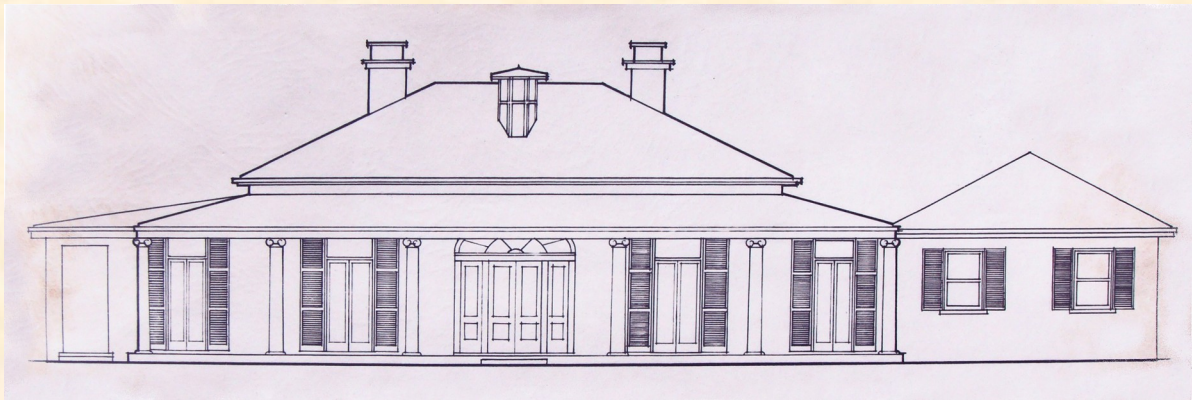


# St Malo

Hunters Hill NSW  
c1846



The battle to save a classic home

Researched, edited and designed by Greg Davis

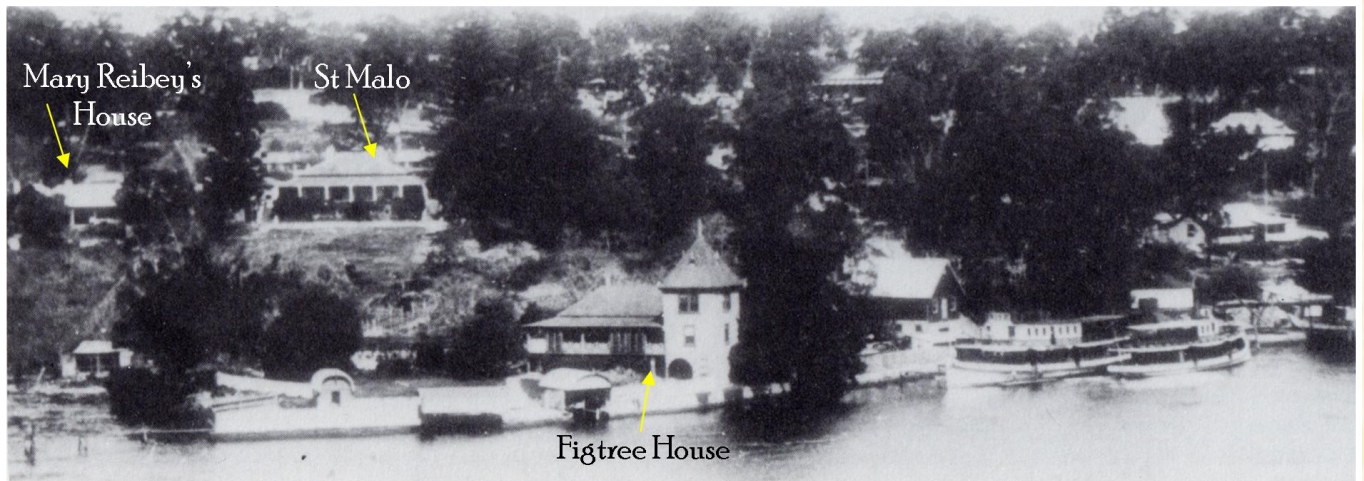
For Facebook group "Old Sydney Album"

# The Battle to Save St Malo, Hunters Hill, NSW

## Background

St Malo was built in c1856 on the 200 acre "Figtree Farm" at Hunters Hill, purchased by Didier Joubert in c1847 for £582 from Mary Reibey, who was an ex-convict and a successful business woman.

