

ENGINEERING HERITAGE RECOGNITION PROGRAM

Proposal to Nominate

General Post Office, Sydney

as an Item of Heritage Interest

Item Name:	General Post Office, Sydney (GPO)		
Other/Former Names:	Nil		
Locality:	Sydney CBD		
Address:	1 Martin Place, Sydney NSW 2000		
Co-ordinates	Lat: -33.86781033735683, Lon: 151.20768826312496		
Current Owner:	Singaporean joint venture between Far East Organisation and Sino Land who bought the freehold from Australia Post in 2017.		
Original Owner:	Australia Post		
Current use:	Hotel and post office		
Former use:	Sydney post office and telegraph service		
Proposed use:	Hotel and post office		
Item Condition:	Excellent		
Designer:	James Barnet, Colonial Architect 1865–90.		
Builder:	Stage 1: Aaron Loveridge (foundations); John Young (main structure); P. N. Russell (smith & founders work). Stage 2: McCredie Brothers (foundations & structure); Mort & Co (iron work), Angelo Tornaghi (clock); Henry Daly (clock bells).		
Started:	Stage 1: 1866 Stage 2: 1880	Completed:	Stage 1: 1874 Stage 2: 1887 Clocktower, clock & bells: 1891
History:	The General Post Office was designed under James Barnet, Colonial Architect from 1862 to 1890. During his official career the Colonial Architect's Office produced more than 1000 buildings. Barnet's major works in the city include the General Post Office, Australian Museum, Chief Secretary's Building, the Lands Department and the Mortuary Station. Most of his surviving public buildings – mainly post offices and courthouses, are dotted throughout the State. Aaron Loveridge's tender for the foundations was accepted on 15 February 1865, with the main structure extending from George Street, mid-way to Pitt Street, which was built by John Young. When completed in 1874 it faced into the 12 feet (3.6m) wide St. Martin's Lane, and land had to be resumed to enable formation of the first stage of Martin Place. Stage 2 – 'the Pitt Street extension' was constructed by contractors McCredie Bros. It was commenced in 1880 and completed in 1887. Although bells had been included in the contract for the clock, some opposition to them had risen 'because they might be too heavy and a danger		

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	to the tower’¹. Thus, on his own initiative, the contractor Angelo Tornaghi installed lighter tubular bells to which Barnet objected. The dispute was resolved when Barnet and Tornaghi went into Hyde Park and after listening to the chiming of the Town Hall and GPO clocks, agreed that the tubular bells were inferior. Tornaghi’s contract was cancelled and eventually a third tender was called, and acceptable bells were installed by Henry Daly. ‘On 16 September 1891, in the presence of a distinguished gathering, the Countess of Jersey, the wife of the Governor, set the bells in motion’¹. Barnet, the last Colonial Architect, retired in June 1890 and was succeeded by Walter Liberty Vernon - the first Government Architect. Vernon reluctantly made additions to the GPO in the form of mansard roofs at the George and Pitt Street ends, linked with single storied attics behind the main parapet line. Barnet expressed regret at the additions and on an occasion privately referred to his successor as “Vernon the Vandal”. C. 1898 Vernon extended the George Street front by two bays taking ‘great care to retain the original character of Barnet’s original design’.¹ The clock tower was dismantled as a safety precaution in 1942 during World War II, but was re-erected in 1964. Following the Newcastle earthquake in 1989 a stability review found the tower to be vulnerable in an earthquake. The innovative solution devised by consulting engineer Colin Crisp involved boring vertical holes down through the square corner columns and post-tensioning the tower with cables; it was completed in 1990 and has been claimed to be a ‘world first’ in post-tensioning a building. The GPO is on the Register of the National Estate and the NSW State Heritage Register. In 2017 Australia Post sold the freehold over the building to joint venture between Far East Organisation and Sino Land for A\$150 million, with an updated heritage management plan included as part of the sale.
Description:	The building is of Pyrmont sandstone with the round columns of the colonnade being of granite from the Louttit Quarry adjacent the Moruya River. It is the best-known building of Colonial Architect, James Barnet. ‘The basis of the design ... was of an Italian Renaissance palazzo freely incorporating Florentine and Venetian elements’.¹ The foundations of the building span the Tank Stream, which had also to be enclosed in a brick pipe; a segment can be seen in a room in the basement. The keystone over the original centre bay on George Street is a single block of sandstone that weighed 27 tons and took 26 Clydesdale horses to haul it in from Pyrmont. Classical sculptures adorn the building - in the spandrels of arches (except for the Pitt Street façade) and on the keystones of arches; all the carving was done in-situ. On the Martin Place façade there are 24 heads ‘on the colonnade arches, representing either a continent, country or state, namely: Europe, Asia, Russia, Italy, Germany, United States of America, Canada, India, France, Belgium, Austria, Polynesia, on the Pitt Street side, and on the right, George Street side, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, Queensland, Ireland, England, Scotland, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Africa and South America’.⁴ And above the main entrance is the figure of Queen Victoria robed as Queen and Empress with her crown and sceptre, that was sculpted in Sicilian marble by Giovanni Fontana.⁴ In the spandrels of the Pitt Street arches Barnet had Italian sculptor Tomaso Sani sculpt figures of people representing aspects of contemporary colonial

