

# Exchange: Commerce and Retail Sydney History Walk

CITY OF SYDNEY





# Exchange: Commerce and Retail Sydney History Walk

From imposing banks to opulent shops and old warehouses, much of Sydney's commercial history can be seen in its buildings. Sydney's shops demonstrate the evolution of retailing from elaborate Victorian shopping arcades to multi-storey department stores. This walk will take you through the heart of the city's financial and retail district – Martin Place, George Street and Pitt Street – pointing out landmarks, their architectural features and the history behind them.



Allow 1 to 2 hours for this tour.

Start at **St James railway station (1)** on Elizabeth Street, opposite Market Street.



Detail from a Grace Bros catalogue, 1922 (Photograph: City of Sydney Archives)



## St James railway station



Elizabeth Street entrance to St James Station, c1940s  
(Photograph: City of Sydney Archives)

In the 1920s the railway was extended from Central station into the city, shifting the retail focus from Haymarket back toward the city centre. St James station brought shoppers to the edge of Sydney's retail district, and from there they wandered off to the **Former Gowings building (19), Myer (18) and David Jones (2) and (3).**



Opposite the station are the **David Jones** department stores on Elizabeth Street **(2)** and Market Street **(3)**.

**2** and **3**

## David Jones



Looking north along Elizabeth Street to the David Jones store opposite St James Railway Station, 1939  
(Photograph: Len Stone / Vic Solomons Collection, City of Sydney Archives)

From its humble beginnings in 1838, David Jones Limited became Sydney's most elegant department store. The store on the corner of Elizabeth, Market and Castlereagh streets **(2)** was opened in 1927. The glamorous ground floor interior is ablaze with mirrors, marble and lights. Located diagonally opposite, the second David Jones building **(3)** was completed in May 1938 to mark David Jones' trading centenary.





Walk north along Elizabeth Street until you reach **Martin Place (5)**. On the way take a look at the **Former Sun Building (4)**.

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## Former Sun Building

*The Sun* newspaper was an afternoon daily, which ran from 1910 until the 1980s. This building was the last of the great newspaper buildings to be built in the city, and the spectacular Skyscraper Gothic style confidently portrayed the commercial power of the media. Built in 1929, the Sun Building is one of only 3 in the city to be designed in this architectural style. The other 2 are **The Grace Hotel (11)** and the **State Theatre (20)**.

5

## Martin Place



View east along Martin Place, 1933  
(Photograph: Milton Kent, City of Sydney Archives)

The city council designed and planned this long thoroughfare as 'the financial and insurance centre' of Sydney. The widening and extension through to Macquarie Street began in 1923 but was not finished until 1935, after an expensive legal battle with landowners seeking compensation. The area was closed to cars in the 1960s and 1970s. Martin Place is lined with imposing banks and insurance buildings that aim to impress. The grand designs and lavish materials convey prestige as well as wealth, strength and security.



Martin Place is a large pedestrian plaza stretching from Macquarie Street to George Street. On the northern side of Martin Place, between Elizabeth and Castlereagh streets, is the **Commonwealth Savings Bank (6)**.

6

## Commonwealth Savings Bank



Commonwealth Bank on Martin Place illuminated for the visit of the Duke of Gloucester, 1934 (Photograph: City of Sydney Archives)

This imposing building was built as the headquarters for the Government Savings Bank of NSW and opened in 1928. Go inside and have a look at the banking chamber - originally one of the largest in the world - which incorporates both Australian and imported marble and a plaster and pressed metal ceiling.



As you come to the end of Martin Place and reach the block between Pitt and George streets you will see the **General Post Office (7)** on your left.

7

## General Post Office



General Post Office, c1907 (Image: City of Sydney Archives)

The General Post Office was constructed in stages from 1866–91. It is the most notable work in the city by colonial architect James Barnet. The realistic carvings facing Pitt Street and Martin Place by Italian-born sculptor Tomaso Sani, caused a public scandal. They were viciously attacked by the press and parliament as being 'hideous in form and expression' and attempts were made to force Barnet to remove them. In the late 1990s, the site was redeveloped into a hotel and major conservation works were undertaken. Down in the basement parts of Sydney's first water supply, the Tank Stream, were uncovered and some historical interpretation of this watercourse has been provided.