On this farm, by the Lane Cove River, were three buildings: two workers' cottages, close to the river, each of two rooms, built c1836 and an earlier convict-built house which Mary Reibey used as country retreat. At this time, the only practical access to Hunter's Hill was by boat.



When the Joubert family arrived at Figtree Farm, they incorporated the two cottages into one home, known as Figtree House. Didier added firstly a timber room, then a two storey stone wing and paved verandah where the family lived until the grander St Malo was completed. Around 1890, Didier's son, Numa, extended Figtree House, adding the distinctive timber tower, now a landmark in the area.

Didier, and his brother Jules, built many of Hunters Hill's early homes, bringing expert stonemasons from Italy for the task.



Mary Reibey's House, pictured in the late 1950's



Figtree House, pictured in the late 1950's





St Malo front verandah and entry c1881.

## The Villa Home

The site chosen for St Malo was slightly further up the hill from the river, adjacent to Mary Reibey's first home. A sweeping drive led past Moreton Bay figs and Norfolk Island pines to the front entry.

St Marlo was a single-storey sandstone bungalow with verandahs, flagged in black and white marble, front and back. The rear side, facing north to the river, had round iron columns with cast iron balustrades, while to the front were delicate cast iron columns.

The roof was covered with blue-grey slate. The kitchen and laundry block was a detached stone and brick building, as was the custom of the day. Eventually this building became staff quarters, after a kitchen was incorporated into the house.



The rear garden, looking towards Lane Cove River, c1881



The rear verandah, c1929





The drawing room, c1881

The drawing room and dining room featured Italian marble mantel pieces and huge sliding doors between these rooms. The architraves were cedar throughout and all the window and door openings were fitted with external timber shutters.

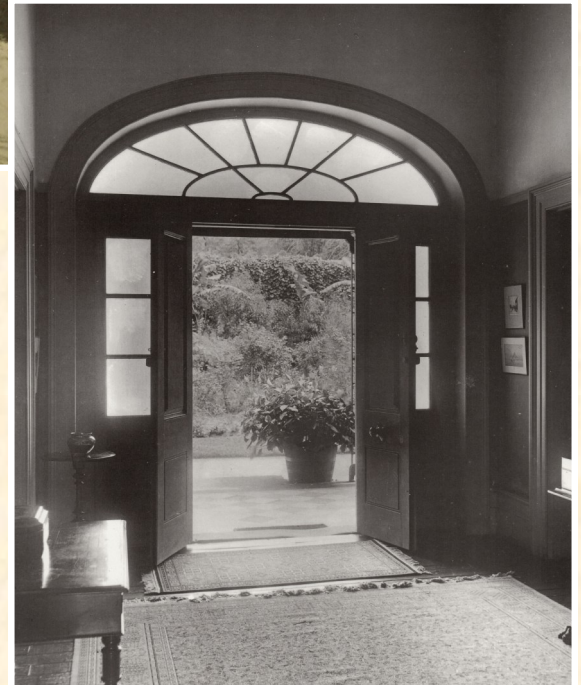
The coach house, which was under the same roof as the kitchen block, later became the garage.

There was a basement area under the rear verandah with the entry under the side steps. The 1881 photo shows an attached kitchen/scullery addition to the east and after the 1930s, a larger bedroom was added to the western side of the home.

Modest by comparison to grander homes in Sydney, in its immediate setting among Reibey's various stone cottages, St Malo would have appeared a fine villa.

With the passing of Didier Joubert in 1881, the family continued ownership of St Malo. Didier's youngest daughter, Rose Du Boise, moved back to St Malo after her husband died and she spent her twilight years at the property where she grew-up.

Greeting those arriving at St Malo was a wide entry hall with decorative fanlight above the double front doors, two sidelights and a domed ceiling, lit by a glazed roof lantern - unique in the Hunters Hill area.



