

Extraordinary Meeting of Council November 7, 2023

Agenda Item 6.2 – The Charlotte Project

Presentation by Wingecarribee Women Writers member, Kerrie Douglass

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today – I represent Wingecarribee Women Writers and our project seeking Council approval to place a bronze statue of Charlotte Atkinson in the park at Berrima.

As you know, Charlotte was a remarkable woman. She was the country's first published children's author and a trail blazer for both the education of women and for their legal rights.

Our project is well-informed by her descendants – Kate Forsyth and Belinda Murrell and their book "Searching for Charlotte". We have given a great deal of thought, time, research and consideration to how and where to commemorate Charlotte – what form a monument should take and where best to place it to achieve maximum visibility, awareness, education and public commemoration.

Berrima is a Georgian village and one of the key traditions of that time was to erect statues in parks and public spaces to commemorate important figures – a bronze sculpture is appropriate and sympathetic to this heritage and is a long lasting and beautiful form. It should be enjoyed by the maximum number of people in a public place.

The park is the perfect location - the Atkinson connection to Berrima is indisputable. James Atkinson was the local Magistrate and owned the large Oldbury estate with land bordering the village. He also owned Lot 1 on what is now the corner of Bryan and Jellicoe streets. Charlotte herself and her family would have frequented this area.

The statue depicts Charlotte reading to her children who are represented by small sandstone blocks. It's placement near the children's playground is very fitting and will promote interaction and learning. On a low sandstone base with an overall height of just 1.4 metres, it will be lower than the eye height of most people and will not intrude on any views as identified in the Berrima Market Place Strategy.

Large numbers of people visit the park – including families, tourists, school groups and car enthusiasts. The Charlotte statue will be a visual representation of the area’s history and heritage. It will promote awareness and encourage engagement with the nearby museum. The plaque will give details of Charlotte and the QR code will lead to an informative website.

All these details are laid out in our Heritage Impact Statement and we trust that Council accepts the Statement and the reputation and credentials of the author who prepared it.

Interestingly, when James Atkinson died in 1834, two local landowners started a campaign for a statue commemorating him – they managed to collect about 100 pounds or around 15 000 dollars in today’s value. The statue did not come to fruition and it’s not clear why. It would not have occurred to them at the time to commemorate a non-Royal woman.

Even now, in the 21st Century, only about 4 percent of statues in this country represent women. Our project is part of a global movement to redress this imbalance. As the organisation A Monument of One’s Own says:

“We need monuments to women’s courage, vision, tenacity, obstinacy and resolve — qualities that have, without doubt, benefited our nation.”

Regarding criticism that the statue represents a woman of ‘white colonial privilege’ instead of someone from our First Nations peoples. Firstly, this description does not equate with what Charlotte endured – the financial, social and legal discrimination she was subjected to simply because she was a woman – and the domestic violence. In terms of First Nations Peoples, it is not an either-or situation– without question we should celebrate both non-indigenous and indigenous women and their stories – we can and should do both.

I also want to address reference to ‘statuary’ in the park being rejected before. I understand this relates to aspects of the design of the playground and not to any previous proposal for a commemorative statue.

As you know, we have raised funds for the Charlotte statue to be placed in the Park through overwhelming public support and generosity. The community engagement and consultation process has been going on since October last year. We know the majority of the local community is behind this.

History - our heritage - is a living and evolving thing and the park has changed and been added to over time. Originally an open paddock where cattle were bought and sold, over the years many trees and shrubs were planted, including the Henry Parkes Oak in 1890. From the 1900's it was a place for cricket and tennis and other recreational and social pursuits. The war memorial was added and later the amenities block, the children's playground, the boules court and shed, BBQ's, tables, seats, and disabled access.

When the war memorial garden and cenotaph opened in the park in May 1953 – built by local ex-servicemen - it was formally handed over to the people of Berrima in a special ceremony. At that time, Mr Blake Pelly MLA acknowledged history is not static. He made the connection between the longer term past history of the village and the more recent history of the World Wars. He said 'History has been made again today'.

And that's what we hope to be doing on December 9, when we add to the park's visual and living history with the beautiful statue of Charlotte – a lasting gift to the Shire Council and the people of Berrima and the Southern Highlands.