

House history: 10-12 Macleay Street, Potts Point

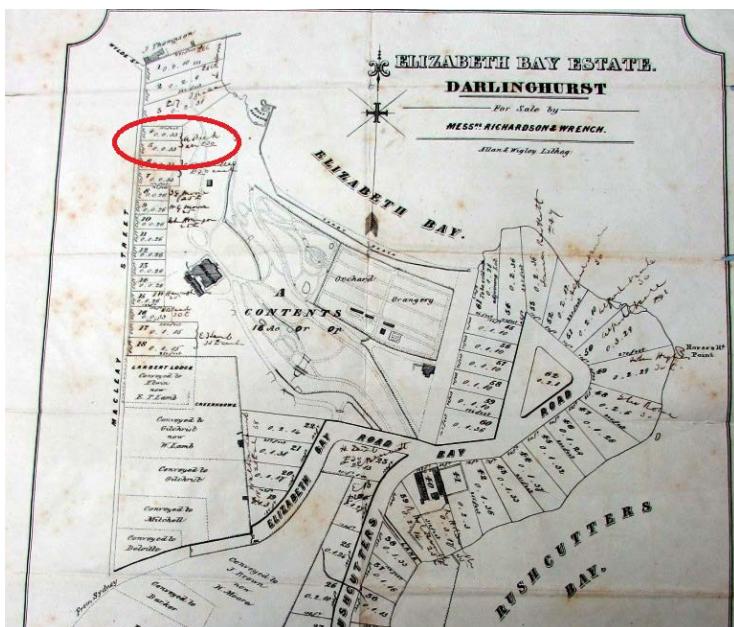
Question: There is a website that says my block of apartments was completed in 1939, and a lot of places around here are of similar vintage. I want to know the history of this building but I also wonder why these places were built back then when most people in Sydney wanted a house and garden.

Answer: Sometimes the history of your home can't be separated from other general questions like the one you have asked. Sydney's planning history will give you the answer.

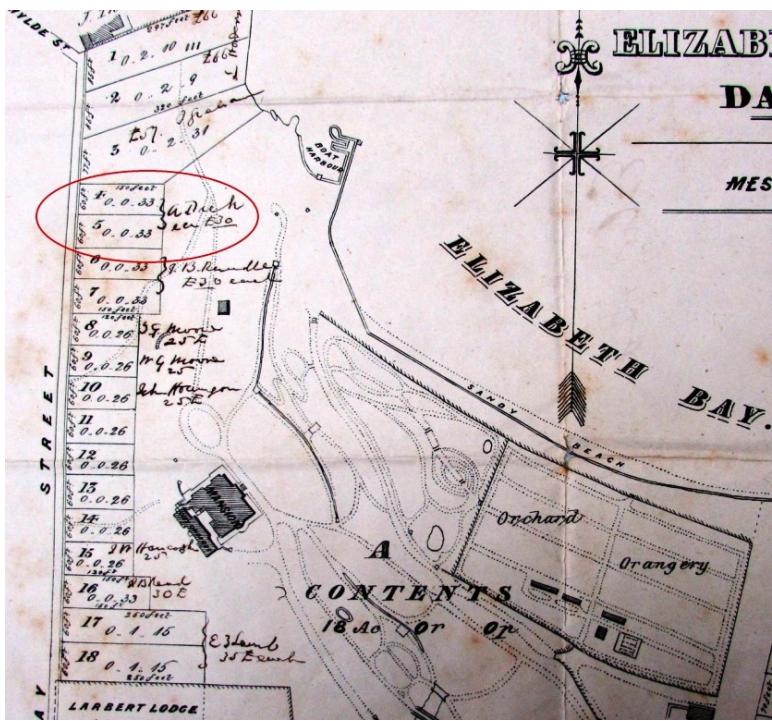
Early land history

The Macleay Regis apartment building at 10-12 Macleay Street, Potts Point stands on ground that was part of Governor Ralph Darling's 1831 land grant of 54 acres (22 hectares) of land to the Colonial Secretary, Alexander Macleay, who arrived in Sydney in 1826. This estate stretched from current Macleay Street to Elizabeth Bay. Elizabeth Bay House, which still stands in Onslow Avenue, was built for Macleay between 1835 and 1839.¹

