HERITAGE COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11. 1 AESTHETIC VALUE

Donnelly River Mill and town are situated in a picturesque location adjacent to the Donnelly River and exhibit the care and attention taken in the original planning to achieve an aesthetically pleasing result in harmony with the bush location. (Criterion 1.1)

11. 2. HISTORIC VALUE

Donnelly River Mill was developed by Bunning Brothers, a company formed by brothers Robert and Arthur Bunning in 1886, which developed into one of Australia's largest timber companies with interests throughout Australia and overseas. (Criterion 2.1)

Donnelly River Mill was probably the first to employ women in a timber mill workforce. (Criterion 2.2)

Mr Charles R. Bunning, a son of Robert Bunning, was a key figure in the timber industry for over 50 years and was instrumental in the mill being developed. (Criterion 2.3)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

Donnelly River Mill demonstrates the application of steam power during an industrial phase immediately prior to the use of electrically-driven equipment. The place also demonstrates innovative mechanisms developed to drive the mill equipment from a single power source. This equipment included the mill saws and the powered rollers and winches used to convey the timber through the mill. (Criterion 3.3)

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

Located in the karri forest, *Donnelly River Mill* and town provided employment and family homes for a large community for nearly thirty years. Many of these families have remained in the district and retain associations with the mill and the town. (Criterion 4.1)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

The decline in the use of steam power in the timber industry was well under way by the 1960s, and today steam is restricted to use in timber kilns.

The largely intact *Donnelly River Mill* is the only extant example of the technology which utilised steam power in working the hardwood forests of the State. (Criterion 5.2)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Donnelly River Mill and town exhibit the self-contained nature of a bush industry and the way of life of those working at the mill. (Criterion 6.1)

Donnelly River Mill is representative of the end of an era in the history of the timber industry, exhibiting the technology prevalent in the timber industry for over 100 years, featuring steam power and the extensive use of local materials. (Criterion 6.2)

Donnelly River Mill is representative of the technical innovation which has been a characteristic of the timber industry in producing timber products for the construction industry. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

The condition of *Donnelly River Mill* is of sufficiently high standard to enable its conservation to be successfully achieved.

The operating floor support structure - which consists of heavy bush timber braced with sawn mill timber - is in reasonable condition, although sections of the floor boards are in need of maintenance. Though there is evidence of decay in some sections of the building including sections of the corrugated iron roofing, the columns and roof timbers are structurally sound.

The chimney stacks are in reasonable condition though corroded at their bases. The boilers, walkways and steam pipe distribution system are nearly all complete, though there is also some evidence of corrosion. The remaining steam engines are in good to excellent condition.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Donnelly River Mill is a good example of the industrial technology which prevailed during the earlier days of the timber industry. The mill was powered by steam and is one of the few remaining mills still standing in almost complete form. Almost all the machinery is still on site and basically intact. Thus it is capable of demonstrating a technological process no longer practised.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Donnelly River Mill and its equipment are nearly all as originally built and installed and present a good standard of authenticity.

The mill town remains basically as it was during the period when the mill was operating. The buildings have been partially restored and the houses are currently providing short-stay tourist accommodation.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13. 1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Donnelly River Mill is situated at the junction of the south and north forks of the Donnelly River, to the south west of Bridgetown and north of Manjimup, in the south west region of Western Australia.

The site of the *Donnelly River Mill* was first used as a sawmill by the Wheatley family in 1912. The mill was used to cut cross arms and telegraph poles.[1] The Wheatleys operated the mill for only two years, and it closed in 1914.

In 1923, Bunning Brothers purchased Lewis and Reid, a timber company with mills at Collie and Yornup, near Bridgetown.[2] Their original intention was to close Yornup and build a new mill on the site of Wheatley's mill. However, the demand for timber in the 1940s meant that a decision was made to keep Yornup open, as it had been renovated and was operating under a new sawmilling permit since 1935.[3] Early in 1947, new plans were being drawn up by Bunning Brothers to build a mill at the site of Wheatley's mill.[4] Bunnings 'changed' the name of the site to the name of the river that ran through the area.[5] In March 1948, Bunning Brothers Ltd became Bunning Brothers Pty Ltd; many companies were incorporated within this company, Donnelly Sawmills Pty Ltd being one of them.[6]

The timber industry experienced a period of recovery and expansion in the late 1940s and 1950s. After the war, there were more men available to work, including displaced migrants from Europe, a building boom was in evidence and developments in technology resulted in increased production.[7] *Donnelly River Mill* was one of several mills established in the late 1940s by Bunning Brothers to work the karri forest timber in new permit areas held by the company. Mills were also constructed at nearby Nyamup and Tone River.[8]

Once a decision had been made to build on the land there was some debate about where to locate the site of the *Donnelly River Mill.* The south side of the river was chosen eventually, to protect the town from the smoke

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1 Mills, J. *The Timber People: A History of Bunnings Limited* (Perth, Bunnings, 1986) p. 147.

