

Appendix E – Oatlands Gaol Wallpaper Analysis
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Oatlands Gaol Wallpaper Analysis

1. Introduction

This survey aims to document the remnants of 19th and early 20th century wallpaper in the Gaoler's House at Oatlands. The interior finishes of the gaolers house, in particular the surviving wallpapers, are an important element in the interpretation of the building and its historical context. The papers are an indicator of the usage of the rooms, but more importantly, they serve to emphasise the domestic nature of the building. As the gaolers house is part of the original gaol complex, it would naturally evoke associations with the more grim aspects of penal servitude during the transportation era – floggings, solitary confinement, etc. But this is only part of the story, and by emphasising elements such as interior decorations and arrangement, it would be possible to give visitors a deeper, broader understanding of both the functioning of the gaol and 19th century domestic life.

The remaining wallpapers – which may very well be only a part of the papers which originally covered the walls - are principally significant in the following ways. Firstly, the choice of papers can enhance our understanding of the usage of the rooms. The upstairs room, marked on Archer's 1835 plan as a bedroom, has papers with mostly floral designs, which were the common choice for bedrooms at that time. Although the papers are not the most expensive varieties then available, they weren't the cheapest either. Combined with the fact that they appear to have been renewed at roughly ten yearly intervals, it seems a reasonable conclusion that this room was occupied by people who had a real desire to enhance their surroundings, perhaps to distance the interior from the gaol to which it is attached. The choice of patterns, mostly floral, would have helped this aim. It certainly provides an interesting contrast, between the very utilitarian gaol and the flowery interior of this room.

Secondly, the wallpapers in the downstairs room, marked on the plan as the women's cookhouse, serve to indicate the changing pattern of usage of the building, particularly this room. The papers are very flamboyant both in pattern and colour, and can roughly be dated 1930's to 1950's, and form a stark contrast to the very plain distemper finish underneath. Thus they highlight the considerable change in use of the room, from a cook house for the female prisoners, to a bedroom, and probably a child's bedroom at that.

2. Wallpaper in Australia – background history

In order to put the wallpaper described in this survey into context, it is necessary to give a brief history of the use of wallpaper in Australia from the mid 19th to early 20th century. Wallpaper has been used as an interior decoration as far back as the sixteenth century, but it was not until the mid nineteenth century that industrialisation of the processes involved saw wallpaper become something that ordinary people could afford. In Australia, there are many examples of early cottages, even slab huts, with lavishly decorated interiors, thanks to the mass production of wallpaper. The Gaoler at Oatlands was always on a low

salary, which explains why the examples found in the gaolers house date to the 1870's, even though the house was occupied from 1836 on. Until the advent of these cheaply available wallpapers, the only decorating choices open to the occupants of the house would have been the selection of paint colours.

Prior to the mid nineteenth century, wallpaper was almost entirely produced by carving the design into woodblocks, and then printing the blocks, one color at a time, by hand. The arrival of steam technology made possible a variety of machine printing techniques. In a very short space of time, wallpapers were being produced on machines that could churn out vast amounts of wallpaper in a multitude of colours, thus heavily reducing the cost. The oldest samples in the gaolers house date from this period, with the youngest dating from approx 1930-s to 1940-s, when the use of flamboyant, brightly colored papers became popular (see photos, men's cookhouse).

It is interesting to note that the decorating techniques used here were fairly basic. Neither of the two rooms with surviving wallpaper remnants were divided into dado and frieze, as was popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, and only three of the layers, two of them being the Edwardian layers, have cornices. The first layer in the upstairs room has a very colorful cornice added to the pattern, but the next three layers did not. This, along with the inexpensive papers, fits with our picture of the gaolers position – poorly paid, and not of very high status.

