Most visitors to the Parliament of New South Wales enter through the colonnaded verandah and hallway of the oldest part of the buildings. Few realise that they have passed through one of the most significant heritage buildings in Australia and part of the nation’s first permanent hospital - a hospital built by rum.

The Rum Hospital
The colonnaded central part of Parliament House, facing Macquarie Street was completed in 1816 as part of Governor Macquarie’s “Rum Hospital”. Upon his arrival in the Colony at the end of 1810, Macquarie found that the town’s hospital was still just tents and temporary buildings in The Rocks area. Macquarie set aside land on the western edge of the Governor’s Domain for a new Hospital, creating Macquarie Street to provide access to it. Plans were drawn up but the British Government refused to provide funds to build the hospital.

Consequently, Macquarie entered into a contract with a consortium of businessmen - Messrs Blaxcell, Riley and Wentworth - to build it. They were to receive convict labour and supplies and expected to recoup the cost of the building (and their profit) from being allowed to import 45,000 (later increased to 60,000) gallons of rum to sell to the thirsty colonists. In the event, it was not as profitable for the contractors as they had hoped.

Upon its completion, the now famous convict architect, Francis Greenway, was asked to report on the quality of the Hospital work. He condemned it, claiming that it “must soon fall into ruin”. Short-cuts had been taken with the construction, there were weak joints in the structural beams, rotting stonework, feeble foundations, and dry rot in the timbers. Macquarie ordered the contractors to remedy these defects but many remained hidden away until the extensive restoration of the 1980s.

The new hospital had a large central building, which was the main hospital ward block, and two smaller wings which were quarters for the Surgeons. The central building was replaced in 1894 by the present Macquarie Street buildings of Sydney Hospital, but the smaller wings remain. The former Mint, next to the Hyde Park Barracks, was originally the quarters for the Assistant Surgeon as well as a storage facility, and the northern wing, built for the Principal Surgeon, remains today as the colonnaded facade of Parliament House.

In its original form the building’s two entry halls had staircases leading to the upper floors. Amenities such as toilets and kitchen were located behind the building.

The first Surgeon to reside here was D’Arcy Wentworth, whose connections with the building are interesting. He had been one of the three contractors who had built the Hospital, and his son, William Charles Wentworth, explorer and journalist, became one of the most important figures in the development of Parliamentary democracy in New South Wales - regarded as “father of the constitution”. He is commemorated by several artworks in Parliament House. The two Assistant Surgeons, unhappy with their accommodation, wrote to Governor Macquarie complaining that, of the eight rooms, six were occupied by the Principal Surgeon and that each Assistant Surgeon consequently was only allocated one each. In addition to this, the grounds behind the house were also almost entirely occupied by the Principal Surgeon.

Another early surgeon to live here was Dr James Mitchell. His son, David Scott Mitchell, was born in the building in 1836. Subsequently, David Scott Mitchell developed an extraordinary collection of Australiana – books, paintings, manuscripts, documents and artefacts – which became the basis of the Mitchell Library collection now held next door in the State Library of New South Wales.

In 1829 the first Legislative Council moved into the building, meeting in the northern downstairs room of the Surgeon’s Quarters, but until 1848 the Surgeons continued to occupy about one third of the space while other government officials, such as the Principal Supervisor of Convicts, were also located here before the Legislature took over the entire building in 1852.

A new Constitution in 1843, increased the Legislative Council to 36 Members (two-thirds elected). A larger Chamber was needed and was constructed on the northern end of the building. This is the Chamber now used by the Legislative Assembly. The former Chamber was used as a committee room until taken over by the Parliamentary Library in 1850. In 1944 it was divided into rooms for the use of the two “lady members”, but after both were defeated in the 1950 elections, the rooms returned to administrative use. Today, the room nearest the Legislative Assembly Chamber is a small annex to the Chamber containing Hansards and Parliamentary Papers.