Entrance Hall, c1929



The dining room, c1881



## Colonial connections

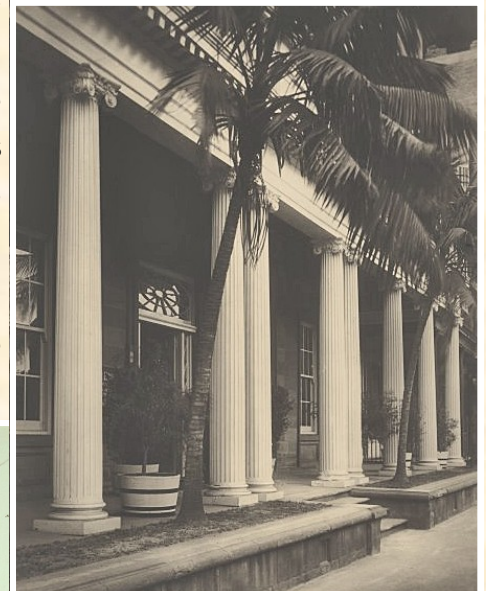
In August 1933, Burdekin House, a grand 1841 mansion in Macquarie Street, was demolished for the building of St Stephen's Church. Six of the columns from Burdekin House's façade were purchased by Rose's son, Ferdinand Du Boise.

These columns were installed on the front verandah at St Malo, replacing the cast iron columns. Rose thought they would look too big, but she was pleased with the result. Although the columns appear to be stone, they were actually of painted wood, hollow and built-up in sections and had delicately carved ionic capitals. These columns were shortened to suit the scale of the villa.

Rose Du Boise passed away in March 1935 and St Malo stayed in the family with Ferdinand continuing to live there.



Burdekin House, above and below.



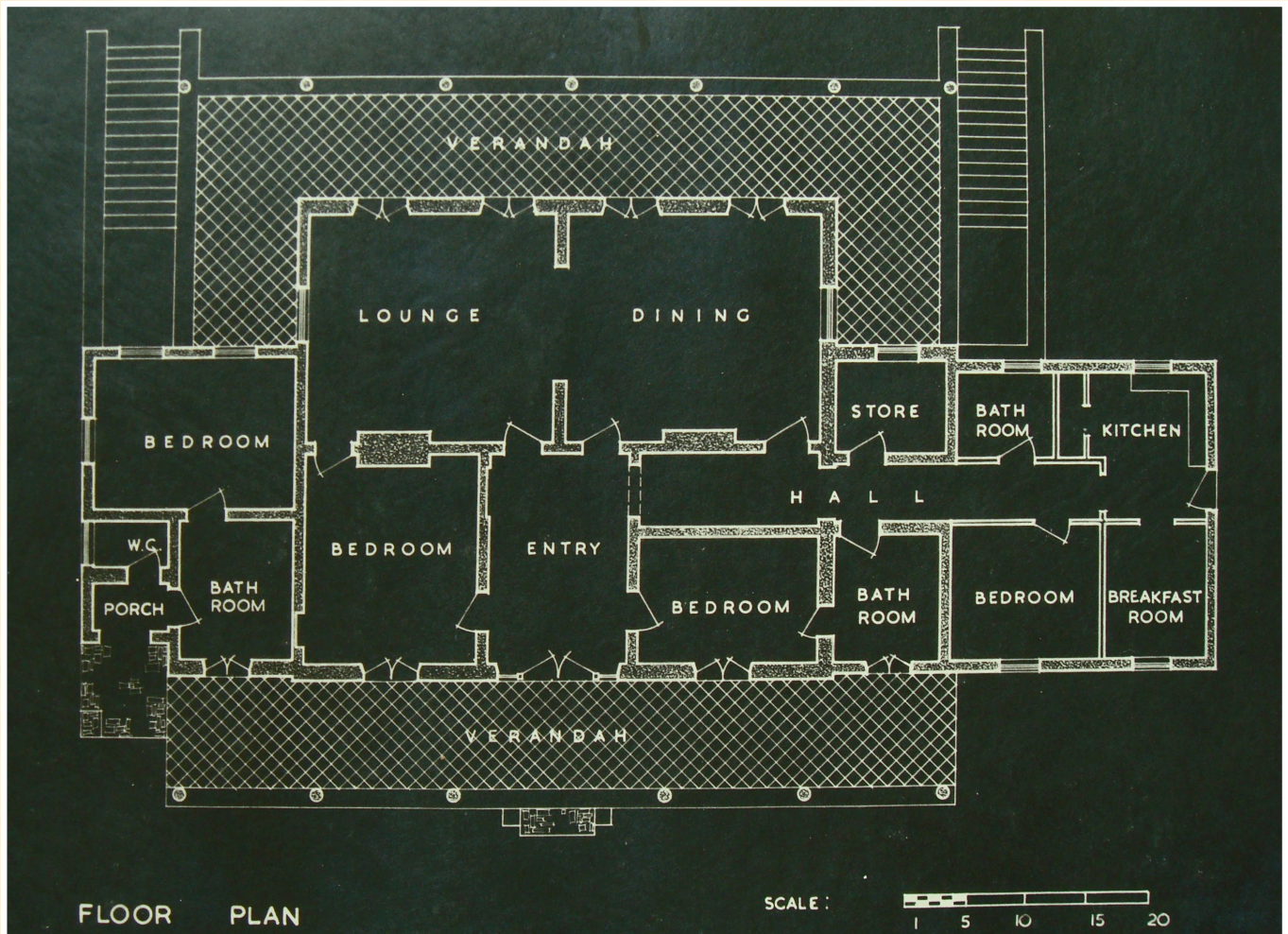
St Malo with its new columns in place, c1952, above and right