The site of 10-12 Macleay Street was part of the extensive landscaped grounds of Elizabeth Bay House. Macleay sold off some of his land in 1841 and left the remainder to his son William. When William died in 1865 this land ownership of the estate passed to George Macleay, who had much of the estate surrounding the house subdivided in that year. In 1868 two blocks of the 1865 subdivision, the land on which the Macleay Regis stands, were purchased on a 99 year lease by Julia Dick.²



Richardson and Wrench's auction plan, 1865, subdivision of part of Macleay's Elizabeth Bay grant. State Library of NSW Subdivision Plans ZSP/E5/12



Detail of Richardson and Wrench's auction plan, 1865, showing Lots 4 and 5 annotated A Dick, each at £30

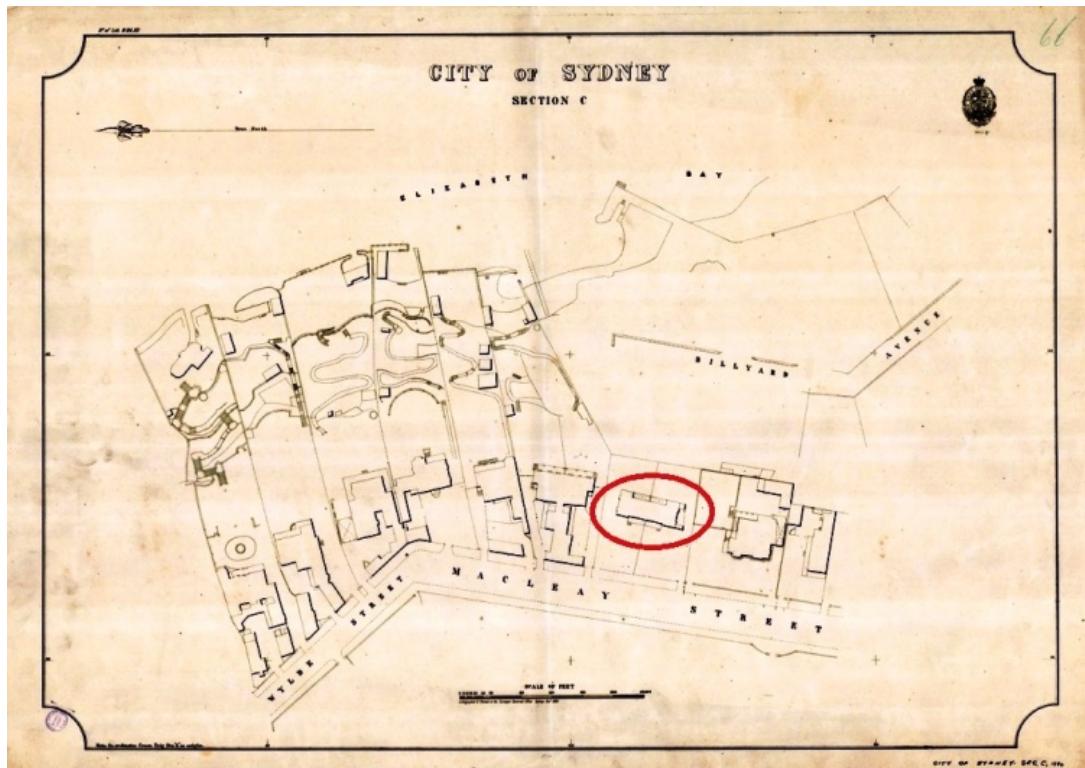
The first houses

Soon after Julia Dick acquired this land she married Charles Eberlein. In about 1870 two semi-detached houses were built on the double block. They were named Elizabeth Bay Villas.³



This photograph taken c 1875 shows the recent development of two and three storey mansions along Macleay Street, including Elizabeth Bay Villas. National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn4191664-v.

The following 1884 plan shows the outline of the building, including the protruding two storey end which is visible in the photograph.



This plan shows the outline of Elizabeth Bay Villas. NSW Dept Lands Metropolitan detail series, Metropolitan Series City of Sydney Section C, 1884, State Library of NSW a1367484h.

The villas were two semi-detached houses, were constantly rented out and never lived in by the Eberleins. According to the City Assessment Book of 1871, the first year that the houses were listed, they were numbered 36 and 38, built of stone and brick with slate roofs, one with two storeys, and one with three, both containing eight rooms each. They were rented to Robert Elvey and Mrs Kirchner. The assessor took the trouble to record that Elvey had 'no coach house', perhaps a comment on a failure to match the standard of other houses being built on a street where coach houses, offices and stables were abundant.

