



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

Northam Post Office & Quarters is significant for the design which has strong visual appeal. (Criterion 1.1)

Northam Post Office & Quarters is a fine, robust, interpretation of the Federation Free style of architecture, which demonstrates the design skill of Hillson Beasley, the PWD Chief Architect. (Criterion 1.2)

The place is a landmark in the Fitzgerald Street vista. (Criterion 1.3)

Northam Post Office & Quarters is an integral element within the townscape and character of the Town of Northam,. It demonstrates the Government optimism for the town and contributes an essential component of the main street streetscape. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Northam Post Office & Quarters is important for the association with the development of postal and telecommunication service and facilities since 1909. (Criterion 2.1)

Northam Post Office & Quarters replaced the former post office at a time when Northam was developing as an important regional administrative centre, and the new location demonstrates a shift in the commercial focus of the town. (Criterion 2.2)

Northam Post Office & Quarters is a fine example of Federation Free style architecture, of considerable design achievement, which has continuously served the community since its completion in 1909. (Criterion 2.4)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Northam Post Office & Quarters is a focal point for Northam residents and visitors by virtue of being the communication centre of the region. It is a place where people meet on an informal social basis. (Criterion 4.1)

Northam Post Office & Quarters demonstrates a sense of place as the place where social interaction and communication with Northam and the rest of the world takes place. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

Northam Post Office & Quarters is a strikingly individual design, quite unlike other post offices of the period in Western Australia, and demonstrates a distinctive and uncommon presence in the Town of Northam. (Criterion 5.1)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Northam Post Office & Quarters is representative of the Federation Free style of architecture in Western Australia. It is a testimony to the skill of the public Works Department Principal architect, Hillson Beasley. (Criterion 6.1)

Northam Post Office & Quarters was a purpose built structure which has demonstrated a versatility throughout the several developments in postal and telecommunications since 1909. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

Northam Post Office & Quarters is in very good condition with no obvious works requiring attention. Regular maintenance provides the basis for the management of the place.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Northam Post Office & Quarters is intact. Very few alterations or intrusions have taken place to the fabric of the place, and the integrity is of a high degree.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Northam Post Office & Quarters demonstrates a remarkably high degree of authenticity given the continuous use and development of service facilities over that period.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary and physical evidence has been compiled by Laura Gray (B.Arch.) Conservation Professional.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

In 1830, Ensign Dale explored eastwards beyond the hills from the Swan River settlement. Favourable reports of the land in the Avon Valley led to the opening of the land for selection as early as 1831, and by 1836, settlers had selected land throughout the region.

In March 1840, the first mail service between Perth and the eastern districts in the Avon Valley, was established, and in April 1842, a J.T. Cooke opened the first Post Office for the Northam Toodyay region, at Katrine.¹

From 1847, several Northam residents ran the Post Office at different venues including their own homes. In 1861, George Throssell took over as Postmaster and conducted the post office from his business premises, at the eastern end of Fitzgerald St,² until the Northam residents lobbied for a separate Post Office and Telegraph Office.

George Throssell subsequently won the tender to construct the new Post Office building in Wellington St. Works commenced in 1872, and the Post Office was completed in 1873.³ Storm damage to the building in 1890 and 1891 resulted in repairs, improvements and additions to the building. In 1896, two years since the initial request, a public clock was erected at the Post Office.⁴

After the initial establishment of Northam in the Avon Valley in the 1830s and 40s, the town developed dramatically in the goldrush period of the 1890s as it evolved as a major railway and agricultural centre. By the 1900s, the existing postal services were strained, and the facilities were inadequate for the increasing demands. By 1902, the community was lobbying for an improved postal facility in a central location.⁵ In December 1902, the Northam Chamber of Commerce forwarded a resolution to the Post Master General's Department;

That this Chamber affirms the principle that the Post Office should be in the centre of the town and take such steps as are necessary to induce the Federal Post Office Department to erect a suitable building in Fitzgerald St, central between Grey and Gordon Streets.⁶

Correspondence to the Deputy Post Master General from the Secretary of the Post Master General's Department on the 30 November 1903, refers to the Northam Chamber of Commerce and Town Council lobby in regard to the establishment of a central post office, and recommends that action.⁷ The PMG

¹ Garden, D *Northam An Avon Valley History* facsimile edition Hesperian Press WA, 1991 p.31.

² *ibid* p.69.

³ HCWA Database 1892 Documentation Northam Post Office (fmr).

⁴ *ibid*.

⁵ *ibid*.

⁶ Australian Archives Series K273/44; Item 1902/2.