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	life. These caused great hostility and controversy when they were unveiled; there were questions asked in Parliament, letters to the editor, a reference to the Royal Academy in London, and even a Board of Enquiry which recommended their removal. Barnet ignored the subsequent instruction and they are still there. The figures represent various activities: Telegraph, Pastoral, Professions, Commerce, Mining, Agriculture Pastoral, Science, Art, Banking and Post Office. The pastoral industry was represented by a shearer. However, 'when it was originally crafted the shearer was shown as shearing the sheep from the tail upwards, instead of the other way round. When the position was rectified, much of the stone was lost, reducing the sheep to a lamb'.¹ On the keystone of the original central arch on George Street is a beautifully carved British coat of arms with the motto which should read, 'Honi soit qui mal y pense'. However, the sculpture made a mistake, and the 'i' is missing from the 'Honi'!
Significance:	The General Post Office is significant for: • its association with James Barnet, Colonial Architect from 1862 to 1890, it is perhaps his most significant building. • 'The Sydney General Post Office is one of the city's finest public buildings and best-known landmarks. It is much more than a reminder of Australia's architectural history. It is a continuing and significant reminder of the part the postal service has played in the development of the country since the British colony's early days'.¹ • 'The new electric telegraph technology connected Australia [from the GPO] with the world in a matter of days ending the tyranny of distance which, since colonial times, had burdened commerce and trade relations. The heads [on the Martin Place arch keystones] symbolize this great triumph over time and distance'¹; and • the post-tensioning of the tower, possibly a 'world first' in post-tensioning a building. • The progressive construction of Martin Place from George Street to Macquarie Street - an important feature of Sydney, 'has its origin in the building of the General Post Office'.¹
Webpage Summary:	The General Post Office was designed under James Barnet, Colonial Architect from 1862 to 1890. It is of Pyrmont sandstone and was built in two stages: Stage 1 extended from George Street mid-way to Pitt Street. It was commenced in 1865 and was completed in 1874 by John Young. When completed in 1874 it faced into the 12 feet (3.6m) wide St. Martin's Lane and land had to be resumed to enable formation of the first stage of Martin Place. Stage two extended to Pitt Street. It included the clocktower and was constructed by contractors McCredie Bros; the work was commenced in 1880 and completed in 1887. The foundations of the GPO span the Tank Stream; a detail of the construction can be seen in the basement. C. 1898, Walter Liberty Vernon the first Government Architect, made additions to the GPO in the form of mansard roofs at the George and Pitt Street ends, linked with single storied attics behind the main parapet line. And he also extended the George Street front by two bays. The keystone over the original centre bay on George Street is a single block of sandstone that weighed 27 tons and carries a carving of the British coat of

