

Gathering Place

RESTORING INVERGOWRIE HAS REUNITED A FAMILY

STORY LYNNE WALKER PHOTOS DAVID ELKIN



Ian Telford and the late Doug Moffatt with dogs Leonard and Ginny

In the heart of the New England countryside a significant country residence restoration has been taking place, a project of such scale and significance that it will ensure the property endures for many generations to come, way beyond its present fifth- and sixth-generation ownership. While restoration projects of this scale are often carried out on well known, high profile residences around Australia, it is rare that a small, privately owned rural property should receive such attention with so much vision exhibited on the part of its owners.

The property is Invergowrie homestead at Invergowrie, between Uralla and Armidale, and the completion of the restoration coincides with the sesquicentenary of the selection of the first 100 acres of a property to be known as 'Invergowrie' by the Mitchell family, and the centenary of the acquisition of the property by the Moffatt family in 1916.

In January 1866, James Mitchell started with that first 100 acres, eventually building it to 7000 acres (2833 hectares) which extended from the Rocky River to Mount Mitchell on the Great Dividing Range. The family first occupied a slab cottage in what is now known as Mitchell Gully. In 1875, construction began on the four-room cottage which was the core of their new homestead and the many buildings surrounding it. Most of these outbuildings remain, having been faithfully restored.

James was a keen gardener. A highly productive vegetable garden sustained the family, extensive orchards were established and in the homestead garden many significant trees were planted, many of which remain today. As James and his wife Isabella had 13 children who survived to adulthood, the cottage was extended with more rooms and verandahs and then a second dwelling was built in the 1880s, which has always been referred to as the bachelors' quarters, presumably because the older boys lived there. The building also included a post office to service the mail coach run.



In 1916, following the deaths of James and Isabella, the property was purchased from the estate by John and Mary Moffatt (nee Mitchell) of 'Yarrowyck', the neighbouring property across the Gwydir River. Mary was the third daughter of James and Isabella Mitchell and had grown up at Invergowrie. The ties between the two families remain close to this day. John was also a competent gardener and he made many additions to the garden including formal rose beds, the planting lists of which still exist. Over the next two generations the property was subdivided and ownership moved around the various portions of the property until in 1985, John's grandson Doug Moffatt and great-grandson David Moffatt, with their partners, decided to buy the parcel of land on which Invergowrie homestead and its outbuildings (except the woolshed) remained. Neither of the couples lived at Invergowrie or even in Armidale, with Doug and his partner Ian Telford living in Canberra and David and his then wife Lee living in various parts of Australia and the United States.

"During my youth Doug was a highly engaged uncle. He was a positive and strong influence for me about heritage, style and attention to detail. In 1985, Doug, Lee and I had a once in a generation opportunity to jointly secure Invergowrie, ensuring it remained in the family beyond the fourth generation," explains David. "Doug drove the overall vision and the onsite decisions, Ian led the garden planning and botanical decisions and Lee and I provided the financial and moral support for those decisions. We visited as often as possible, always gathering around the kitchen and dining tables, ensuring alignment of vision, heritage values and conservation priorities. Along the way we celebrated key milestones, had many debates, lots of laughs, the occasional tear but my partnership with Doug is best described as highly collaborative, deeply respectful and for the most part great fun!"

After restoring the garden between 1986 and 2000 and renovating the outbuildings and bachelors' quarters by 2008, it was the homestead's turn. Painting the internal walls, the soft furnishings and the finishing touches were finally completed in October 2016.



Ian Telford, David & Nicholas Moffatt





Northern verandah of the oldest section of the homestead with climbing Mme Alfred Carriere



Restored rose garden

Ian and Doug commuted from Canberra for several years working on the garden restoration before finally moving in 1996. "The garden had largely been grassed over for many years. We started with the vegetable garden. I relied on past records and tried to re-establish as many roses as possible from Doug's grandfather's planting in 1919," says Ian. "The garden chugged along without great expense. It was the buildings which required money and the outbuildings and the bachelors' quarters were restored first."

The restored outbuildings include a granary, machinery shed, blacksmith's shop and tool room (formerly the Mount Butler School), as well as garages built in the 1920s. The stables had been condemned and were demolished and it is on that site that a museum or 'family shed' is now being constructed.

"The most important priority was to 'stop the rot', to remove the termite risk and damage and waterproof and weatherproof all buildings. This necessitated our master craftsman and builder, Darrel Fraser, reconstructing virtually every board, stump, bearer, joist, beam, rail, window and brick on the property! We knew we were in a race against Father Time so our priorities were preservation and conservation ahead of home comforts. For almost 30 long years Invergowrie was to be a 'destination of the heart', for while highly functional, it certainly was not a luxury destination!" says David.

Then the vision changed. "Initially our objective was sustainability of ownership within the family. That quickly became a shared vision for Invergowrie as a 'gathering place' for family and friends. We agreed that Invergowrie could be a way to reunite the widely dispersed branches and generations of the Moffatt and Mitchell families. We hoped Invergowrie could be a safe and inspiring place for any and all," he adds.

This became particularly significant as Doug was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and succumbed in April 2013, leaving his share of the homestead to David's son, Nicholas.

By that time the outbuilding restoration had been completed and the homestead was about to be restored according to Doug's vision. The transformation is now complete and the result is a light, airy, gracious building with wonderful colours being uncovered in the kitchen, dining room and sitting room, as the walls were stripped back.

"The sesquicentennial celebrations at Invergowrie on October 8, 2016 highlighted how deeply relevant our vision for Invergowrie as a 'gathering place' is. So many family members and friends expressed their support for the conservation and restoration of Invergowrie's gardens and buildings. We were thrilled to learn of so many very personal connections, recollections, foundational memories and experiences, in some cases over 80 years ago!" enthuses David.

The recent construction of an innovative heritage-style family museum or 'family shed', a composite timber, iron and rock construction surrounding two shipping containers, has added a new dimension of connection for family and friends with Invergowrie. The family shed has museum quality archival storage and display spaces developed under the watchful eye of fourth-generation Mitchell descendant and master potter Christine Ball.

"There is great satisfaction in keeping it going, with the garden keeping on producing and the house which is a joy to live in. It's such a pleasure when everyone comes and the house is open and full of light and air and life," concludes David.

It is the sincere hope of current owners David and Nicholas Moffatt that Invergowrie will continue to be a safe and inspiring place, a "destination of the heart" for many generations to come and there is no doubt that that would be Doug's wish as well.

