

Australian Heritage: BEDERVALE

By Gordon Brown



Clockwise above left:
mellophone; cedar table;
Rockingham dinner service.
Photos courtesy Lisbeth Westra

Main photo: Bedervale,
Photo courtesy Victoria Royds



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expert presenter
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One of Australia's finest Colonial homesteads is located just outside the picturesque little town of Braidwood, in southern NSW.

Bedervale is a single story Georgian house built in the early days of settlement between 1836 and 1842, commissioned by Capt. John Coghill on land granted to him in 1826. It was designed by the famous architect, John Verge, who also was responsible for designing Camden Park and Elizabeth Bay House in Sydney.

The timber for the construction was all cut locally. The columns were made of black ash, the rooms fitted with exquisite, classically detailed cedar joinery, and the floors were all hardwood. Even the bricks were made on the property. The marble and sandstone were also sourced locally at Marulen.

I've been to many of these stately residences but Bedervale is really different, not just because it is so absolutely drop-dead gorgeous, but because it was held in the same family for 170 years, by descendants of Capt. Coghill. The family who own it now – the Royds – keep it as their own home, so it is a veritable living museum and time capsule rolled into one.

When I visited, I was incredibly excited to find a rare pair of cedar tables dating back to 1820-30 in the front foyer that Margaret, my charming guide, did not seem aware of their importance. I was amazed at the calm way that she took the revelation when I valued them until she informed me that Bedervale has a unique arrangement with the National Trust. She explained that the family sold the contents to the nation in the 1970s, to avoid any dispersion and kept ownership of the property themselves.

A great place to start is the library, where there is a wonderful cedar bookcase with square astragal glazed bars and as one looks around it is evident that each succeeding generation has added another bookcase, not identical but each in the style of the generation in which they were made.

The drawing room has been given over to pure Victorian taste: elaborate chairs, sofas and mirrors abound in that gloriously cluttered Victorian style.

One piece not to be missed from this room is a rare French mellophone from the 1840s. It's a musical instrument, elaborately decorated with mother of pearl inlay comprising 84 keys and played by pumping double bellows. A similar one (also originally from Bedervale) is to be found in the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Another highlight awaits in the dining room – a superb Rockingham dinner service of 138 pieces no less. The griffin mark underneath dates it between 1826 and 1830. Something else worth noting is a local piece made by the famous cabinet-maker, Roderick McDonald, which was shown at the International Garden Palace exhibition in Sydney in 1879. It's a hallstand and you can find it in the main foyer.

Strangely enough, however, as I often find when wandering around these stately homes, it is the outbuildings and servants' quarters that give me the biggest thrill. Bedervale is no exception. One of the storerooms is absolute magic, crammed full of mystery objects like manual apple-corers, kerosene and gas lamps of all description and every kind of obsolete kitchen paraphernalia. There are about seven tin baths going back though the ages of all shapes and sizes, but the piece that seriously gladdened my eye and wetted my whistle was a huge, illicit copper whisky still.

Directly opposite in the rear courtyard is the old working kitchen and servants' quarters, it doesn't take much imagination to visualize the cook and all her minions working the old range from before light to after dark, feeding the farmhands, gardeners and of course and most importantly – the gentry and house guests in the grand house.

After visiting Bedervale, Braidwood is well worth a visit, a great bakery, two kerosene lamp shops, 'go figure' and also a wonderful little museum documenting the early days of settlement that contain a surprisingly important link with the Chinese immigrant population. Of course the reason many of them were there, in the first place was... *there was gold aplenty in them, there hills!*

Bedervale is located at Braidwood, midway between Canberra and Bateman's Bay. Tours are available by arrangement, bookings are essential. B&B or farmstay cottage accommodation is available. For enquiries contact 02 4842 2421 or visit www.bedervale.com