The connection of St Malo with Sydney's past was not only with the Burdekin House columns. November 1939 saw the demolition of the Commissariat Store in The Rocks. This was one of Sydney's earliest public buildings, from c1810, and a quantity of the stone from that building was used in the construction of the stone wall on St Malo's Joubert Street boundary.



Commissariat Store, The Rocks, c1930s





Floor plan of St Malo, c1952. Kitchen area had been added to the right and a bedroom extended to the left.

## The beginning of the end

In June 1948, The County of Cumberland Master Plan for Sydney went on public display. Among the wide-sweeping plans for the greater Sydney area was the North-western Expressway, to be built through Hunters Hill and with new bridges at Gladesville and Figtree. This was the beginning of the battle to save St Malo – a battle that would last more than a dozen years.

## The National Trust goes into action

The effect on Hunters Hill would be the compulsory resumption and loss of 100 houses and public buildings. The newly-formed National Trust was enlisted by Ferdinand Du Boise, the grandson of Didier Joubert, to help save St Malo.

The National Trust suggested that the route of the expressway should be changed to save St Malo and in February 1950 this was agreed to.

Ferdinand died in May 1951, with St Malo passing to family members.

In the early 1950s, St Malo was leased to the Trade Commissioner for India, Dr. T. G. Menon and Mrs. Menon, where they lived and entertained regularly, holding lavish cocktail parties and many charitable and fundraising functions.



## The pressure starts

By 1954, many North Shore Councils were demanding the government make a start to the North-western Expressway, to ease the increasing traffic congestion. The planning of the Expressway was well underway and it was clear that St Malo was still under threat.

The National Trust negotiated a 20 year lease on the home to strengthen its opposition to the Expressway's route. The Trust sub-let St Malo to Tinker Tailor Group, who restored and furnished the home and opened it to the public. They used it for functions and as a base for their interior decorating and catering business.



The drawing and dining rooms after restoration by The National Trust and Tinker Tailor Group, c1955.

This was the National Trust's first 'acquisition', made possible by the generosity of Mrs Walker, a niece of Ferdinand Du Boise, who was one of her uncle's beneficiaries. The first ever National Trust Open day was held in July 1955 where the newly restored St Malo and grounds were open to the public.



The entry hall after restoration, c1955



A National Trust open day in the late 1950's



## Tenders called

The controversy languished until 1959, when the State Government called for tenders for the new bridge, which started a fresh battle to save St Malo. It was clear the Government had no plans to preserve St Malo, as they continued their original route for the Expressway and were compulsorily resuming properties affected by those plans. Besides St Malo, there were other important properties in the demolisher's sights, including the original Mary Reibey's house (adjacent to St Malo), Figtree House and St Mark's Chapel c1857.



Mary Reibey's House, rear.



Figtree House.



St Mark's Chapel.