By 1856 a new Constitution brought responsible government and a bicameral Parliament, and a second Chamber was needed. The new fully-elected Legislative Assembly was to occupy the old Council Chamber on the northern end of the building, while the reconstituted Legislative Council would occupy a new Chamber. However, the Government Architect failed to provide a new plan in time (and was dismissed!) and instead a prefabricated “iron store and dwelling with ornamental front”, pre-fabricated in Scotland by engineering firm Robertson & Lister, was purchased from James Dean of Melbourne. Shipped to Sydney in March 1856 it was sufficiently completed for the opening of the first bicameral Parliament on 22 May. Today, a door cut into an interior wall of the Chamber reveals its iron interior as well as wood from its shipping cases, which, in 1856, were used to line the walls. Its curved roof was soon covered by a gabled one to reduce heat and noise. Over time both Chambers were modified and repaired, including having their facades moved closer to Macquarie Street.
The Sir Henry Parkes Room

When the Legislative Council moved into the northern downstairs room in 1829, other parts of the building were taken over for its offices including part of the central ground floor rooms. Originally these were two rooms with a corridor running alongside the Macquarie Street wall. The rooms and corridor were later combined into the present single Parkes Room.

When restoration of the room was undertaken in the early 1980s, the hinged interior window shutters (nailed shut for decades) were discovered to have the original paintwork. However, due to many breakages over the years, the original Georgian glass panes that made up the windows themselves, have been replaced with modern sheets of window glass.

From 1829-50 the rooms were mainly used for administrative purposes, housing the Clerk of the Executive and Legislative Councils and other public servants. For the period from 1831 to 1836, the Clerk, Edward Deas Thomson, had the added responsibility of curator of a small natural history museum – the first Australian Museum. He delegated this responsibility to his messenger, William Galvin, who later also had the assistance of an assigned prisoner, John Roach, who had worked in London as a taxidermist. In 1836 the collection of stuffed birds and animals, botanical specimens and other curiosities moved out to become the nucleus of the Australian Museum in College Street.

After 1840, the new Parliamentary Library used part of the area but by 1852 had moved to the old Council Chamber. A Refreshment Room was located in the rooms until 1869 when a new Dining Room was erected behind the Rum Hospital Building and the expanding Library returned to the room, staying until 1980.

Twentieth Century Changes

In 1906 a purpose-built main reading room, the Jubilee Room, was completed for the library (see History Bulletin 3) and the old central rooms continued as the Parliamentary Librarian’s rooms and “Front Reading Room” of the Library. At this time, the back verandah of the original “Rum Hospital” was enclosed creating what is now the Premiers’ Corridor (History Bulletin 6). The upstairs rooms of the former Surgeon’s Quarters became the offices of Hansard, the Parliamentary Reporting Staff (History Bulletin 7).

In 1915 minor alterations were made on the Legislative Council side of the building, the old lower back verandah was removed, additional rooms were added and the Legislative Council Lobby created. The western room of the old “Rum Hospital” later became the Legislative Council Members’ Room.

Over the years, grand plans for rebuilding Parliament House came and went. By the 1970s it was an ad hoc collection of buildings spreading from the heritage frontage on Macquarie Street back to Hospital Road. A new Public Works design was adopted at last, and the buildings behind the heritage area were demolished (or, in the case of historic Richmond Villa, moved). A contemporary 12-storey building was constructed which linked to the retained heritage buildings via the Fountain Court.

The heritage buildings of the Parliament, the Chambers, Jubilee Room and the original Surgeon’s Quarters, were renovated and restored during the 1980s with such contemporary touches as air-conditioning, additional power and phone lines added without obvious impact on the rooms themselves. The Jubilee Room briefly became a museum, but was soon in more general use. In 2001, as part of the Parliament’s commemoration of the Centenary of Australian Federation, the Sir Henry Parkes Room was named to honour the man often called the “Father of Federation”, and who was five times Premier of NSW in the nineteenth century. From the 1980s until then, it had been called the Greenway Room after architect Francis Greenway. Greenway had designed significant Macquarie Street buildings but his only connection with this building had been to condemn it!

By 1984, restoration of the old Rum Hospital building was complete. Together with its “twin” the former Mint, it remains the oldest building in Macquarie Street and the oldest public building in the City of Sydney. It can fairly be said of the former Principal Surgeon’s Quarters that no other building in New South Wales has played a longer and more central part in the affairs of this State.