ULTIMO HOUSE.
Century-old Architecture.

BY J. B. GIMLET.

In the days of Sydney’s infancy few of our forefathers fully realised the destiny which lay before the town of Sydney. Large areas of land on the outskirts of the town were granted for agricultural purposes, the early pioneers little thinking that in the century to come a great city would arise from the modest settlements, and their green fields be covered with houses and factories. Perhaps the difficulty of transport was the factor which made expansion seem impossible to the early settlers, and of course little was known of the natural resources of the colony, for in the days of which I write the Blue Mountains still presented a mystic, impenetrable barrier to the west. Usually, upon receiving a grant of land, the settler would erect a mansion, of an old world type, substantially built, and one which would withstand the elements for centuries, hoping no doubt that for generations his heirs would farm the land, and when the estate became too valuable for agricultural purposes, and heavy land taxes forced subdivision. So in Sydney to-day, even in the heart of the city, old world buildings, untarnished and unplastered are to be seen, surrounded by lofty buildings, sadly awaiting the inevitable day when they must make way for modern structures. Modern Sydney has dealt harshly with her architectural inheritances.

One of these century old mansions stands in the grounds of the Technical College at Pyrmont. Its name is Ultimo House. On December 31, 1803, John Harris, a surgeon in the New South Wales Corps, received a grant of 164 acres of land lying and situated between Church Land and the ground used as a Brickfield within the Town of Sydney . . . . known by name as Ultimo Farm.” In this era of rapid transit, it is difficult for one to realize how far away from the Sydney settlements this land was situated, and how isolated it was. The nearest neighbour to the farm was Major Johnston, to whom land in the vicinity had been granted several years earlier. The eastern boundary of the land stood the brickfield, the site of which is still known to many as Brickfield Hill, but for miles in every direction stretched virgin bushland. One solitary windbreak, the Sydney Road, later renamed George-street in honour of the King, passed by the estate, and along it travelled the coach to Rose Hill. Ultimo House became the first stopping place for the coach on its journey from Sydney.

THE FIRST STRUCTURE.

During the years which followed, John Harris received further grants, and a large estate was formed, upon which in 1806 was erected a building which he named Ultimo House. The derivation of the curious name remains a mystery, though it is certain that the title was in use before the land was granted to John Harris. The mansion was in the Colonial style of architecture, a two-storied edifice with wide verandahs supported by slender columns. But this columnar style, so general in the colony, did not satisfy John Harris, and on even extra rooms were to be added to the building he availed himself of an opportunity to design and construct a more original façade. He undoubtedly succeeded in building something quite uncommon, which at the same time was excellently proportioned, and possessed a static beauty so much in harmony with the surrounding bush land.

Two massive square towers flank the entrance, and in the centre an even more massive battlemented tower stands over the entrance to the mansion. On the ground floor these towers, which are connected by a balcony, are pierced by great elliptical banded openings, and on the first floor by square windows. The building could not be attributed to any particular style of architecture. As heavy battlemented towers and the impregnation of weight and massive suggest ancient Egypt, though only the inside bears this comparison. A close examination of the façade reveals that even in those early days, when the vicissitudes of a pioneer’s life tended towards a neglect of artistic refinements, the builder observed many subtle nuances in architectural design. The towers are slightly pyramidal, and the façade built with an appreciative inclination so that optical illusions might be overcome and the building looks an air of stability.

The house contains seven very capacious rooms on each floor, and a very large kitchen, a light area or central court, a feature seldom found in domestic architecture, and on the ground floor two residences. The cause of this latter irregularity must be attributed to the remodelling, the inner vestibule having been the entrance chamber to the older Ultimo House. The first vestibule contains a wooden balustrade of delicate design, which is stylistically inharmonious with the architectural design of the building. It is included amid a storm of protest from the builder’s friends, but John Harris stoutly defended it, and so it remained as a foil to the entire mansion. The inner vestibule is approximately semi-circular on plan, and it contains a curved landing stone stairway, perhaps the most interesting feature in the house, and one which, considering the facilities available, displays great ingenuity in construction. Under this stairway is an opening through which access is obtained to a lofty but very narrow ambulatory surrounding the light area. The walls of the light area rise perpendicularly from the ground floor to the roof. Whether an intermediate floor existed one cannot determine. There is ample evidence to maintain that there was a floor, for at the present time two doors on the first floor open into a void, although the presence of a floor would destroy the efficiency of the light area.

A peculiarity which to a tall person proves very disconcerting, is the measure height of many of the doors, few of which are more than six feet high, many of them being even considerably less than that moderate height. From the centre of the roof arises a small octagonal wooden tower, surmounted by a domical roof. It is not an important feature in the design, and might well have been omitted, for its floor is far below the level of the main roof, and one can see little from the tower, while from the ground only the domical roof and the weather vane can be seen.
Early in the second half of last century the city had extended to the boundaries of John Harris’s grant, and soon the Ultimo Estate was subdivided. Ultimo House stood almost in the centre of one of the many seven-acre sections, and was soon surrounded on all sides by terraced houses and factories. In 1911 a section of the estate was resumed for educational purposes, and included in the resumption was Ultimo House. The days of the mansion’s greatness were now gone forever. Unoccupied, the old house suffered the final indignity of being used as a depository for litter. The greatest enemy of old buildings, dampness, entered; the wood fittings warped and decayed, the walls cracked and the plaster fell from the ceiling, leaving exposed the laths, which appear to be short pieces of wood broken from packing cases. Here and there a fragment of printing is discernible on some of the laths; such was the scarcity of wood for building in the young colony.

The entrance door stands wide open, as it often did in the days of old, when festivities were in progress, but the windows are forever shuttered and never again will light stream out from them into gardens of shrubs and flowers. The old mansion stands sadly dilapidated, but still possessing that air of severity which only a century’s existence can give to a building. Facing the east it looks upon a sea of buildings, all foreign to its style, where not so long ago, were green fields and tree-covered hills. The last vestiges of the extensive gardens surrounding the house have disappeared. For many years an old sundial, which long ago had ceased to record time, lingered in front of the house, but recently it, too, has gone. Soon the mansion itself will be but a memory. Its site is demanded for the erection of a modern building.

Can Sydney not spare from destruction those old buildings, often worthy in architecture, and always rich in associations, which were the homes of early pioneers, to whom her debt is so great?