



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

The opulent and stylistic ornamentation displayed at *Byfield House* creates visual and aesthetic interest. (Criterion 1.1)

The imposing entrance tower and the location of the building above the township of Northam give *Byfield House* a landmark quality. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Byfield House demonstrates the wealth acquired by its owner as a direct result of the gold boom era. (Criterion 2.2)

Byfield House is valued by the community for its close association with James Byfield, the son of early European settlers to the Swan River Colony (his mother was a nursemaid to Governor Stirling's children) who was a prominent figure involved with the development of Northam at the beginning of the twentieth century. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Byfield House, a prominent and well known landmark since the beginning of the century, offers the community a sense of time and place. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

The high level of opulence exhibited at *Byfield House* in the applied ornamentation and imposing tower makes this building an uncommon structure. (Criterion 5.1)

The location of *Byfield House* on three lots with the site having three street frontages is unusual in a suburban setting and provides a generous sized site, creating distance from neighbouring buildings and emphasising the rarity. (Criterion 5.2)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Byfield House is representative of the Federation Queen Anne Style of architecture where the influences of the gold boom in Western Australia produced an eclectic mix of stylistic decoration. (Criterion 6.1)

12. 3 CONDITION

The condition of the internal fabric at *Byfield House* is good with a substantial amount of the upper floor walls and ceiling having been replaced within the last decade. The external fabric suffers more significantly being exposed to the effects of the weather with the result that some of the brickwork and roof tiles are in poor condition. No substantial building alterations have been undertaken since the last change of ownership with only superficial maintenance being applied. Overall, *Byfield House* is in good condition.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

The current use of *Byfield House* as a family residence is compatible with its original intention, restoring some integrity to the place after periods where it has combined other functions with the prime residential use. The ability of the house to convey the grandeur and opulence of the turn of the century building has been diminished with internal alterations, particularly to the upper floor, although it is still evident in the high ceilings and room proportions of the lower floor. *Byfield House* displays moderate integrity.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Internally, the building has low authenticity with significant alterations having taken place to provide varying function throughout the century. The external fabric has been affected by maintenance and the loss of the top of the tower but a good proportion of the original fabric is still evident. *Byfield House* has moderate authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Carolyn Denham-Shade, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by Katrina Chisholm, Architect.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Byfield House (1904), is an imposing two-storey, red brick mansion with a prominent Italianate tower.¹ This Federation Queen Anne style home, built for James and Elizabeth Byfield, defines the corners of Gordon, Duke and Chidlow streets in Northam and is 'clear evidence of the benefits brought by the multitudes of gold-seekers who passed through the Avon Valley.'²

The town of Northam is situated 100 kilometres east of Perth in the fertile Avon Valley discovered by Ensign Dale and a party of explorers in 1830. European settlers living in Perth at the time were eager to obtain land grants for farming in this area and by the 1850s Northam had developed into a thriving village.

James Byfield, a Methodist and staunch Temperance advocate, arrived in Northam in 1869. Establishing a business as a wheelwright, he also managed, and later purchased, the local flour mill. About 1890, he imported and installed a roller mill, one of only two in the Colony at that time.³ His other commercial enterprises of coach builder, sawmill owner and builder, coupled with the prosperity brought to Northam as a result of the gold boom, made him a very wealthy man. He was to make a significant contribution to the commercial, civic and religious life in Northam during his lifetime.

On 23 December 1902, Byfield purchased land at 30 Gordon Street, a street that 'proved particularly popular among Northam's prominent citizens.'⁴ Here he erected a two-storey edifice complete with tower. His granddaughter recalls that 'he had travelled to America and was very impressed with a house he had seen there. He decided to come home and build one for himself.'⁵ The place reflects Byfield's gentry status in the town and the wealth and position he achieved.

James and his family moved into *Byfield House* in March 1904, and his granddaughter, Jessie, was born in the bedroom at the front of the house six weeks later, on 26 April 1904, while the painting was still being finished. James was Mayor of Northam at the time.⁶

¹ Apperly, R. Irving, Robert. et al *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1989) p. 72.

² Molyneux, Ian *Looking Around Perth* (Wescolour Press, Perth, WA, 1981), p.115.

³ *Twentieth Century Impressions of Western Australia* (P.W.H. Thiel and Co, Perth, 1901), pp. 711-712.

⁴ Garden, D. *Northam. An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1979), p.152; Certificate of Title for 30 Gordon Street Northam, Titles Office.

⁵ Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Miss Jessie Gladstone, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878.