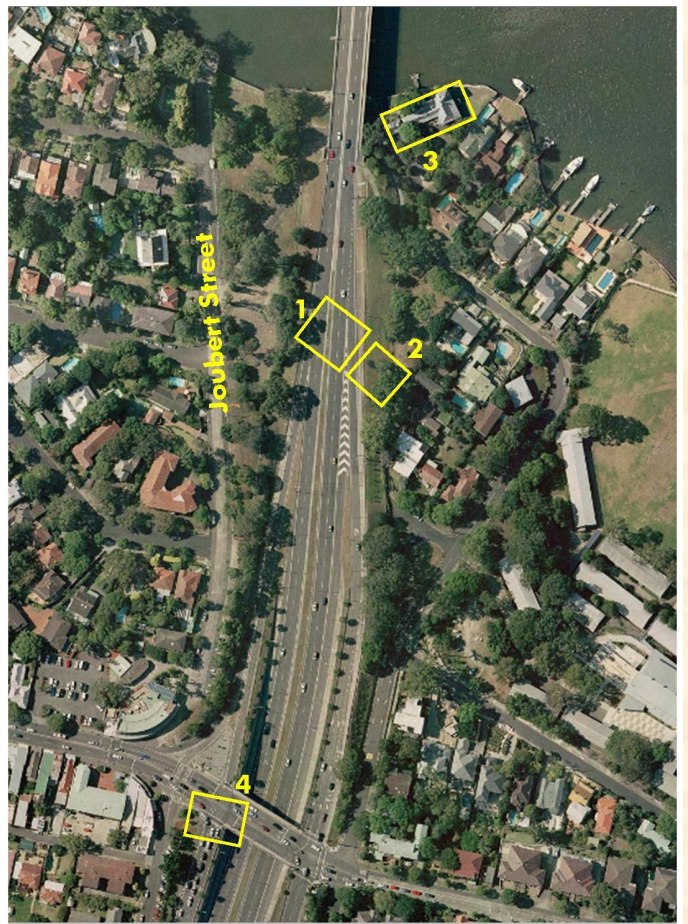
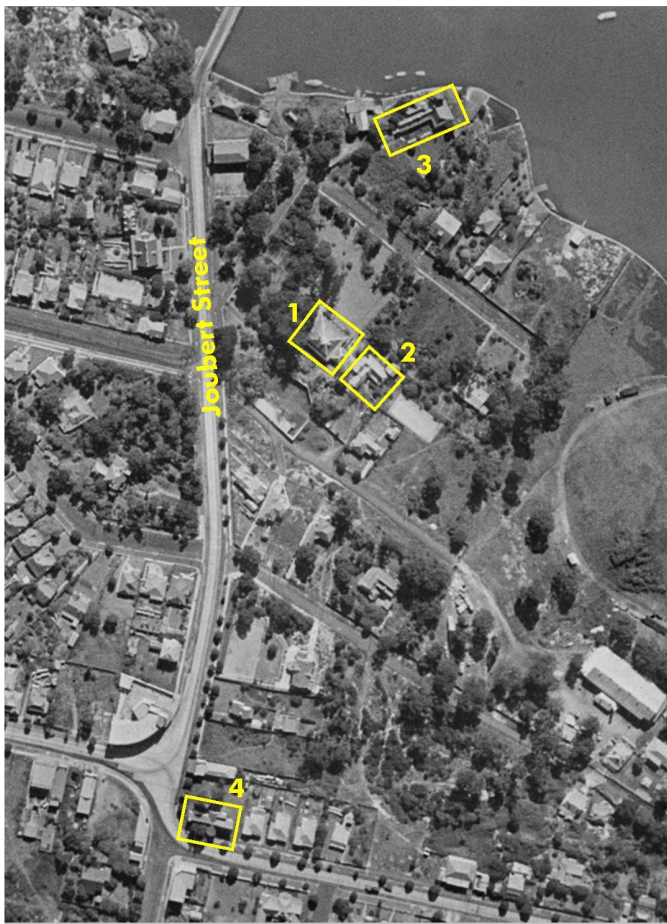


Diagram showing the devastation caused by the North-western Expressway through Hunters Hill  
Left is 1943 view and right is 2012

1. St Malo, 2 Mary Reibey's House, 3 Figtree House, 4 St Mark's Chapel.



## A glimmer of hope

Publicity surrounding this impending destruction of Hunters Hill history was in full flight and by September 1959, protests were arranged by The National Trust and local residents. The Minister in charge of roads declared that the Expressway route could not be changed as tenders had been called. The government would look at the possibility of moving St Malo and St Mark's Chapel to other sites nearby.



