

Sprents Book

James Sprent was born in 1808, was a graduate of Glasgow University who arrived in the Colony in 1830.

There are a number of reports which substantiate the fact that he was stationed in Hobart for various periods somewhere between circa 1837 to 1846, where on February 25th 1841 he undertook an extensive and large scale survey of the greater part of Hobart Town.

The extent of that survey could best be described as extending from the Brooker Highway north to Burnett Street, south along Arthur Street to Knocklofty Terrace, east to D'Arcy Street in South Hobart along the Sandy Bay Rivulet through to Battery Point around the Wharf area and back to the Brooker Highway.

This was done between the time of his first attempt at a Trigonometrical Survey of Tasmania between 1833 to 1837 and on resumption some 10-years on, in 1847.

Sprent produced a set of 76 street plans at a size measuring approx (landscape) 50.5 x 65 cm which captured minute detail down to the individual buildings situated at the time in Hobart Town.

That catalogue of plans then became a large bound volume and in a reference form was always known as 'Sprents Book'.

In early 1858, Sprent was appointed Surveyor-General, but his health had been so badly affected by the years of hardship during his fieldwork, that he was tragically forced to retire due to ill health later the same year.

James Sprent died at his home in Hobart on 22nd September 1863, aged 55, and so was gone one of the country's great surveyors, but the legacy he left with the Sprents Book plans, lives on in the work detailed below.

It is generally thought that the Sprents Book was split, in about the late 1960's and each individual page was then carefully mounted on a durable thin cardboard backing, presumably for easy handling and storage and in fact that foresight, along with a rigorous restoration project by the (former Lands & Surveys and then later on Lands Department and now DPIPW) saw each plan contained within a mylar type bag, which further protected them from general wear and tear.

Remarkably and given the extensive handling over the years (now in excess of 150-years) all of the plans are in excellent condition, have been eagerly sought after by private historians, researchers from TMAG, the State Library and the State Archives Office.

All plans were scanned in colour at high resolution in 2004, as part of a forerunner to the Information and Lands Services Division progressive Archiving Strategy (Archive, Storage and Delivery Strategy Project) and the work with those particular individual images, has resulted in the georeferencing of each plan in alignment with the Departments Cadastral fabric, the building blocks for the LIST spatial datasets.

Each individual plan has also been encapsulated into one seamless mosaic and it is expected that on completion of this particular work, that mosaic image will attract high interest from those within the community, harbouring and treasuring the rich and vibrant natural history of the colony, which is faithfully preserved and contained in the Sprents Book series of plans all those years ago.

Individual copies (of Sprents Book) pages, also feature prominently in interpretation display cases in Hobart, most notably near the site of the old ANZ Building in Macquarie Street in an interpretation panel just off the street (page 63), likewise in the foyer at the site of the new Menzies Centre, corner of Liverpool and Campbell Streets (page 35). That plan is part of the on-site interpretive works for the new UTAS Faculty of Health Science building. In December 2009 at a celebration to mark the 175th birthday of the oldest working Theatre in Australia, a copy of Sprents Book plan (page 23) was used for an open day.

The Divisions' Archiving Strategy expects to formally hand over this unique set of work in the latter part of March to mid April 2011 to the State Archives Office, where it will no doubt compliment the already impressive display of Historical works held within that office.