2 Southcombe, M.R.H. *Steam in the Forests* (Victoria Park, Hesperian Press, 1986) p. 117.

3 Southcombe, p. 117; Mills, p. 179.

4 Mills, p. 147.

5 The townsite is still officially gazetted as Wheatley.

6 Mills, p. 154.

7 Ball, J., Bush, F. and Statham, P. 'Southern Forest Region of Western Australia: A Study for the Australian Heritage Commission' (Centre for Western Australian History, University of Western Australia, September, 1993) p. 59.

8 Mills, p. 165.

from the mill stacks that would otherwise be blown over the town by prevailing winds.[9]

The *Donnelly River Mill* was situated next to a river because water was needed for the boilers, the mill's source of energy. Steam-powered mills exhibited the technology of the time and *Donnelly River Mill* had two steam locomotives.[10] It was a karri mill and was belt-run.[11] The mill was powered by a single cylinder horizontal steam engine built by Robey's of Lincoln, England. The engine was bought from Onkaparinga Woollen Mills by Bunning Brothers in 1947.[12]

Pegging out the site of the *Donnelly River Mill* began on Anzac Day 1948. The mill cost nearly £100,000 to build, and this figure did not include the 12 miles of railway that ran between Donnelly River and *Yornup Mill*.[13]

The *Donnelly River Mill* was not just a mill, but a town. Situated some twenty-seven kilometres from Manjimup, the area of the *Donnelly River Mill* was isolated from nearby towns by rough roads.[14] Aside from the mill there were cottages for workers with families, and single men's quarters. The general store, butcher's shop, social club and school were all built after the *Donnelly River Mill* opened.[15]

The workers' housing was built on the hill overlooking the mill. There were twenty cottages situated in a crescent formation, following the road.[16] There were thirty-three single men's quarters, arranged in three rows of ten, with the remaining three dwellings out of alignment with the others.[17]

The mill 'opened' on the 13 September 1950, although it was not until several weeks after this that full production commenced. John Tillman suggests the early opening occurred because Charles Bunning had promised his financial backers that the mill would be operational by this date.[18]

The *Donnelly River Mill* was officially opened on 24 April 1951.[19] The opening ceremony commemorative leaflet thanks all the staff and employees for their hard work on the mill. The directors thanked the staff, 'for the part [they] have personally played in these [the mill's] operation."[20] The ceremony was well publicised and was attended by over three hundred people.[21] The mill was opened by the acting Premier, A.F. Watts, whose

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9 Mills, p. 148.
10 Southcombe, p. 118.
11 Mills, 147.
12 Southcombe, p. 117.
13 Mills, p. 148.
14 Mills, p. 169.
15 Mills, p. 148.
16 Mills, p. 148.
17 Tillman, J A *Donnelly: Men and Mill* (Excelsior Print, Bunbury, 1991) p.13
18 Tillman, p. 25.
19 Tillman, p. 26.
20 Tillman, p. 26.
21 Mills, p. 168.

ceremonial duties also included operating the machinery to saw a log.[22] The social club was opened by Mr Justice Jackson, president of the Arbitration Court.[23] Other activities included an overnight train from Perth to Yornup siding to enable people to attend the opening of the mill, and a picnic lunch near the mill site.[24]

A shop was built in 1952. It had a storeroom at the rear and a post office at the front.[25] The store provided most general items, so that shopping in nearby towns was not a necessity.

The primary school was built in 1953. It provided education for the children of workers at the mill. It was situated in the middle of the settlement and a large karri tree had been felled for use as a part of the playground equipment.[26] The first teachers were a married couple named Phillips. There were forty pupils. The Donnelly school was short of resources and, at first, children had to sit on the floor and use their chairs as desks. A very active parents' association worked to provide the school with essential items, while Charles Bunning was a benefactor who contributed to the purchase of school aids.[27]

The original plans for the townsite at *Donnelly River Mill* included a church, but this was never built.[28] Church services were held in the open by a priest from Bridgetown who used a karri stump as a pulpit.[29]

Soon after the *Donnelly River Mill* had been established, an influx of migrants arrived in the timber areas of the State seeking employment. The mill employed a number of migrants, but the newcomers created a housing shortage. Temporary accommodation was set up on the west side of the mill by Harry Martin and the area became known as Martin's Corner.[30]

Initially, only men worked the mill. Bunnings' policy changed some time after the *Donnelly River Mill* was established, with Charles Bunning supporting the inclusion of women in the mill work force, adding that they needed an interest close to home.[31] It is not known how many women started working as a result of this initiative. Women's tasks involved, "working on the sorting tables, pulling the wood off the sorting tables, also with the planing machines, tailing out behind the flooring machines and the moulding tables."[32]

Conditions at *Donnelly River Mill* were basic. There were shared water taps situated throughout the single men's quarters; in the cottage accommodation, there was a wash house shared between every two

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22 Tillman, p. 8.
23 Mills, p. 169.
24 Mills, p. 168.
25 Tillman, p. 19.
26 Mills, p.188.
27 Mills, p.188.
28 Mills, p.148.
29 Mills, p.154.
30 Mills, p.154.
31 Mills, p. 206.
32 Oral testimony of Ben Bryant, Former managing director, cited in Mills, p. 207.