The National Trust organises a petition with 7,000 signatures in 1959

## The Minister makes his decision

In October 1959, the Roads Minister, Mr Hills, announced that the cost of altering the original Expressway route would be at least £200,000 and this made any changes impossible. He did say that although the land adjacent to Figtree House was affected, the building was not involved in any demolition plans.

He is quoted as saying *"St Malo was one of a number of similar homes in Hunters Hill. No historical event had taken place there and its occupants had played no outstanding part of historical importance in the early life of NSW. The situation then is that St Malo has very slight historical value, it has some architectural value which it shares with other old building of the period and it is in an attractive setting for entertainment."*



*"But if we demolish the pub instead, won't we be accused of acting against Australian tradition?"*

There was talk at the time that if the Expressway route was changed, the Hunters Hill Pub would be demolished and to many Aussies, this was worse than losing St Malo!

This Molnar cartoon, from the SMH 1959, expresses that sentiment.

He added *"The fact that this involves St Malo is greatly regretted, but it is apparent that the true significance of St Malo is less than many persons have thought"*.

Dr Lindsay Grant, a spokesman for St Malo, said *"The Minister's statements contained many of the same blatant inaccuracies and evidences the same lack of proper investigation both as to historical facts and costs"*.

He challenged the minister to substantiate his statements.





Driveway at St Malo, c1959

Dr Grant was refused a personal interview with the Minister to present a petition containing 7,000 signatures.

He said *"Should the Minister deem the acceptance of the petition beneath him, we intend to petition the Queen, as I understand is our legal right."*

The Government started sending resumption notices to affected residents, including Mr J Kininmont the proprietor of the boatshed on the Lane Cove River. Upon a visit by the DMR valuers, he was told to *"name his price"*.

The Minister, Mr Hills, announced in December 1959 that the tender for the new

bridge will soon be let and there was no alternative to St Malo being demolished. Dr Grant, who by this time had managed to give his petition to Mr Hills, was organising a protest with 2,000 car owners with placards displayed on their cars.

## A final chance

In February 1960, a court injunction was sought to prevent the DMR from proceeding with the demolition of St Malo. The hearing of the NSW Full Court failed and in June 1960, the Full High Court in Melbourne heard an appeal against that decision, which also failed.

Clearing of the land around St Malo had now started and in October 1960 the 70ft Moreton Bay fig tree was sawn down, along with the lofty Norfolk Island pines.



The 70ft Moreton Bay fig, pictured in 1959

**St. Malo Trees For Mousetraps**

The old landmark which gave Fig Tree Bridge its name at Hunter's Hill was destroyed yesterday.

The landmark, a 70ft high Morton Bay fig tree in the grounds of historic St. Malo, has been sawn down to make way for approaches to the new Fig Tree Bridge.

St. Malo, the handsome stone house in Joubert Street, will be moved to make way for the approaches.

Last night, the sawn remains of the fig tree were smouldering about the 8ft-wide stump.

Lofty Norfolk Island pines in the grounds of St. Malo have also been felled.

The timber will be used to make mousetraps, according to a spokesman for the contractor.

He said a small amount of the timber from the St. Malo trees was suitable for floor joists. A load of other timber had been sent to a factory for mousetraps.

An article in the SMH rather unceremoniously declared "St Malo Trees For Mousetraps". The same article also stated that St Malo was to be moved. Another article, in November 1960, reported that the furnishings were starting to be removed from St Malo. This article also stated that St Malo was being moved 100 yards from where it stands.

SMH article from November 1960



## So, what happened?

By June 1961 a sad end had come to the grand old lady of Hunters Hill. Despite all the controversy, protests, petitions, rallies and straight out begging, St Malo was demolished.



St Malo, after the "good bits" had been removed, 1961



The demolition complete, 1961

The Burdekin House Columns went to Scone NSW to find a home in The Old Court House Theatre, a Carrara marble mantel piece and the black and white flagging were used in the renovation of a Federation home in Chatswood and no doubt there are many relics of St Malo scattered throughout other Sydney homes and gardens.

I wonder how many current owners of those homes know of the battle fought, more than 50 years ago, to save St Malo .