In 1877 the assessor recorded the houses were three storeys, each with 14 rooms, but as the next assessment in 1880 recorded the building as only two storeys with 11 rooms, we could hazard a guess that there had been some overestimation in the earlier record. It was not uncommon for the specific number of floors to vary in many assessment records and because the ground dropped away from Macleay Street towards the harbour, it may well have been a case of two storeys in front with three at the rear.

Although Julia Eberlein died in 1907 she continued to appear as the owner in the next few assessments until the records caught up with the facts by 1914 when the new owner - or to be strictly correct the owner of the remainder of the 99 year lease - was recorded as Charles Blackburn. The lease had been assigned to Blackburn at the end of 1911.⁴ By now the land had been inherited by James Onslow.

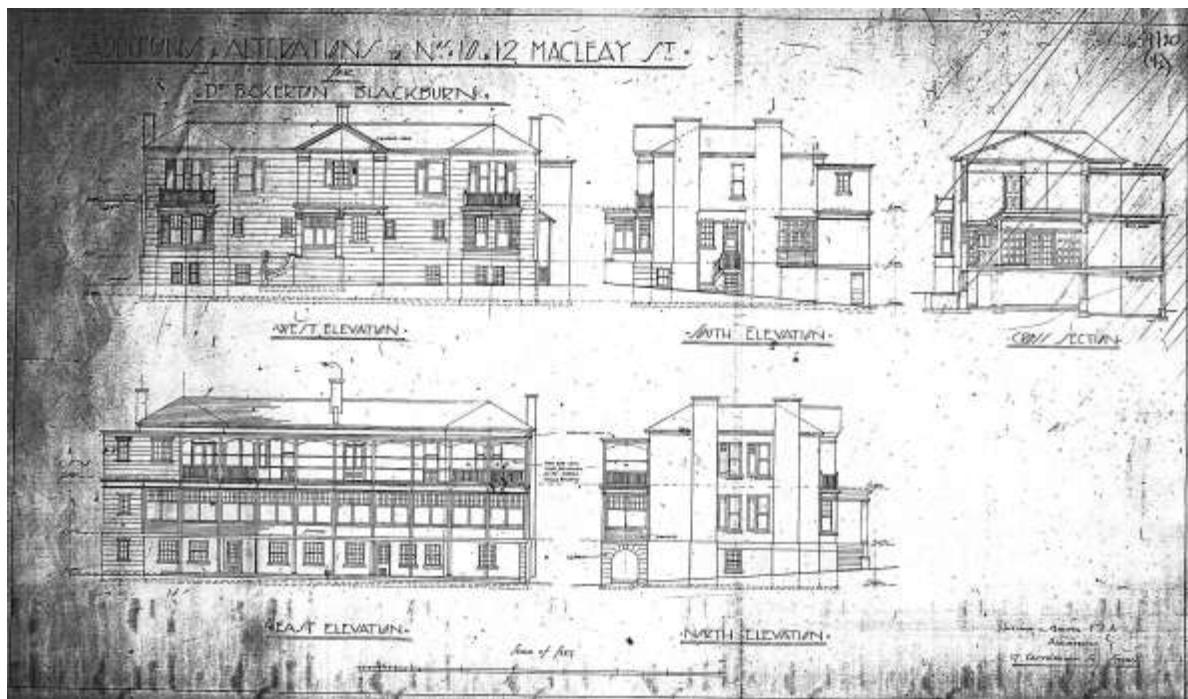
The two houses Blackburn had acquired were apparently still two storeys containing eleven rooms. He had some minor alterations made to the properties in that year, then lived in number 12 and rented out number 10.⁵

Brief Land Title history

- 19 October 1831 - Grant to Alexander Macleay, 54 acres
- 1866 - subdivision of lots on 99 year leases
- 1 March 1868 - Allotment including land on which Macleay Regis stands leased from George Macleay to Julia Dick
- 9 November 1911 - Lease assigned to Charles Blackburn
- 17 August 1937 - Blackburn assigned lease to Harold Percival Christmas
- 1937 - Converted to Torrens Title.

