

Exclusive Politics Federal National Archives

Almost scandalous: Historian alerts Prince Charles to plight of crumbling archives

By Shane Wright and Katina Curtis

May 27, 2021 – 9.00pm

International pressure is piling on the federal government to pump millions of dollars into the National Archives to preserve documents on the brink of disintegration with warnings it risks losing records of global importance.

The office of Prince Charles has been made aware of the situation facing the National Archives and in particular the plight of the Pitcairn Island register which holds details of the births, deaths and marriages of descendants of the Bounty mutiny in 1789.



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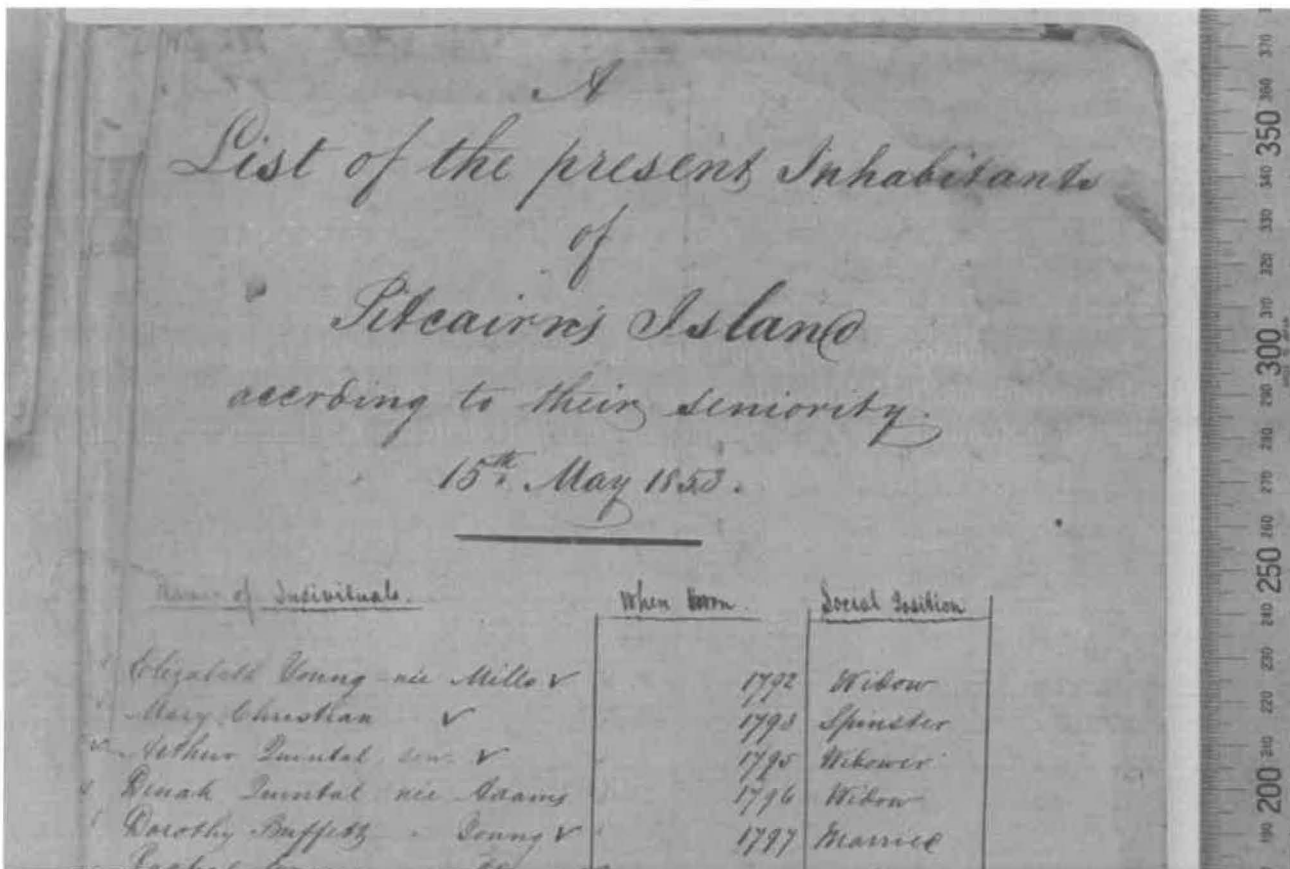
The register is disintegrating, along with many other unique archives including wartime speeches of John Curtin and personnel files of RAAF non-commissioned officers from World

War II.

The heir to the British throne was alerted to it by Philip Davies, a globally recognised architectural historian and the chairman of the Commonwealth Heritage Forum, which was launched last year at the Australian High Commission in the United Kingdom to help poorer members of the Commonwealth to protect architecturally important heritage.

Mr Davies said he was dumbfounded when he heard the Pitcairn Island register was at risk of disintegration.

“That we have such an important document that could simply be lost is not far from scandalous,” he said. “It’s unthinkable that this should be put at risk of loss.”



Pitcairn Island’s registers of inhabitants and births, deaths and marriages are at risk of decaying before they can be digitised. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA

The island’s register is held by the National Archives. It came into Australia’s possession after Pitcairn Islanders moved to Norfolk Island in the 1850s and remains one of the few primary documents that shows direct links to Bounty mutineers such as Fletcher Christian.

It follows years of funding cuts to the institution, which is struggling to protect 384 kilometres of records that are growing rapidly every year.

The Tune review of the National Archives, released in March, recommended a \$67.7 million seven-year project to urgently digitise the records most at risk. Despite that recommendation, there was no extra money in this month’s budget for the Archives to carry out the required work. The government has said it will make a formal response to the Tune review by the end of the year.

Mr Davies said the federal government should as a matter of urgency put money towards digitising the register given its link to a key moment in maritime history.

“This is not just about Pitcairn Island or Norfolk Island or Australia. This is an international issue,” he told *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

Pitcairn Islanders have called on the federal government to protect the register, which records details including the children and grandchildren of the original mutineers.

Mr Davies said the story of the *Bounty* was important to the Commonwealth and the global historical community and needed to be protected.

“It is an extraordinary story in itself with the mutiny and the creation of the community on Pitcairn,” he said.

“To have a primary source document like this that is currently crumbling away because of a lack of funding is very disappointing. This is a part of the Commonwealth’s shared history and needs to be protected as soon as possible.”

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