houses.[33] There were no showers or baths in the early years and septic toilets were not installed until 1968, replacing the old pan toilets.[34]

In August 1958, to mark the State's Festival of Trees Week, Bunnings donated a karri tree "as a tribute to the State's forest wealth."[35] This tree was provided from *Donnelly River Mill* stock and four trees were felled before a 'perfect' specimen was finally chosen. The tree was then transported in three sections to Perth and placed in Kings Park, where it still remains on display. The tree was proclaimed as 'The Elizabeth Karri Tree'.[36]

The *Donnelly River Mill* closed in June 1978 in accordance with the policy of the Forests Department to close less efficient mills. Since it had operated for only 29 years, the mill itself remained principally as originally constructed. Charles Bunning made the closing speech, reflecting on community feeling at *Donnelly River Mill*. He said, "people who came here always went away feeling happy that they had seen something unique not only in sawmilling operation but in the surroundings, the set out of the housing, the way people looked after their gardens, and generally all that went to make *Donnelly River Mill* a happy one."[37] The community feeling at Donnelly River Mill was clearly very strong. The original concept of creating a town - not merely a place of work - had succeeded, not only because of the isolation and relative self-sufficiency of the community but also through the pride of the workers in their mill.

When *Donnelly River Mill* closed, Bunnings donated the land and the mill to the Crown, "for so long as they remained for public benefit."[38] The usual practice when timber mills closed down was to reassemble the equipment at new sites. However, when *Donnelly River Mill* closed, the mill equipment was out of date, with the transition from steam to power from the State electrical grid; accordingly, most of the equipment remained *in situ* following the mill's closure.[39]

The *Donnelly River Mill* is an excellent example not only of how a timber mill operated, but also of the social environment of workers in the mill and their families. Besides the mill, the workers' housing, social club, store and school remain.[40]

13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

33 Tillman, pp. 13 & 31.
34 Tillman, p. 35.
35 Mills, p. 186.
36 Mills, p. 187.
37 Mills, p. 240.
38 Heritage Council of Western Australia, 'Conservation Incentives Program: Application for Assistance' February 1993, p. 3.
39 Information obtained from G.B Hill and Partners in a fax to Heritage Council, dated 14 January 1994.
40 Heritage Council of Western Australia, p. 3.

Donnelly River Mill is a timber mill complex built in 1949 to mill logs from the surrounding karri forest. Constructed largely of local materials, it operated under steam power until its closure in 1978. [41]

The basic structure of the mill is the mill floor which supports the operating equipment above the floor and also the drive shafts, pulleys and belts under the floor. The initial power to operate all mill equipment came through drive shafts from a single steam engine.

Though below-the-floor drive equipment was the practice in timber mills and reflected the technology required to operate a mill by steam power, this is different from the usual practice in other workshops, which have drive shafts and pulleys in the roof and belt drivers coming down onto the work benches. The purpose of all drive equipment being below floor level was to achieve an open path for the movement of timber through the mill and also to improve safety.

Nearly all the mill equipment is located under the main mill roof. The roof is of robust design and is made of two pitched segments joining at a central box gutter sheeted with standard corrugated roofing material. The support structure is all of timber construction; the support columns are of round bush timber, while the roof timbers, trusses and beams were constructed from sawn timber.

The three steel chimney stacks are 20 metres in height and are stabilised with anchored guy ropes. A smaller chimney provided for exhaust of steam from the steam engines.

With regard to the equipment itself, the boilers generating steam for the engines are under a roofed area and are protected from the weather, while the boiler generating kiln steam is similarly protected under a separate roof.

Two of the original steam engines - which respectively provide direct belt power to the mill equipment and coupling to an alternator generating electrical power - remain in position and are protected from weather, though in need of maintenance. A third steam engine - which generated electric power - has been removed apart from its engine block, while a diesel engine has been removed entirely. A fourth steam engine, also used for power generation, remains in position. Light is now provided through the State Energy Commission distribution system, and the original switching equipment and switchboards have been removed.

Remaining in position are :

the winch used to handle logs from trucks into the mill,
the overhead winch for positioning logs on the travelling carriage,
the travelling carriage itself,
the twin saws which made the first log cuts,
bench rollers, other saws, moving feed trolleys and rails,
packing case benches,

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41 The material for this Section is derived from G.B. Hill & Partners *Conservation Plan : Donnelly River Mill* (for the Heritage Council of Western Australia, Perth, 1994).

the conveyor systems for waste transport, collection of sawdust from the bench saws and supply of sawdust to the kiln boilers, and
the shaft and pulley drive system under the mill floor.

The drying kilns have been demolished, as has the large planer building where dressed timber was produced. The equipment has been removed from the site of the planer building and from the pre-cut area, and the second timber sorting table has also been removed. The rail system used to move timber in the storage yard has been dismantled.

13. 3 REFERENCES

Ball, J., Bush, F. and Statham, P. 'Southern Forest Region of Western Australia : A Study for the Australian Heritage Commission' (Centre for Western Australian History, University of Western Australia, September 1993).

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