Blackburn's 'Greenhithe'

Charles Bickerton Blackburn was a leading Sydney physician and academic who held the position of Chancellor of the University of Sydney from 1941 to 1964.⁶ He lived at 12 Macleay Street until 1920 when he made major alterations to the property, turning both houses into one larger dwelling of three storeys with 16 rooms which he renamed 'Greenhithe'. The architects for this work were Joseland and Gilling.⁷



Plans for alterations to numbers 10 and 12 Macleay Street, Joseland and Gilling, architects, 1920. City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 126 659/20

Blackburn lived in this house from 1921 until 1937, when he on-sold the lease to Harold Percival Christmas.⁸ Christmas was a major retailer who became one of the founders and the managing director of Woolworths Limited when it was registered in 1924. When Christmas took possession of 'Greenhithe' he immediately moved to have the title for the property converted to Torrens Title.⁹

New South Wales.

[CERTIFICATE OF TITLE.]



REGISTER BOOK.

VOL. 4896 FOL. 50

CANCELLED □

HAROLD PERCIVAL CHRISTMAS, of Sydney, Company Director, Applicant in Primary Application No. 33221, is now the proprietor of an Estate in Fee Simple, subject nevertheless to the reservations and conditions if any contained in the Grant hereinafter referred to and also subject to such encumbrances liens and interests as are notified herein in That piece of land situated in the City of Sydney Parish of Alexandria and County of Cumberland containing One rood twenty five and one half perches or thereabouts as shown in the plan hereon and therein edged red and also shown in the plan lodged with said Application No. 33221 being lots 4 and 5 Elizabeth Bay Estate, and being part of 54 acres originally granted to Alexander Mac Leay by Crown Grant dated the 19th day of October 1831.

In witness whereof I have hereunto signed my name and affixed my Seal, this Twenty-first day of December,

Signed in the presence of

McGraw

Bequia Genna



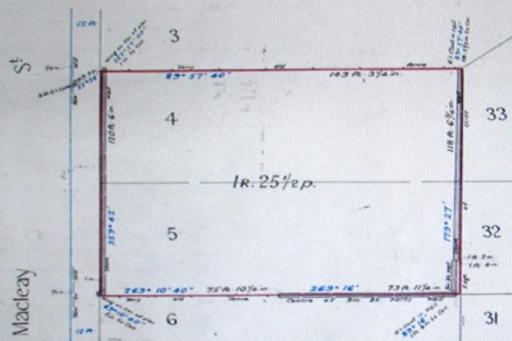
In witness whereof I have hereunto signed my name and affixed my Seal, this Twenty first day of December,

Signed in the presence of

Arctagium

Rev. W. Miller

Wells



Amongst the reservations and conditions contained in the Grant above referred to are reservations of all mines of gold or silver and of coals.

~~Very w. chilly~~

No. C62016 MORTGAGE dated 11th January 1938
from the said Harold Percival Christmas to The
Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Company
Limited

Produced and entered 28th January 1933
at 29 mts to 'o'clock in the afternoon.

85

Certificate of Title of Harold Christmas, December 1937, mortgaged to the MLC Assurance Company Limited. Lots 4 and 5 remain unaltered from the original subdivision back in 1866.

The Macleay Regis

At the same time as he was acquiring the land, Christmas applied to the City of Sydney Council for permission to demolish 'Greenhithe' and he submitted a building application to construct a large block of flats.¹⁰ At nine storeys and containing 87 apartments as well as a penthouse, utility rooms, garages and several shops at street level this would be the largest apartment building in Sydney at the time.¹¹

The architects were Pitt and Phillips who already had a reputation for designing apartments in the eastern suburbs. As only Pitt's name appears on the drawings he probably designed it.¹² The building was constructed by Alex Speers and Sons and completed in early 1939. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that it had cost over £100,000.¹³ By the mid 1939 Christmas had registered a company called the Macleay Regis Pty Ltd and he transferred the building's title to this company.¹⁴ There were seven shareholders, including Christmas. The Christmas family remained owners of the building. This was common practice at the time, with individual owners renting out the whole property, or as in this case, living in part of it as well. The company ran the building, set the rules and managed the rentals.

In 1955 the company's articles of association were rewritten to place the building's apartments under 'Company Title.'¹⁵ Company Title ownership was developed to allow individual apartments in buildings to be separately 'owned'. Under company title, an occupier does not have a certificate of title to any real estate, but owns a specific number of shares in the company which equates to a defined area of the building. Until the Strata Title Act of 1961, company title was the common way of 'owning' an apartment. The Macleay Regis remains under company title to the present.