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	arms. However, the motto has been miss-spelt as the 'i' is missing from the 'Honi' in 'Honi soit qui mal y pense'. Most of the carved figures on the building were done in a classical manner. The keystones of arches on the Martin Place façade show 24 heads representing either a continent, country or state. In the spandrels of the Pitt Street arches Barnet had Italian sculptor Tomaso Sani sculpt figures of people representing aspects of contemporary colonial life. These caused great controversy and eventually, a Board of Enquiry was held which recommended their removal. Barnet ignored the subsequent instruction and they are still there. On his own initiative, the clock contractor Angelo Tornaghi installed tubular bells instead of the specified conventional bells, causing a dispute with Barnet. The dispute was resolved when Barnet and Tornaghi went into Hyde Park and after listening to the chiming of the Town Hall and GPO clocks, agreed that the tubular bells were inferior. Tornaghi's contract was cancelled and eventually acceptable bells were installed by Henry Daly. During World War II the clock tower was dismantled as a safety precaution; it was re-erected in 1964. Then following the Newcastle earthquake in 1989 the tower was found to be vulnerable in an earthquake. The innovative solution devised by consulting engineer Colin Crisp involved boring vertical holes down through the square corner columns and post-tensioning the tower with cables; it was completed in 1991 and has been claimed to be a 'world first' in post-tensioning a building. In 2017 Australia Post sold the freehold over the building to a joint venture between Far East Organisation and Sino Land with an updated heritage management plan included as part of the sale.		
Engineering Theme:	Civics and Buildings		
Heritage Listing:	• Register of the National Estate, 21.3.1978 & 28.9.1982 • State Heritage Register #00763, 2.4.1999		
References/Sources:	1. <i>The History of the Sydney G.P.O. – the City's Centrepiece</i> by Peter Bridges & Robin Appleton. Hale & Iremonger, 1988. ISBN 0 86806 304 5 2. <i>James Barnet, Colonial Architect</i> by Peter Bridges & Don McDonald. Hale & Iremonger, 1988. ISBN 0 86806 293 6 3. <i>Sydney's Engineering Heritage and other sites</i> by Michael Clarke. The Institution of Engineers, Australia 1999. ISBN 0 85825 716 5 4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Post_Office,_Sydney 5. <i>The Use of Prestressing Through Time as Seismic Retrofitting of Historical Masonry Constructions: Past, Present and Future Perspective</i> by Adolfo Preciado, Gianni Bartoli, Harald Budelmann.		
Nominated by:	Michael Clarke		
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EHA Branch:	Sydney	Nomination Date:	23 September 2025

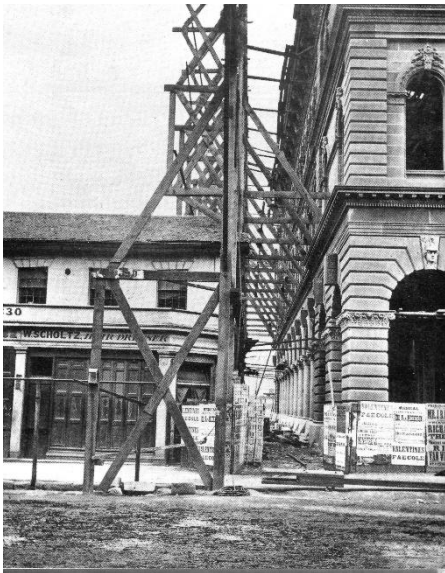
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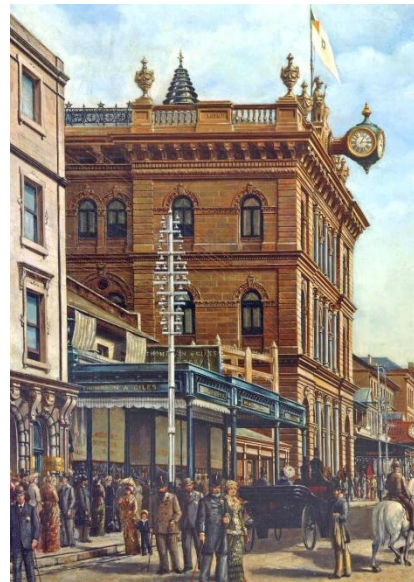
General Post Office (GPO)



Carving spandrels, Martin Place



12ft wide St Martins Lane



Sydney GPO 1883



GPO Stage1



GPO, 1892

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Martin Place colonnade



Moruya granite column



'The owl' in colonnade



Carved spandrel, Martin Place

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Classical carving, George Street



Queen Victoria above main entrance



Hon soit qui mal y pense!



Pitt Street spandrel with sailor, shearer & astronomer



Hotel interior

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Dismantling clocktower, 1942