A St Malo mantel piece finds a new home in this Chatswood property, pictured in 1971

## A small victory for Hunters Hill

There is a slight piece of good news to go with this story: The intense interest of the local and wider community in preserving St Mark's Chapel, the oldest public building in Hunters Hill, saved it from oblivion. A site in Figtree Road (the tennis court of 'Kaoota') was given by the Hindwood Family for the re-erection of the Chapel. The last service on its original site was in March 1962. The opening service on the new site and its dedication as 'St Mark's Church was on Sunday, 28th October 1962.

## Were any lessons learnt from the St Malo story?

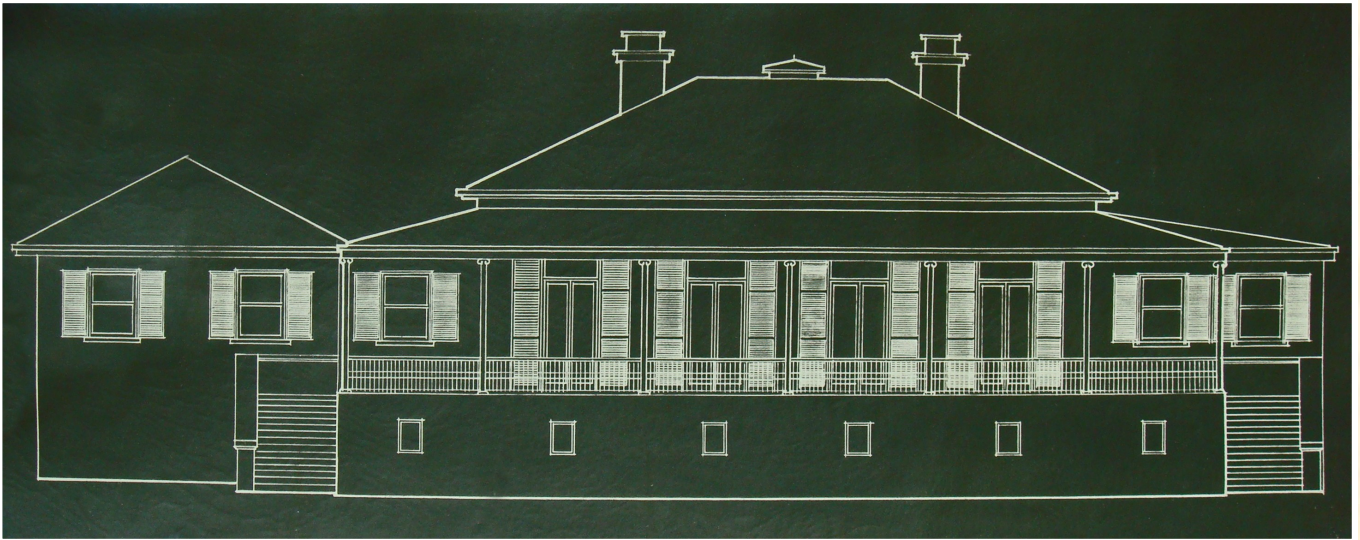
In my research for this story I have read quotes from people saying this wouldn't happen today.

*Oh really?*

It is happening every day in every part of Sydney, even to properties that are "listed".

In the end, all levels of Government get what they want.





St Malo, rear elevation as it was in 1952



Side rear steps, c1929



Front of St Malo, showing the Burdekin House columns, c1952

#### Sources of information:

Historic Houses Trust, The National Trust, Historical Society of Hunters Hill, The Hunters Hill Trust, Design and Art Australia Online, [sydneyarchitecture.com](http://sydneyarchitecture.com), [Trove.nla.gov.com](http://Trove.nla.gov.com), [thefreelibrary.com](http://thefreelibrary.com), [lite.maps.nsw.gov.au](http://lite.maps.nsw.gov.au), [lite.maps.nsw.gov.au](http://lite.maps.nsw.gov.au), State Records NSW, The Mitchell Library (photos from the Harold Cazneaux and Douglass Baglin collections), National Library of Australia, State Library of NSW, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Australian Women's Weekly and these books: *Demolished for the Public Good*, *Demolished Houses of Sydney* and *Old Buildings of Hunters Hill*. © **Greg Davis 2013**