3. Methodology

The method used to separate the wallpaper samples is an invasive one, therefore I have only taken samples which had already fallen from the wall, and the condition of which would make re-attachment unlikely. The one exception to this is the sample taken from the upstairs room just below the ceiling. This sample was chosen as it would show if any cornices were used, and the sample was taken from the corner of the room to the right of the fireplace at a point where the wallpaper was dangling and on the verge of falling. The condition of the wallpaper in this room is very poor, with large sections missing and various fragments simply lying on the floor. Given that this was the case, taking a sample such as this should not materially impact on the integrity of the room. In the case of the downstairs room, the women's cookhouse, the surviving samples can easily be seen above the chimneypiece, and had partially separated. Here I carefully folded back the top layer and took photographs of both layers, in order that the separated papers could easily be re-glued if desired.

The samples removed from the upstairs room were subjected to the simplest method of separating papers. This consists of soaking the sample in warm water until the layers begin to separate, and then taking off one layer at a time with forceps, flat blade scrapers and tweezers. The disadvantage of this method is that some papers lose color or definition through the soaking in water. However it is possible that in some cases the damage may have occurred long ago when the next layer was applied with size (glue). Once separated, the papers are allowed to dry and then scanned and stored on acid free paper.

By looking carefully at each paper, it is possible to judge the likely methods of printing, number of colors, style of design, quality of paper, etc, and by so doing make a reasonably good guess at the relative cost and age of the paper. The method of dating the paper mostly relies on the style of the pattern and comparison with known samples. In a few cases the selvedge (ie the unprinted edge of the paper) has a Registered Design number printed on it, which can be looked up to provide a date.

The method of printing can usually be divided into two categories, machine printed or block printed. Machine printed designs tend to be well registered, that is the different colors of the pattern all line up correctly to give the complete design, while the patterns on block printed papers often overlap, due to the block being placed slightly out of alignment. Printers often put “register marks” either in the design or on the selvedge to help with this, which can give us a handy method of assessing the accuracy of the printing. The other main indicator for block printing is the texture of the ink. In machine printed samples, the ink usually sits flat on the paper, whereas with block printing the ink often pools in places or forms ridges which are fairly easy to spot.

4. Wallpapers – description

4.1 Upstairs room

The papers in this room are in a fairly fragile state. Sections of paper have fallen off the wall entirely, whilst other areas are either loose or about to fall off. The papers taken for sampling were mostly collected from the debris on the floor, with two other samples being removed from areas which were about to fall off, in order to find extra details such as cornice or dado papers. After soaking the samples in warm water, six different layers of wallpaper and three different cornice papers were identified. Some of the layers separated very well, providing excellent samples of the individual papers. The process of separation by water will in some cases damage the paper, causing loss of definition and colour. This has occurred in the second layer, although the damage is minimal, and may perhaps have been caused by sun damage whilst it was the top layer.

The individual layers are as follows: (see appendix for full scans)



First (ie bottom) layer : This is a classic mid-Victorian pattern, consisting of pink roses on a diamond trellised background, combining geometric pattern with a floral motif. The paper is of medium quality, as are all the samples from this room. The dominant colour

is the dark green beloved by Victorian decorators. The quality is about average for the time, but this would have been somewhat above average in cost, as there are six colours used in the pattern. It is difficult to say with certainty, but the paper is most likely machine printed, as there are no discernible signs of it being block printed. The age of the paper –

approximately 1870's – would put it well within the period when machine printed papers were widely available.

This wallpaper was applied with a cornice, the decorative band at ceiling level. As the sample is frayed at the top, it is only possible to give an approximate width, about 70 mm. The cornice is very bright, and must have stood out considerably, forming a contrast with the main paper. The pattern is one of interwoven leaves and flowers, probably roses, with a striking combination of colours, particularly the bright blue of the foreground. The ground colour is a pale green very similar to the main paper, with a total of 7 colours including the ground colour. Like the main paper, it appears to have been machine printed.



Second layer: Although this layer has lost some of its definition and intensity of colour, we are fortunate in having a very large sample - one of those taken from the floor - and a section of the selvedge (see section 2 for definitions of terms). There is a degree of similarity with the first layer in that the design consists of bunched roses in a roughly diamond pattern, however the design as a whole is much less formal or geometric.

Unlike the first layer, this paper appears to have been wood block printed. The selvedge shows register marks for the principal colours, and there are various places where the ink has the distinctive raised edges produced by block printing. The ink itself appears to be distemper.

