



## Community Economic Development Program

### Berrima – Success Story

#### Challenges and opportunities

Historic Berrima is located on a bend in the Wingecarribee River in a scenic valley 130 kilometres south of Sydney in the Southern Highlands. The town is widely regarded as the best preserved example of a Georgian village on the Australian mainland.

Berrima was one of the first towns established in New South Wales. By 1840 it had a Court House and a Gaol and had become the administrative centre for the region. The town was a convenient stopping point for travellers going to and from Sydney and residents prospered.

Fortunately, building developments which destroyed the historic character of so many other towns and villages in the area a century ago somehow missed Berrima and when restorations were finally undertaken they were handled sensitively. The essential character of the place was not spoiled.

In the 1980s traffic had started to become a problem because the town of Berrima straddled the main road between Sydney and Canberra. While some businesses made money from the passing trade, the overall experience was unpleasant and the peace of the town was shattered.

A big change came about in 1989 when Berrima was by-passed by the South Western Freeway. The town could revert to being a destination in its own right: a place to visit for its historic treasures and a place to go for a holiday.

However, there was another problem – one of greater magnitude and not so easily fixed.

New Berrima, a slightly larger town with more residents, had sprung up nearby, with Blue Circle Southern Cement the major employer. Over time, people in the towns began to form into disparate groups. There was no communication between the groups, who were often suspicious of each other and, in some cases, openly hostile. Berrima began to get a reputation within the Wingecarribee Shire for being dysfunctional.

#### A program for change

In 2002, three community workshops were held to try to solve this problem. The workshops were facilitated by the NSW Department of State and Regional Development after

an application from one town group who wanted to have a community hall built in Berrima.

The situation was strained, with the facilitator reporting that this community was the most difficult she had ever had to deal with: during the workshops there was abusive language, near fistcuffs, and complaints made to various State Government Ministers, the local member for parliament and to Wingecarribee Shire Council.

Despite the difficulties, the Berrima Townlife Committee was formed, with the aim of identifying and researching specific projects which could foster a happier village atmosphere. Berrima Townlife worked hard to make some headway.

The turning point for Berrima came in 2004 when the Berrima Residents Association and the Townlife Committee decided to meet for the first time. This meeting was judged a success and the participants decided to meet on a regular basis. Later, representatives from other village organisations came along as well, including the Berrima Business Houses, the Berrima Courthouse and the Berrima Correctional Centre. The group, which became known as the Combined Berrima Association, has now met every two months for the past three years.

Representatives from the Berrima Public School, the Berrima District Historical and Family History Society and Museum, and Wingecarribee Shire Council also meet with the Combined Berrima Association to discuss any issues of concern.

The town of Berrima was on its way!

#### Goals

The goals for the people in and around Berrima were simple: to achieve trust between the residents and to have a community where people talk to each other.

#### Projects

A great deal of care was taken to find out what the people of Berrima wanted and needed. In 2002, the community had been surveyed extensively over a three month period; 500 residents – those living within a five kilometre radius of the Berrima Post Office, in both Berrima and New Berrima – were door-knocked. During these surveys people were asked to respond to a series of

simple questions. Responses showed that 90 per cent wanted a community hall and 95 per cent wanted sporting facilities.

The Combined Berrima Association has worked hard to achieve a turnaround in the community with more than 20 improvements, events, and activities, including:

- Hosting events such as Carols by Candlelight which has been held since 2002 and is a free event, popular with children from both villages. Candles are sold to raise money for the Bush Fire Brigade.
- Organising the first Anzac Day services in over 30 years in the Memorial Garden in 2006 and 2007.
- Funding a tree surgeon so that restoration work could be carried out on the historic English Oak planted by Sir Henry Parkes in 1890 in the Memorial garden, thereby allowing the tree to possibly survive for another hundred years.
- Extensively re-making two walks along the river by constructing paths, removing noxious weeds and planting natives.
- Placing a noticeboard in Berrima for the use of all village groups (there had never been one in the village).

A community hall was one of the things people had most asked for when questioned about what should be done to help the town. This need has now been fulfilled. Berrima was given the use of a hall by the Anglican Church and this building has been renovated by members of the Combined Berrima Association. It is now busy with free Saturday afternoon music concerts every month. To help create a wonderful atmosphere, Berrima Townlife decorates the hall with flowers and puts on an afternoon tea for concert goers.

Dr. Ann Parker of the Combined Berrima Association also comments that a wonderful relationship has developed among the people in The Friends of Harper's Mansion group. "This National Trust house in Berrima had been listed for sale but has now been re-opened on weekends by a team of 70 volunteers. Berrima Correctional Centre inmates are helping with the gardening and are maintaining the maze."

### How the Department has helped

In 2002, the NSW Department of State and Regional Development provided Berrima with \$12,000 towards community planning activities, as well as non-financial assistance in the form of facilitated planning workshops. Since this time, the Department's Business Development Manager for the Illawarra has regularly attended and participated in Berrima committee meetings.

### Ongoing activities

One of the most innovative and successful projects undertaken in Berrima – a project for the 175th Anniversary Celebrations in June 2006 – was the making of a giant commemorative quilt which graphically displays Berrima and its history.

This was a big undertaking: the project involved 80 people as either donors or artists, the materials alone cost \$4,000 and volunteers put in over 2,000 hours of work. Many of these people had not known each other previously, but they got to know each other well as they stitched and appliquéd patchwork images onto a seven square metre spread. The finished quilt was accepted by Wingecarribee Shire Council as part of their Heritage List and is now on display at the Berrima Courthouse Museum.

There has also been outside recognition for Berrima's achievements: the Bushcare subcommittee's work was so successful that this group won the NSW Premier's Bushcare Award for the Wingecarribee Shire in 2006. Berrima was also a top ten finalist for the Community of the Year (population under 15,000) Award category of the Regional Achievement & Community Awards in 2007.

All the hard work has paid off. Berrima is now a community blossoming with new activity, where people trust, respect and talk to each other.

### Contacts

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**Community Name:** Berrima **LGA:** Wingecarribee **Region:** Illawarra  
**Population:** 868 in village, 42,272 in LGA (2006 Census)  
**Main industries:** Tourism, cement manufacture, correctional services