⁷ *ibid*

cites a number of reasons for that recommendation; future extensions at the former post office site are costly, the new site should be in the central business district, the existing site is restricted and not likely to develop as the business sector of town as it is bounded by church and public owned sites; the banks, hotels and businesses are focussed in Fitzgerald St which is likely to become the main thoroughfare; a central location would facilitate the closure of the West Northam Post Office, and save office expense. The correspondence goes on to substantiate the proposal of selecting land at the western end of town, in the vicinity of Gordon St, on Fitzgerald St; it is central between the West Northam Railway Station and the Northam Station; it has direct communication with the south east portion of town and the Leakes Estate (over the Avon River by the footbridge into Weld St); the Northam community was agitating for a railway platform between the stations, and that was likely to be located near Gordon St, therefore the location of the post office in very close proximity would save time and money on conveyancing; and a central location would facilitate mail deliveries in the Northam area.⁸

On May 21 1904, the Deputy Post Master General visited Northam and interviewed the Northam Mayor and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce. He conceded that the growth of the town was in a northerly and westerly direction, and agreed that a site in Fitzgerald St in the vicinity of Gordon St was a suitable location. The Post Office had, it seems, always been in an inconvenient location.

In February 1905, the PMG Department recommended the removal of the Northam Post Office to a more convenient site,⁹ and in July 1905 the site was purchased from J Sermon for £450.¹⁰

By March 1908, it seems no further action had taken place, and the allocated funding was in danger of lapsing, despite Senator Best's visit and assurances in December 1907.¹¹ The sketch plans which had been prepared by the State Public Works Department had not been agreed to by the Commonwealth Works Officers and the Post Department, and fresh plans were prepared by the PMG Department and submitted to the State PWD to prepare working drawings and call for tenders as early as possible.¹²

With the Post Office nearing completion, on 18 November 1908, *The Northam Advertiser* states, in part;

Without any pretensions to architectural grandeur the new post office presents a very substantial and comfortable appearance. A little greater height would not have been amiss from a spectacular point of view, but in this excessively practical age, the idea is to get as much convenience as possible at the smallest cost, and it cannot be fairly said that the Federal postal authorities have treated Northam in a niggardly spirit. The hall itself has been designed on the most modern lines with a view to economic and effective supervision. In it the entire business of the post office will be transacted, the whole staff being always under the immediate eye of the officer in

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Correspondence PMG to the Secretary of Home Affairs, dated 28 February 1905 Australian Archives Series K273/44; Item 1902/2.

¹⁰ CT Vol 155 Fol 52 Australian Archives Series K273/44; Item 1902/2.

¹¹ *The Northam Advertiser* 11 March 1908 Australian Archives Series K1/1; Item 1092/08.

¹² Correspondence to Commonwealth Works Registrar from the Deputy Post Master General, dated 10 June 1908; Australian Archives Series K1/1; Item 1092/08.

charge. It is a very spacious room 47 feet long by 51 feet wide in its greatest measurements, though the corners are taken out for various purposes. The tie beams and principals are of oregon and the top of the counter and the cabinets of polished New South Wales cedar. Nearly all the rest is local jarrah varnished so as to bring out all the beauties of the wood. The ceiling, the walls of the telephone cabinet, and the front of the counter all furnish excellent instances of the value of our local timber for work of this class. South of the main hall are the residential Quarters, and these have been built on a generous scale.....One forward movement that has been coincidental with the erection of the new building has been the introduction of the underground system for our telephone wires.....¹³

The contractors, Messrs Pittman and Totterdill¹⁴ completed the construction on 10 December 1908, and possession was granted to the Postmaster 5 days prior to the contract period. However, a small matter between the Public Works Department and the contractors delayed the hand-over until the 6 January 1909.¹⁵

The Northam Post Office began operating on 1 February 1909, after the telephone exchange transferred their services at 11am on the previous Sunday.¹⁶

In 1928, with business in all sections decreasing, a staff investigation recommended that the 2 postmen positions be abolished, and that tenders be given for the mail delivery.¹⁷ Between 1927 and 1936, when a motor truck was acquired for the mail deliveries, the horses were stabled off site in private accommodation.¹⁸

In 1957, the clock, which had been relocated from the former post office, was removed due to its deteriorated condition.¹⁹

In 1961 and 1962, substantial maintenance was undertaken to the entire building.²⁰ In 1964, a proposal was made to resume a portion of the Postmaster's backyard to provide vehicle access to the proposed Long Line Equipment communication facility which would be a separate self contained building on a separate site to the west of the existing post office building.²¹

In 1966, the first broad band co-axial cable link was introduced between Perth and Bunbury. Repeater stations were constructed every 30 or 40 miles in sight lines across the countryside. The Mt Bakewell (York) repeater transmitted in three directions, one to Mawson, the second to the Northam radio telephone terminal, and the third to Pingelly.²²

In the early 1990s, Australia Post consolidated its operations and sold a considerable amount of its Post Office properties and privatised the operations of those centres. Australia Post retained ownership of *Northam Post Office & Quarters*, and its operation is central within the region.