Turn right into George Street and then right again into the narrow lane, Angel Place. This series of laneways was preserved as part of the Angel Place office development. Discover the former **Palings Warehouse (8)** in Ash Street before walking up Palings Lane to George Street. On your left is **Société Générale House (9)** 350 George Street.

8

## Palings Warehouse



Ash Street, 1920s (Photograph: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

W H Paling was a musical entrepreneur who imported and eventually manufactured pianos and sheet music. Upper floor rooms in the large 1880s Palings Building in Ash Street, and many others in this area, were rented out to teachers of music and dance, and as artists' studios.

9

## Société Générale House

This insurance house was built in 1895 for the Equitable Life Assurance Society of America, under the supervision of their visiting architect Edward Raht. You may view the grand interior from the entrance foyer only. Please follow any direction issued by the concierge. No photography allowed.



Cross over George Street and wander up the pedestrian section of Barrack Street to York Street and turn right. Lift your eyes and look for the miniature Eiffel Tower on the **AWA building (10)** 45–47 York Street.

10

## AWA Building

Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) Ltd (AWA) was a household name from the 1930s to the 1950s as both a broadcaster and a manufacturer of radios, record players and other electrical equipment. Wireless House, its headquarters on York Street, became a Sydney landmark when it was built in 1939, the steel tower being the highest structure in the city until the 1960s.



Wander south along York Street until you reach **The Grace Hotel (11)**. Along the way you will see a remarkably intact streetscape (the so-called York Street Wall) which retains many fine 19th and early 20th century buildings.

11

## The Grace Hotel



Grace Hotel (Image: City of Sydney Archives)

The Grace Building was constructed in 1930 for Grace Brothers as a department store and offices. The Gothic skyscraper design, particularly the spectacular corner tower, was modelled on the Chicago Tribune Building (1922). The Grace Building was requisitioned by the Australian Government during World War 2 and used by the US Army Services of Supply and the Royal Navy as a service base for Pacific operations. The building was extensively refurbished in 1995 and opened as The Grace Hotel in 1997.



At this point you may wish to take a detour to see the warehouses along Clarence and Kent streets.

12 to 14

## Detour: Stockpiling in the city

The streets of York, Clarence and Kent between Erskine and Druiett streets are peppered with late 19th and early 20th century warehouses. These buildings serviced the busy wharves of Darling Harbour and the expanding retail businesses along George and Pitt streets. Today many of them have been converted into offices and residential units. If you have time, you might like to wander around the block bound by King, Clarence, Market and Kent streets. Keep your eyes open for the arches of old carriageways which led to courtyards behind the warehouses. Highlights include **Broughton House (12)** at 181 Clarence Street, an imposing former warehouse of the ironmonger John Keep and Sons dating from 1900, and the **'twin' warehouses** at 197–199 Clarence and 340 Kent streets **(13)** and at 201–207 Clarence and 346–348 Kent streets **(14)** – both groups of warehouses back onto shared central courtyards.





Head down King Street towards George Street. Before crossing George Street, look across at the **Former Darrell Lea shop (15)** corner of King Street and also to the right down George Street to the **Strand Arcade (16)** 412–414 George Street, the **Dymocks Building (The Block) (17)** 428 George Street and Myer (18) corner of Market Street. Cross and walk along George Street toward Market Street.

15

## Former Darrell Lea shop

This exuberant building was constructed in 1863–64 for Ashdown and Co, wholesale and furnishing ironmongers. It became the Royal Exchange Hotel in the 1930s and then the Belfields Hotel. From 1957 it was the flagship store for Darrell Lea chocolates until it closed in 2012.

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## Strand Arcade



Inside the Strand Arcade in the late 1970s (Photograph: City of Sydney Archives)

Named after The Strand in London, a smart and fashionable shopping street, Sydney's Strand Arcade opened in April 1892. Today it still retains the small elite boutiques that defined the Sydney shopping experience of the 1890s.

17

## Dymocks Building (The Block)

The Block was built by the Dymock's firm in 1926–1932 following the demolition of the Royal Hotel and shopping arcade. The enclosed shopping promenade above Dymocks retains terrazzo floors, silky oak shopfronts, and leadlights in the shop windows. It is a hidden gem of Sydney retailing.