The ground colour is a pale cream, quite probably the natural colour of the paper. The foreground colour is a pale blue-grey, but would most likely have been darker when new, thus giving a greater contrast between the ground, the foreground, and the connecting pattern of foliage in white. Assuming this to be the case, the original paper would have appeared as bunches of roses on a clearly defined diamond shaped background, an appearance that is largely lost in the sample we have now. Whilst the paper is of average quality, the number of colours – 7 including ground – would have taken considerable labour to block print, thus making this paper a moderately expensive one.



Third layer: This paper is quite different, both in colour and pattern, to the first two layers. Rather than a geometric design, it is a much more “naturalistic” design of flowers and foliage. As was common at the time – about 1890 – the pattern includes flowers of various types on the same stem.

As with the other layers, the paper is of average quality, and the ground colour may possibly be the natural colour of the paper. The design is printed in a single colour, and is certainly machine printed, thus producing the variations in shading. Given that it is monotone and machine printed, it would most likely have been a fairly inexpensive paper.



Fourth layer: This paper is Edwardian both in date and design. Amongst the samples there is a section of selvedge with a full Registered Design number (649553) which dates this paper to circa 1915. The design is a striped pattern of blue flowers and green foliage

on a white trellis with a ground colour of sandy cream. This paper is machine printed with 4 colours and ground on a reasonably dense paper.

Fifth layer: This is the simplest paper found in this room, consisting simply of thin cream stripes on a darker cream/sandy ground. The paper is not of good quality, and given the simple design of one colour and ground, it would have been a fairly cheap paper.



Sixth layer: This is another striped pattern, but much wider than the fifth layer, with a more complex design. The paper quality is similar to the fifth layer. The design is alternating bunches of flowers on white stripes. The paper has lost some of its definition and colour, but does have a good section of selvedge complete with Rd number, 731584, giving a date of approx 1925. Interestingly for this period, the paper does have some of the indicators of being block printed, ie. Ridged ink formations, and misalignment of several of the colors.

Seventh layer: This layer appears to be not a wallpaper but a lining paper which has been painted .

4.2 Upstairs stair lobby

One very small fragment just above the skirting board. This fragment has been labelled and preserved, but is of little use other than to confirm that there was at some point wallpaper in this area. The fragment (which was so loosely attached to the wall that it fell off at a very gentle touch) is too degraded to give any detail of pattern, colours, etc.

4.3 Women's Cook House

The wallpaper remnants in this room are perhaps the most surprising, as a glance at the photographs will confirm. Given the exuberant patterns of the two samples, it is highly likely that at the time the wallpaper was applied the room was used as a child's bedroom, a stark contrast to the former purpose – cookhouse for the female prisoners.



The top layer is the only example of wallpaper in the gaolers house that has not been covered over by later decoration. The paper is a pictorial design, probably ca.1950's, a rather fanciful depiction of a mediterranean village square with figures in the foreground walking, driving carts, etc. The pattern is printed in 6 colors on a pale blue ground, in the pastel tones that were popular in the 1950's.



Underneath this paper, as can be seen by folding back a loose corner, is a gem of 1940's children's wallpaper. The pattern is a melange of giraffes, cactuses, and exotic foliage in very bright yellow and black. As the top layer of wallpaper is in good condition, it is not possible to get a larger sample of this lower layer without the risk of damaging the top layer.

