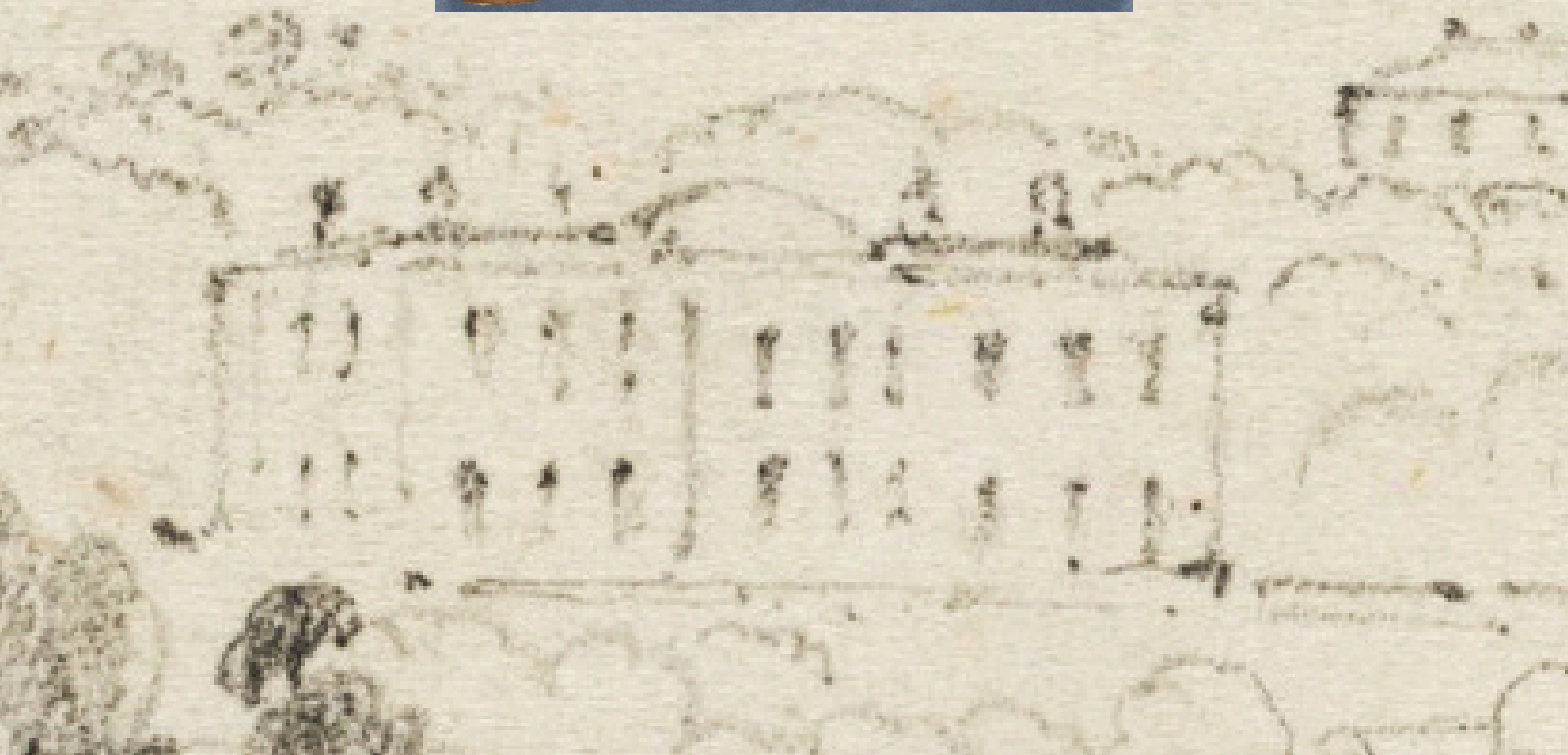


# John Verge

1782-1861

BY CLIVE LUCAS OBE

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## JOHN VERGE 1782-1861

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Of the architects who practised in Australia during the first half of the 19th century, it was John Verge who was perhaps the most accomplished in the sense of his output and the quality of his work.

Verge understood scale, spatial arrangement and detail in a way which is sophisticated and unrivalled in colonial work. His was essentially a domestic practice and he was fortunate to have clients who could indulge in costly and large establishments. Probably no other contemporary practitioner had the opportunity to display his talents as Verge did. That Verge was so good is one of the great mysteries of Australian architecture, and research to date has not indicated the influences or the direct inspiration for his work. He was not a trained architect in the sense of Francis Greenway, Henry Kitchen or Mortimer Lewis. Indeed he seems to have had no training in a way which could possibly have inspired and influenced his work.