Holding shares in a company title building and not a certificate of title is usually only relevant at the point of purchase or sale of your apartment when the company board of directors must approve the sale of the property. There are implications for house history research. Without a line of title to search discovering who lived in your apartment is only accessible through the company records. These should be accessible to the owners, but possibly not to other researchers.¹⁶

A fine Art Deco building

The Macleay Regis is one of many large blocks of flats – now often referred to as apartments – built in the Kings Cross/Potts Point area. Because it was part of the City of Sydney, the planning constraints which applied to this area were more in line with city expectations and buildings of height were permitted. The reasons that resulted in the construction of apartments were varied, and included a preference for this kind of dwelling by single people, including single women, who were numerous following the realities of World War I.

By the 1930s Sydney was receiving its first trickle of anti-fascist refugees from Europe and this further encouraged so-called 'European style' building. Proximity to the city centre was also attractive to out-of-town people of wealth looking for a 'city pad.' Other areas close to the centre tended to be working class and run-down in the early decades of the 20th Century, whereas this area, contingent to the eastern suburbs, was more palatable to this demographic.



Macleay Regis balconies, 2009. With permission: David Thompson, <http://artdecobuildings.blogspot.com.au>

In its original configuration the building contained 87 apartments of one and two bedrooms and a penthouse with a rooftop garden, where the Christmas family lived. Roy Lumby has described the building as supplying:

...a high level of residential amenity that included a concierge who resided within the building, an internal telephone system that connected occupants to the hairdresser, pharmacy and florist located on the ground floor and maid service ...¹⁷

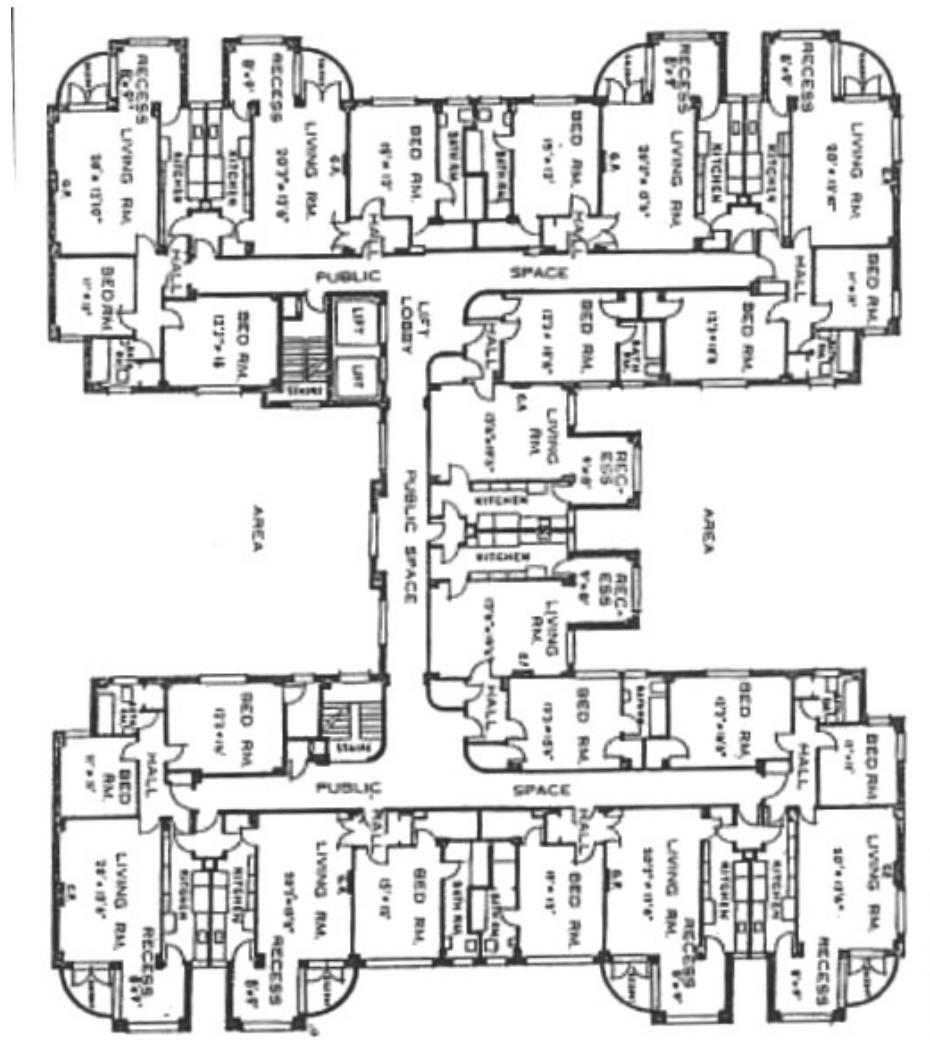
There were several garages, store rooms, common laundry areas and a kitchen on the eighth floor which provided meals for residents who ordered them in advance. In less prestigious residences the occupant could place their order for a meal on their way out in the morning. The building remained the largest in Potts Point throughout the 1950s.