5. Bibliography

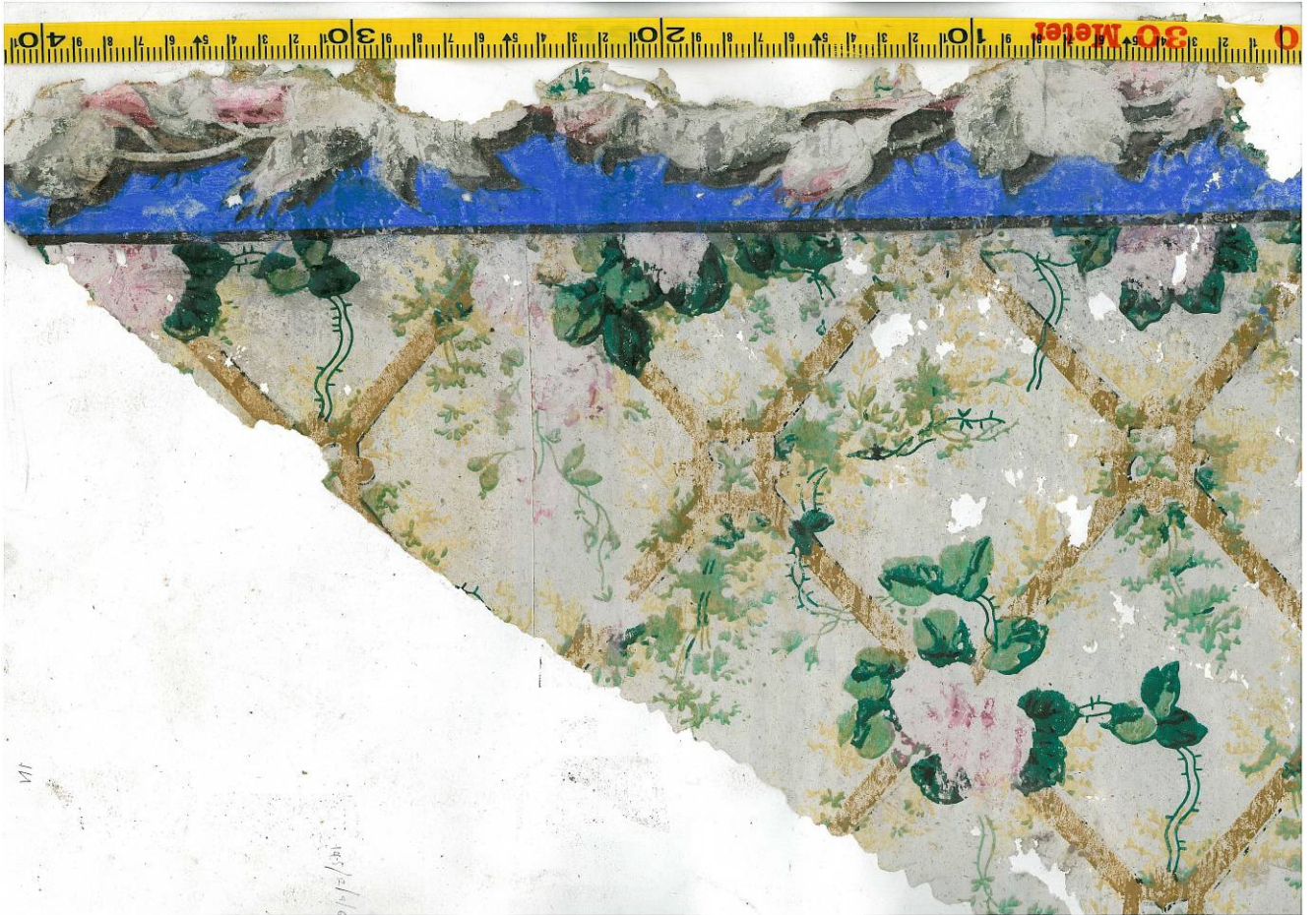
The following books provided a useful source of information about the history of wallpaper and examples of wallpaper of known date:

- *British Wallpapers in Australia 1870 – 1940*, Catriona Quinn, Sally Webster and Helen Temple, Sydney, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 1997
- *The Decorated Wall – Eighty Years of Wallpaper in Australia c. 1850 – 1930*, Phyllis Murphy, Sydney, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 1981
- *Wallpaper*, Brenda Greysmith, London, Studio Vista, 1976

6. Appendix – Scans of separated layers and photographs from women’s cookhouse

NB: In order to fit a reasonable portion of each pattern on to the page, the scans are not to scale.

6.1 Bedroom, first layer with cornice



6.2 Bedroom, second layer



6.3 Bedroom, third layer



6.4 Bedroom, fourth layer



6.5 Bedroom, fifth layer



