations topped by a brick foundation.



Soon a clue would be revealed when the crumbling plaster was stripped from the walls.

The 'something' which stood on the hard standing of bricks beside the fireplace had left its mark on the walls.

It is possible that an oven was built in here, or a copper boiler.

Lieutenant DuCane, the engineer in charge of building the Convict Depot, wrote in his half-yearly report to Earl Grey in September 1854:

“Cookhouse.-This building has been roofed and shingled, the floor laid with brick, the walls plastered, the oven made, and coppers fixed, the window sashes have been made, the walls have been pointed outside. It has been occupied since April”.

We know that this description fits a building somewhere on the site -could it be this room? Not very likely, as this was marked as 'Quarters' but possible. More probable is that the kitchen to the Superintendent's Quarters was built in a similar manner.



A number of items were found in the loose soil, indicating that the building was in use with a dirt floor before the brick floor was laid.

Can you spot :

Pieces of domestic crockery

Glass bottle tops

Part of a fob watch

A bone - perhaps remnants of a workman's dinner?

A slate pencil

Two of these items may be a little more thought-provoking.....



The strips of lead were formed whilst molten. They have taken the shape of the gaps between the bricks, so we know that someone was making something here by pouring molten lead, during the period when the room was used with a brick floor. Fishing weights? Bullets? What do you think?

The sole of a child's shoe was found well under the brick floor. This may be due to an English tradition—and those 1850's convict builders would have been English, or possibly Irish.

There, since medieval times, rituals to protect the home from witchcraft and evil spirits included placing a shoe under the floor.

Why? Nobody knows for sure, but shoes, especially, are shaped by constant use.

They're not washed and hold traces of sweat and smell. By leaving behind this impression shoes symbolise the spirit of the wearer making a powerful magic protection for guarding the home.

Adult's and children's shoes are commonly found, along with gloves, bottles containing urine and nails and occasionally items of horse harness.

Sometimes these charms were bricked up in chimneys or old bread ovens as alternative hiding places.

Is our shoe coincidence? A careless child?

I suspect not. Boots were too precious in those days....I leave you to think about it.....