John Verge was born in Hampshire, England in 1782. His father Nicholas Verge has been described as a builder but it seems he was more correctly a bricklayer. The Verge family seems certainly to have been involved with properties in Bloomsbury in London and undoubtedly in some building work and speculation. Whatever the work was, it was successful enough by 1826 for Verge to acquire a small estate in his native county, near Christchurch, and follow his chosen occupation of landed proprietor. Flattering prospects undoubtedly led him to the idea of emigrating and in December 1828 he arrived in Sydney with his son, a servant, sheep, agricultural equipment and capital to the value of £2,738.<sup>1</sup> Verge applied immediately for a grant of land and was allowed to select 'four square miles' on the Williams River near Dungog in New South Wales which he called Lyndhurst Vale.

This venture was not a success and by 1830 Verge had returned to Sydney and to his original activity of building. His references must have been adequate for in 1831 Governor Darling stated, 'I had sent for a builder of the name of Verge, who I understand was doing business on rather an extensive scale and had given much satisfaction'.<sup>2</sup> What this business was remains a mystery and no English records have yet identified his contribution to London's early 19th-century building projects.

Verge, however, remained an eager farmer and an unwilling architect. His professional life in Sydney confines itself to 1830-37. After this he retired first to Lyndhurst Vale northern New South Wales and later Austral Eden on the Macleay River where in 1838 he had been granted a further 1,000 hectares.

Verge's architecture belongs to the financial flowering of English neo-Classicism, the Greek Revival, the eminent style in England in the post-Waterloo period. He was foremost a Greek Revivalist, although like any of his architectural contemporaries he did, when appropriate, use other styles. For example, he designed a Chinese privy for the garden of the Hely residence, Engehurst, and a castellated privy for another client. For proposed cloisters at The King's School at Parramatta he chose a Tudor Gothic Style. However, he is most famous for the numerous houses he designed in the Greek Revival style for sites in Sydney and the surrounding countryside.

By 1832 he was responsible for a number of villas at Potts Point which was then becoming a fashionable Sydney district. Of these houses Tusculum and Rockwall still survive. The wide verandahs encircling both floors of Tusculum make it unusual for Verge whose designs rarely give much clue to their antipodean location. The correctly detailed colonnade or porch was the

more usual embellishment to his chaste facades.



Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney: the central space or saloon is the finest thing of its kind in Australian colonial architecture. Image courtesy Museums of History New South Wales.

Verge's grandest design around a central space is that at Elizabeth Bay House, built for Colonial Secretary Alexander Macleay in 1835-38. Much larger in scale than Camden or most of his other work, it has three main fronts with its offices behind, set into the hillside to emphasise the house, its garden setting and the most beautiful prospect of Sydney Harbour to the heads. On entering, one is immediately drawn inwards to the central elliptical saloon crowned with a lantern; the stone geometric stair climbing its wall to the floor above. In scale and quality this interior is unequalled in colonial architecture. The Palladian plan, similar to Engehurst's, is old fashioned and recalls the villa plans of English architects like Sir Robert Taylor<sup>3</sup> and Sir John Soane<sup>4</sup> at the end of the 18th century.

Macleay knew the great 19th-century architectural writer John Claudius Loudon<sup>5</sup> and it is conceivable that he had determined the plan and simply commissioned Verge to carry it out. The detail however is characteristically Verge, very up-to-date Greek work. Had Elizabeth Bay House been completed it would have been the most consciously Greek of his designs. Unfortunately, the Doric colonnades to its three fronts and two-storey portico of Doric and Ionic orders were never built.

His surviving buildings are amongst the most cherished monuments from the Colonial period, and as long as they survive, Verge will be acknowledged and remembered as one of the great architects in Australian history.

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Front cover illustrations:

John Verge, circa 1836-1852, attributed to James Wilson, ML 1065, SLNSW and *Elizabeth Bay* [detail] by Conrad Martens, 1838. SLNSW

1. Will Graves Verge, *John Verge* (Sydney, 1962) p.1.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Plan of Coptfold Hall, Essex, 1755, a villa designed by Sir Robert Taylor, which has a plan similar to Elizabeth Bay House.
4. John Soane, *Plans, Elevations and Sections of Buildings* (London, 1788), plate 18.
5. Alexander Macleay was one of J.C. Loudon's proposers for his election as a Fellow of the Linnean Society, 4 February 1806.