18

## Myer



Farmer and Co's new building on the corner of George and Market streets, July 1933 (Photograph: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

The former retail emporium of Farmer's (established in 1840) was built between 1928 and 1957. The store included an art gallery, roof garden and restaurant. In 1960 Farmer's was taken over by the Melbourne retail giant Myer. The store traded as Grace Bros from 1983 to 2004.



Before crossing Market Street, pause and look up at the **Former Gowings building (19)** and the **State Theatre (20)** next to it. Then cross over to take a closer look at each of these buildings.

19

## Former Gowings Building



'Gone to Gowings' (Illustration: City of Sydney Archives)

Since 1868, Sydneysiders have 'Gone to Gowings'. The firm became a public company in 1920 and the Gowings Department Store was purpose built for the company in 1929. Gowings closed its doors in 2006 and has since been converted into a hotel.



20

## State Theatre



2UW attendant and lift driver at the State Theatre, 1936  
(Photograph: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

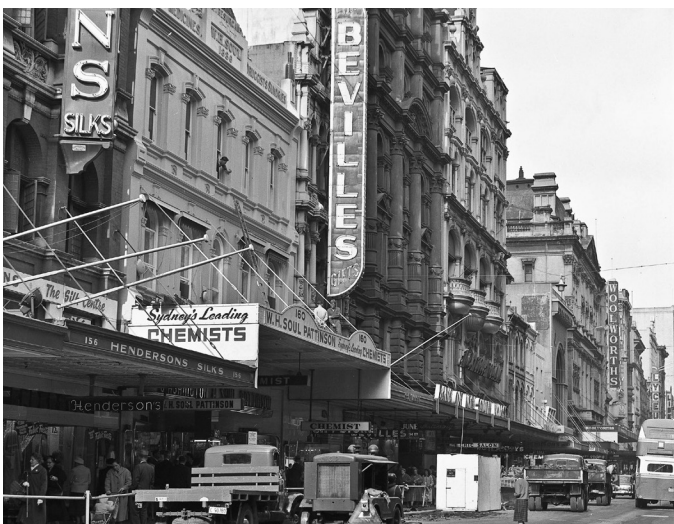
The State Theatre opened on 7 June 1929 in a blaze of colour and light. It is the third building on our tour designed in the Gothic Skyscraper style. Above the theatre is an 11-storey office tower. The interiors of the State Theatre are lavish and it is worthwhile going on a guided tour.



Walk down Market Street until you get to Pitt Street. At this point you may wish to take a detour into Pitt Street Mall to see the **Soul Pattinson Chemist building (21)**.

21

## Soul Pattinson Chemist building



Pitt Street, 1960 (Photograph: City of Sydney Archives)

Pitt Street Mall, created in 1988, contains many layers of Sydney's commercial and retail history. Have a look up at the parapet on the **Soul Pattinson Chemist building (21)**. Can you see the phoenix rising from the ashes? W H Pattinson rebuilt his pharmacy in 1886 after a fire and named the new building Resurgam.



Walk south along Pitt Street until you reach the **ArtHouse Hotel (22)** on the right at 275 Pitt Street.

22

## ArtHouse Hotel

Mechanics institutes and schools of arts were central civic buildings in many 19th century towns. Founded for the educational improvement of skilled working class men, they quickly became popular with clerks, schoolteachers and professional men. The former School of Arts in Pitt Street was refurbished as a hotel in 2002 and the restored interior decoration is impressive.



Keep walking down Pitt Street and turn right at Park Street to find the **Queen Victoria Building (23)** on George Street, between Market and Druiitt streets.

23

## Queen Victoria Building



Queen Victoria Building, 1919 (Photograph: City of Sydney Archives)

There have been markets on this site since 1810. The Queen Victoria Markets replaced the old George Street markets in 1898. They were designed for the council by the city architect, George McRae, and aspired to be the grand shopping arcade of Sydney rather than produce markets. The imposing Romanesque building was never successful as markets. The QVB was refurbished in 1986.



You can finish your walk here, or find your way to the corner of Liverpool and Castlereagh streets to discover one of Sydney's largest and grandest department stores. The former Mark Foy's Department Store closed in 1983 and now houses legal courts, officially named the Downing Centre.



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