¹³ *The Northam Advertiser* 18 November 1908; Australian Archives Series K1/1; Item 1092/08.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *The Northam Advertiser* 6 January 1909 (Reason for delay not given).

¹⁶ Australian Archives Series K1/1; Item 1902/08.

¹⁷ Memo dated 17 October 1928 Australian Archives Series K1184/1; Item 80/13.

¹⁸ Australian Archives Series PP 212/1; Item 0358/31.

¹⁹ O'Brien, Val 'Town of Northam Municipal Inventory'.

²⁰ Australian Archives Series P0139/1 & P0139/2.

²¹ PMG plan 17 June 1964 Australian Archives Series K433/1 & XP1137.

²² *The Northam Advertiser* 25 March 1966; Australian Archives Series K433/1 & XP1137.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Northam Post Office & Quarters is situated on Fitzgerald St at the intersection of Gordon Street. The Post Office wraps the corner and the building line corresponds with the boundary of the property. The residential section addresses the Gordon Street frontage, and is recessed back from the street.

Northam Post Office & Quarters is a fine example of Hillson Beasley's Federation Free Style influence.²³ The place demonstrates many of the style indicators of that influence, and Beasley is a recognised exponent of the Style. Although essentially a non residential style, the post office Quarters are detailed in a different manner to the Post Office. The use of stucco is obvious in the pillars of the arcade which wraps the street corner and continues on the west end of the building. The asymmetry of the place is obvious with informal massing which forms a balanced composition. The use of contrasting materials has been successfully applied to the post office building, with a series of rendered string courses wrapping the building, and contrasting with the red face brickwork. Clerestory windows above the arcade roof have stucco pilasters between the windows in each set. The central protruding section of the building on Fitzgerald St features a set of three vertical formatted arched windows with the arched course in contrasting alternate render and red brick, referred to as 'blood and bandages'.²⁴ A decorative stucco frieze runs part of the perimeter around the building on the wall under the eaves. The gable above this wall, and that above the Gordon Street arcade, feature bas relief on a roughcast stucco background. A round, square paned window is central within each gable.

The complex roof is clad with corrugated iron, and for the most part is a hipped gambrel roof with the two feature gables as mentioned. A decorative bell tower is situated central on the roof above the gable frontage on Fitzgerald St. A separate bullnose verandah wraps the corner of the upstairs verandah on the Quarters.

The residential section rises to double storey, with a solid double storey section on the Gordon St frontage terminating the Post Office arcade, and giving the impression of a block tower. The recessed section on the Gordon Street frontage and the rear of the building have a first storey verandah with colonnade beneath. The top storey verandah is detailed with vertical timber balustrade and valance and curvilinear brackets.

The Post Office interior can only be accessed from the double entry doors on the corner arcade, as the other doors from the west side have been blocked to entry. The main hall is a magnificent space with the clerestory windows, sectioned panels of tongue and groove timber ceiling lining, decorative ceiling vents, and appropriate light-fittings, contrasted by the contemporary Australia Post shop fitout. While the shop fit is a separate entity with no relationship to the existing structure which confines it, it does not impinge of the existing fabric of the Post Office. Similarly office partitions and sorting room equipment are moveable items, and the high ceilings flow through the spaces due to the partitions not being full height. At the rear of the mail room,

²³ Apperley, R., Irving, R., Reynolds. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present* Angus & Robertson, NSW, 1989, pp.137 & 138.

²⁴ *ibid*, p.138.

toilet and staff room facilities have a skillion metaldeck roof, suggesting it is a c1960-1970 addition.

The Quarters are accessed from the office area, and entry is directly into the stair space, and entry hall. The accommodation is well appointed, with minimum intrusion into the original fabric. The kitchen and bathroom, upstairs have been modernised, and a small portion of the top floor verandah has been enclosed.

The laundry and garage are both separate buildings in the rear yard of *Northam Post Office & Quarters*, which has a Gordon Street facade.

The imposing *Northam Post Office & Quarters* occupies the corner of Gordon Street at the eastern end of, and commanding an impressive vista, in Fitzgerald St Northam.

13. 3 REFERENCES

Garden, D. *Northam An Avon Valley History* facsimile edition Hesperian Press WA, 1991.

Owen, GE *The Postal History of Western Australia, 1829-1901* Melbourne, 1959.