Detail: Aerial photograph, Frank Hurley, c 1952. Frank Hurley, *Sydney from the Sky*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1952), illustration 28.

The Macleay Regis today

The Macleay Regis is widely recognised as a prime example of an Art Deco building located within the finest enclave of art deco buildings in Australia. It was listed by the National Trust in 1986 and is a heritage item on the City of Sydney inventory.



Reproduced from HeriCon, 'Macleay Regis, 10-12 Macleay Street, Potts Point: Conservation Management Strategy', prepared for Macleay Regis Pty Ltd., 2011, attributed to L J Hooker Ltd, Presenting "Macleay Regis" Home Units, 1954.

The exterior and the internal layout of the building retain much of the integrity of the original design. Although many owners have altered and modernised the interiors of individual apartments, the fact that the building was well documented when it was first built means there is a great deal of information available on its original fixtures and interior design.¹⁸



"MACLEAY-REGIS"

MACLEAY STREET, SYDNEY.

Architects: E. C. Pitt & C. C. Phillips.
Builders: Alex Speers & Sons Ltd.

In the upper illustration we see the service kitchen where meals are prepared and transported by service lift to any floor, where they can be served to the occupants of the flats who are not desirous of doing their own cooking. There is a 20 c. ft. "Electric" storage cabinet installed by New Systems Telephones Pty. Ltd.

The lower illustration shows a typical kitchen in one of the flats. It is long and narrow in shape, the various equipment, such as "Electric" refrigerator, gas cooker and sink, being ranged down one side as seen in this view. The telephonette can also be seen; the system was installed by Telephone Sales & Service Co. By this system it is possible for any tenant to ring up the chemist, florist or grocer for service.

There are many illustrations similar to this one that appeared at the time the building was first marketed. 'Macleay-Regis', *Building*, 24 February 1939, p. 22.

The HeriCon Conservation Management Strategy lists an inventory of building applications (BAs) made to the City Council to alter the building from the 1940s to the 1980s. It also lists repairs carried out from 1971 to 2000, sourced from the minutes of the company. A number of disastrous fires in the Kings Cross area, including one in August 1981 which killed 19 people and another in 1989 at a backpackers' hostel, resulted in the local authorities tightening up on fire safety in older buildings. In 1986 the City of Sydney served a fire safety upgrade order on the Macleay Regis, which was eventually completed in 2000.

How was this history found?

When you live in a famous apartment like the Macleay Regis it is almost certainly going to have been written about already, so the best place to start is the [City of Sydney Library Catalogue](#). It lists a copy in the Sydney Research Collection (City Archives) of:

HeriCon, 'Macleay Regis, 10-12 Macleay Street, Potts Point: Conservation Management Strategy', prepared for Macleay Regis Pty Ltd., 2011. To make things easier, it is [available online](#) (PDF 4.11 MB). This source provided much of this history and some leads to finding other sources, including references to [Land and Property Information](#) documents.

The City of Sydney [Assessment Books](#) established the dates when the street numbering was changed. The 1877 book listed numbers 36 and 38, while the next assessment in 1880 listed them as 10 and 12, the numbers the building retains today.

Another great tool is the City of Sydney's Historical Atlas of Sydney, which is [available online](#) and provides maps and associated documents of the city. For example, this one immediately provides a sense of the distribution of houses and larger flat developments.



Civic survey, Kings Cross-Potts Point, 1948. Historical Atlas of Sydney, City of Sydney Archives.

