

Peeling back layers of convict past



TREASURE TROVE: Woolmers Estate, circa 1868.

NICK CLARK

A 150-year-old wooden rocking horse is one of the prize finds in a conservation program being conducted in the attics of historic Longford property Woolmers Estate.

Curators and volunteers have been conserving and identifying artefacts with a view to assisting a World Heritage nomination.

Heritage Minister Michelle O'Byrne said the conservation work was in preparation for a visit by UNESCO later this year.

The estate will be assessed for inclusion in the Australian convict sites World Heritage listing.

About 40 assigned convicts worked on the 1220ha estate within a decade of the granting of the land to Thomas Archer in 1817.

Curator Liz Adkins said the attics were used by the Archer family as bedrooms for convict servants and later to store old bedsteads and toys.

"The attic looks rather cha-



WITHIN THE WALLS: This attic room at Woolmers is slowly revealing a wealth of convict history. Picture: ROSS MARSDEN

The attics were the home of domestic servants locked in at night so they did not mix with local men

otic but the project team is excited at what treasures may come to light during the clean-up," Ms Adkins said.

"So far we have unearthed the old rocking horse and a fascinating array of Vic-

torian-era magazine pictures on the walls."

She said an 1868 photograph showed the rocking horse would originally have had a horse-hair mane and tail and a leather saddle.

"We may be able to find out more from the archives because it seems the Archer family kept nearly every receipt," she said.

Ms Adkins said the attics would provide an insight into

the lives of female convicts. "The attics were the home of two or three or four domestic servants, who were locked in at night and had bars on their windows so that they did not mix with local men," she said.

Jai Patterson, of the Roving Curator program, had discovered a "hidey hole" most likely used by the young women to stash prohibited items such as alcohol or tobacco.

Ms Adkins said a fascinating glimpse into the hopes and dreams of the inhabitants would come from the layers of history underneath wallpaper.

"There were cut-outs from newspapers of cartoons and exotic locations," she said.