

# Berrima

## *Heritage Matters*



The re-development of Berrima Gaol is the biggest development in Berrima's history. The developer, Blue Sox Group, is Sydney-based with an extensive urban apartment building portfolio and limited heritage experience.

Blue Sox has shown its detailed plans of an exclusive entertainment precinct to selected Berrima property owners but has refused to show them to a community organisation or the broader community — this lack of genuine community engagement is a great concern. We believe that the community should be treated more respectfully and integrally in the design process.

The detailed plans seen by selected residents include 60 hotel units in 2-3 storey blocks on the riverbank and a 160-car multi-storey carpark outside the gaol walls. Inside the walls are a function centre, restaurant, bar/s, wellness centre, and meeting rooms. Worryingly, the plans indicate access holes cut into the heritage-listed gaol walls. The plans show a disregard for the site's heritage and history. Further, it has said that construction outside the gaol walls is non-negotiable.

### ***Who are we?***

Berrima Heritage Matters is a group of concerned residents who want to ensure that the re-development of Berrima Gaol does not jeopardise the unique heritage and historic values of the gaol and the village. In 2021 Berrima won **Best Australian Tourist Town** (population under 5000), by turning the gaol into a luxury entertainment precinct with little respect for its past will significantly affect the village and its tourism appeal. Send us an email if you would like more information or would like to join our group in the **Battle for Berrima Gaol**.

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## What are the other options for the site?

The previous Coalition state government designated the sale of Berrima Gaol a State Significant Development and chose a confidential Expressions of Interest (EOI) and selected tenderers process.

Other groups developed proposals for the EOI stage but, disappointingly, did not progress to the tender stage. In 2022, the Coalition government made a surprise announcement that the successful tenderer was Sydney property developer, Blue Sox Group, whose focus is construction of urban apartment buildings but with little heritage experience.

The government has since used commercial-in-confidence and legal privilege excuses to deny release of useful information about the tender process. As is too often the case, the freedom of information process benefits business and government rather than the community.

The other viable proposals for the site featured a state-of-the-art museum, educational facilities, art and craft facilities, cell-block accommodation, commercial hospitality and retail opportunities, a community performance venue, and social enterprises. They also created sustainable local jobs.

Importantly, these proposals respected the heritage, history, environment and the constraints of the site, and did not plan to build outside the gaol walls.

These proposals combined profit and not-for-profit features but proponents were not given the opportunity to participate in the full tender process.



Figure 5 – Proposed Concept Strategy

[Drawing from a Heritage Impact Assessment written by Urbis on behalf of Blue Sox and is available from the NSW Planning Portal]



## **Who cares?**

Earlier this year, Berrima residents and others attended two community meetings and the Berrima Gaol Community Group was formed. Key outcomes of those meetings were:

1. A majority acceptance that with the decommissioning of the gaol came the reality that something needed to be done with the site but there was little enthusiasm for development outside the gaol walls.
2. Around 80 percent of attendees at the second meeting said, via a show of hands, 'no' to development outside the gaol walls.

Disappointingly, since the April meeting, the community group was made defunct by the meeting organiser who has formed another group, One.Berrima, which appears to have a broader pro-development agenda.

The Berrima Residents Association has a stated position of no development outside the gaol walls.

Berrima Heritage Matters' aim is to highlight Berrima's unique heritage and history which we believe will be lost if the current project goes ahead.

## **Environment matters too: What is a riparian zone?**

The environment around the gaol is also important. For those of us until recently unfamiliar with the term 'riparian zone', it includes the banks of a river and includes the soil, terrain and natural bushland. The Wingecarribee Council has designated a 50-metre riparian zone adjacent to the river in Berrima. The river is part of the Sydney Water Catchment.

A healthy riparian zone supports a healthy river including birds and animals. The Wingecarribee in Berrima has a documented platypus population and this population is a nationally recognised platypus hotspot. Australian platypus habitat has reduced 22% since 1990. Let's not jeopardise our platypus population, and the overall river eco-system and water quality.

## ***Catherine Leary Project***

### ***Who is Catherine Leary?***

Catherine Leary's story represents the grimness of the gaol's early years. She was a 12yo girl who stole some clothes in 1848. She was sentenced to 14 days gaol including time in solitary confinement in the basement dark cells. There are many stories from the colonial era of the gaol — stories of hardship, petty crime, executions, serial killers, bushrangers and brutality to prisoners.

This heritage and history is at risk of being lost if the Blue Sox wrong-headed adaptive re-use project goes ahead. The colonial-era gaol and its heritage-value mid-20th century cell blocks will be sacrificed for an exclusive entertainment precinct which is incompatible with the heritage and history of the gaol and the village. The juxtaposition of the grimness of the colonial 1800s prison with the ostentation of luxury hotel units, signature restaurant, high-end bars and a wellness centre is incongruous. Rather than uniformed prison warders at the gaol gates, future visitors may encounter a liveried concierge saying 'yay' or 'nay' to those wanting to enter in the exclusive precinct perhaps to get their chakras realigned in the wellness centre.



### ***What lies beneath?***

The dark cells experienced by Catherine Leary and others still exist, probably entombed under a layer of concrete.

Apart from the gaol walls, gates and Bulls Head Fountain, the dark cells represent an important remaining part of the 1839 gaol structure.

While their condition is unknown, their existence mustn't be ignored. There's a possibility they exist as they were prior to 1945, albeit with the cobwebs and detritis from years of entombment.

The circled area in this photo we believe shows access to basement cells (pre-1949 structure) — we've spoken to people who have more recent knowledge of them.

[Photo 1937 Australian Photo Review, [trove.nia.gov.au](https://trove.nia.gov.au)]