The more you use maps the easier it will be to recognise their faults. The 1865 Trigonometrical Survey map for the Potts Point area shows the Elizabeth Bay Villas, here ringed. However other information suggests they were not built until around 1870. A closer look reveals that the houses along the stretch of Macleay Street where our property is have been pencilled in, presumably at a date after the map was made, while the original content of the map is coloured.



Beware! Maps can contain information that has been added in after the date the map was created. This one shows an outline of Elizabeth Bay Villas, which other sources establish were built well after 1865. Block L1 Trig Survey 1865, Historical Atlas of Sydney, City of Sydney Archives.

The [Australian Dictionary of Biography](#) has entries on the early land grantees. For the early land grant history see James Broadbent, 'The Push East: Woolloomooloo Hill, the first Suburb', in Max Kelly, ed., *Sydney City of Suburbs*, UNSW Press, 1987.

The general history of the area which addresses the question of why it came to be an area of many flats was established from secondary sources, including:

Caroline Butler-Bowden and Charles Pickett, *Homes in the Sky: apartment living in Australia*. Carlton: The Miegunyah Press in association with the Historic Houses Trust, 2007.

Richard Cardew, 'Flats in Sydney; the thirty percent solution?' in Jill Roe, ed. *Twentieth Century Sydney*, Hale & Iremonger, 1980, pp. 69-88.

Other sources

[Sands Directory](#) and Assessment Book entries contain many names of people who lived on the site prior to the building of the current Macleay Regis. The National Library of Australia's newspaper database [Trove](#) is another useful tool.

While the architectural plans and illustrations used in this history indicate that the public areas of the building have remained very intact, the interiors of many apartments would have been altered over time. If you want to find out how your place might once have looked, the HeriCon Conservation Management Strategy contains photographs from newspaper and journal articles that indicate the original interiors in 1939. Many advertisements from suppliers provide details of original fittings.

[The Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection](#) housed in the Old Mint Building in Macquarie Street specialises in records relating to interior design and furnishings. The Library is open to the public and its catalogue can be searched online.

¹ LPI, Book 401 No. 79. Between 1828 and 1831 Governor Darling made a number of large land grants east of the settlement in what became known as Darlinghurst/Potts Point. The grant to Macleay was by far the largest of these.

² LPI, Book 114 No. 636. The early history of ownership and inheritance of the original state can be found in HeriCon, Macleay Regis, 10-12 Macleay Street, Potts point, Conservation Management Strategy, for Macleay Regis Limited, 2011. [Access online](#) (PDF 4.11MB).

³ City Assessment Book, Fitzroy Ward, 1871, lists the houses at 36 and 38 Macleay Street and the Sands Directory for that year names them as Elizabeth Bay Villas.

⁴ Old System Title Book 950 Number 755.

⁵ NSCA CRS 126 1024/11

⁶ C R B Blackburn, 'Blackburn, Sir Charles Bickerton (1874–1972)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/blackburn-sir-charles-bickerton-5257/text8859>, published first in hardcopy 1979, accessed online 3 February 2015.

⁷ NSCA CRS 126 659/20

⁸ Old Systems Title Book 1789, Number 247.

⁹ Primary Application 33221.

¹⁰ NSCA CRS 126 718/37; 799/37.

¹¹ 'Macleay-Regis', *Building*, 24 February 1939, p. 17.

¹² Eric Pitt and Charles Phillips worked both alone and in tandem, and there are other examples of their work in the Mitchell Library's manuscript collection. Architectural drawings for the Macleay Regis are held in the City Archives NSCA, 126 799/37.

¹³ 'Building and Construction', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 1939, p. 6, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17565130>.

¹⁴ Certificate of Title 1939, Volume 4896, Folio 50.

¹⁵ HeriCon, Macleay Regis, 10-12 Macleay Street, Potts Point, Conservation Management Strategy, for Macleay Regis Pty Ltd, 2011, p. 13, citing an extraordinary general meeting of the company held on 24 march 1955.

¹⁶ Owners in this building can access company reports and information via a secure section of the company site: macleayregis.com

¹⁷ HeriCon, Macleay Regis, 10-12 Macleay Street, Potts Point, Conservation Management Strategy, for Macleay Regis Pty Ltd, 2011, p.10.

¹⁸ HeriCon, Macleay Regis, 10-12 Macleay Street, Potts Point, Conservation Management Strategy, for Macleay Regis Pty Ltd, 2011 provides details of interior features as well as many original advertisements.