

Modern Penrith Maintains its Link with the Past

Stroll through the graveyard of pretty St Thomas Church perched on a hilltop overlooking the Mulgoa Valley and you get to recall the very beginnings of European colonisation of New South Wales. The church was built in 1836 and the inscriptions on many headstones mark the passing of the colony's earliest settlers.

Penrith Valley's European history dates back to 1789, just a year after the establishment of the British colony of New South Wales. Governor Arthur Phillip despatched a group led by Captain Watkin Tench of the Royal Marines to explore the country to the west of Parramatta.

It was they who first set eyes on the river that Tench described as "nearly as broad as the Thames at Putney and apparently of great depth, the current running very slowly in a northerly direction". Phillip named the river Nepean after Evan Nepean, the Under Secretary of the Home Office in London who had played a role in organising the First Fleet.

The original inhabitants of Penrith were the Darug tribe and many of their descendants still live in the area. Aboriginal sites of significance to the Gandangara people are to be found in the Bents Basin State Recreation Area, and evidence of Aboriginal history unearthed during work on the Penrith Lakes Scheme has been carefully recorded and relics recovered for display at a planned education centre.

The name Penrith is first recorded in 1822, but its strategic location on the route west and the building of a courthouse in 1817 helped establish it as a roadside hamlet and important staging point to the inland. Today Penrith is a modern city with a population of over 170,000, but reminders of its colonial past can be found throughout the district.

At St Marys, visit historic Mamre Homestead built in the 1820s for the son of colonial chaplain, magistrate and pastoralist Samuel Marsden. Today, the fully-restored homestead operates as tea rooms and a craft shop and the old grace and charm remains. St Marys also boasts Mary Magdalene Anglican Church built in 1840 and a number of gracious old homes.

Emu Plains has the Arms of Australia Inn Museum, built around 1840 and restored to its original period. The museum hosts historical displays and outdoor exhibits. Also of interest at Emu Plains is Knapsack Bridge with its spectacular sandstone pillars dating back to 1878, and the historic stone building at the Emu Plains Railway Station.

The most important house in the district is Glenleigh Estate at Regentville, magnificently set in 35 hectares of formal gardens on the Nepean River. Originally built for merchant James Ewan from fire bricks brought to Australia as ballast, the house is ornately decorated. Two Italian artists were brought to Australia to create the mural ceilings and the house is currently undergoing extensive restoration.

Even the golf courses have a sense of history about them at Penrith. Glenmore Heritage Valley, the home of Glenmore Country Club's 27-hole championship facility, is built around historic buildings that date back to the 1820s and make the golf course even more of a sanctuary from modern day pressures.