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AN CLARION COUNTRY

It's a haunting tale of history

By JOHN MURPHY

LONG before it became trendy, Gordon Morton had found a quaint historic home in the inner suburbs and spent every weekend and evening renovating.

But his house is far from the ordinary Richmond terrace. It is Lalor House in Church Street, once home of Eureka stockade leader Peter Lalor.

The ornate grey mansion is Richmond's most historic building and the only one legally protected from demolition.

It was Lalor's home while he was speaker of the Legislative Assembly and the scene of pomp and pageantry when a State coach picked him up to take him to the opening of Parliament.

Mr Morton has lived in Richmond all his life and the house had always fascinated him.

Auction

"I used to pass it every morning as I drove over the hill," he said.

"One day I was passing and I saw it was up for auction and I ended up buying it."

In 1953 he paid 11,000 pounds for the house, which was covered in ivy and known by locals as "the haunted house."

Mr Morton has no time for the ghost stories published in the press about the house. He put it down to noises you would expect in a house that old.

It has a tragic history. Lalor's wife died of a mysterious illness, his daughter committed suicide by jumping off the balcony and later his son hung himself.

Lalor died mysteriously in the house in 1889.

All the ingredients for a good ghost story — fueled by incidents in which his own family has sworn someone grabbed them while they were on the phone.

Once the cellar was opened after being sealed for years. A cat jumped out.

They had never seen the cat before and have not seen it since, triggering the popular story that it was Lalor's cat imprisoned for more than a century.

CITY LIVING

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● GORDON MORTON . . . decay one step ahead of the renovator.

Mr Morton says people come to the door almost weekly offering to sleep in the house with sensitive tape recorders and cameras to catch the ghost.

He shows them the door. Mr Morton said renovation had become a full time job but would end up a losing battle as he cannot keep pace with the decay.

Much of the restoration the National Trust tries to persuade him to do is beyond his means.

An architect once complained that the original wooden bath had been replaced with a modern ceramic bath.

"I just asked him 'do you have a wooden bath in your house?'" he said.

Mr Morton has become well known in the Richmond community. He was a councillor for six years from 1954.

He is now a member of City Hall's urban conservation advisory committee which is trying to conserve what is left of Richmond's history.

He is keen to preserve Richmond's history and spends a lot of time talking to the local elderly.

He found the house was owned by Peter Lalor only after moving in. He had been talking to a local who remembered those days.

He has an extensive collection of photos of old Richmond which includes one of Lalor's former home in a small cottage across the road.

Ironically, Lalor's former house adjoined the home of notorious Richmond gangster Squizzy Taylor.