⁶ Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Miss Jessie Gladstone, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878. Note: Although Byfield is credited with building 'half of Northam', the pressure of all his other activities makes it probable that he sub-contracted work to local builders. *Byfield House* shares some of the characteristics of other large homes in the area including

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Photographic evidence of 1905, shows *Byfield House* with a flagpole on top of the tower's pyramidal roof. The bull nosed verandah roofing was painted in stripes and a picket fence was in place along the front of the street verge. At the time *Byfield House* was referred to as 'West View.' The land and property was transferred into Elizabeth Byfield's name in February 1905. The Byfield family lived in the place until James' accidental death in 1914. A short time later, Elizabeth Byfield moved to a smaller house in Duke Street, and *Byfield House* was probably leased out. In the 1920s, due to a downturn in the family fortunes and the reputed ineptitude of James' son, Alfred, *Byfield House* was sold. In August 1922, the place passed out of the Byfield family forever.⁷

Between 1922 and 1942, *Byfield House* had a series of owners until the Army leased the place in 1942 when it became the headquarters for the Military Police in Northam until June 1944. During this time a brick shed with iron roof and barred windows was erected in the back garden. Reputedly, 'an Italian prisoner of war was locked up in there for the whole of the war.'⁸

In January 1945, *Byfield House* was purchased by Edith Donahue who owned the property until her death nearly thirty years later. On 14 October 1968, as a result of the Meckering earthquake, extensive damage occurred to the pyramidal roof and flagpole. The roof was repaired but left flat at the top.⁹

Photographic evidence in 1973, shows *Byfield House* with a hedge along the Chidlow Street frontage and the original picket fence removed.¹⁰ About this time, *Byfield House* was converted into flats, the back verandahs enclosed, one of the kitchen doors bricked up (possibly the tradesman's entrance), and the cellar access-hatch, situated on the verandah, was closed off.

On 25 October 1979, a National Trust assessment described *Byfield House* as '... architecturally interesting as a grand, eclectic design reflecting the several influences on architecture introduced into Western Australia by the gold boom.'¹¹

Two years later, in 1981, the place was purchased by Evonne Thorley, a business proprietor, who made an application to change the zoning. This application was refused and the place remained vacant for a time. At this stage, *Byfield House* was a very poor state of repair and subject to vandalism. A 'white sticker', signifying the place as unfit for habitation, was issued by the

Mitchell House (1905) and builder Simon Millington's own home in Newcastle Street. These similarities lead many local people to believe that Millington built *Byfield House*.

⁷ *Avon Valley Illustrated* (Northam, 1905), p.25; Certificate of Title for 30 Gordon Street Northam, Titles Office; Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Bud Byfield, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878; Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and James Byfield, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878; Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Jessie Gladstone, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878.

⁸ Enquiry with Defence Centre, Perth, Accomodation Listings, Northam 1939-1945, HCWA File PD1878, p.14; Photograph p.8, HCWA File PD1878; Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Elza and Barry Briegal, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878.

⁹ Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Elza and Barry Briegal, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878.

¹⁰ Battye Library, 4326B 32/29.

¹¹ National Trust Assessment Exposition, 25 October 1979; Molyneux, Ian *Looking Around Perth* (Wescolour Press, Perth, WA, 1981), p.115.

Council and demolition was considered.¹² In 1982, Elza and Barry Briegal, picnicking in Northam, saw *Byfield House* advertised for sale in a local Real Estate Agency. The agent warned them that the interior of the house was in a very poor condition. Despite its dilapidated state, the Briegals purchased *Byfield House* in 1982 and made an application to the Council to use the place for Devonshire tearooms, and an antique shop and art gallery. In October 1982, the Council approved their application for change of use and alterations.¹³

Between October 1982 and January 1983, extensive repairs and alterations were made to the interior of *Byfield House*. Ceilings were replaced, walls were plastered and wallpapered, and floors were sanded to remove the marks from hob-nailed army boots. Archways were cut between the downstairs rooms for easy access for the patrons of the restaurant. The upstairs bathroom was altered and the gaol converted to a toilet. Elza Briegal climbed onto the roof in order to plan a Victorian style garden in keeping with the style of the house. Partitions that had enclosed the verandahs were removed and the verandah was painted red. Eleven tradesmen were involved in the work in order to make the place ready for business.

On Sunday 2 January 1983, *Byfield House* was officially opened as a gallery and restaurant by the Minister for Tourism, Barry McKinnon. The place became an important focus in the community for special celebrations, anniversaries, weddings, and charity auctions. It was visited by people from all over the world including politicians and the Thai Royal Family.

In 1987, the Briegals offered *Byfield House* for sale. It sold before the proposed August auction date to the Richards family who continued with the restaurant and leased out the upper floors.¹⁴ During this time, further alterations were made to the place including the addition of walk-in wardrobes to two of the bedrooms upstairs.¹⁵

In 1993, the Richards offered the property for sale, but because the 'lathe and plaster walls were crumbling', no one would purchase the place. In July 1994, after the walls had been repaired, the place was purchased by the Hendersons. A builder's report of the time stated that external walls outside the kitchen and former dining room were sinking, (since repaired) but that *Byfield House* was in good condition considering its age.¹⁶

Currently *Byfield House* is used as a family home. Some alterations have been made since its purchase in 1994. Full-length bookcases have been built next to the fireplace in the former dining room, and a brick and iron-rail fence has been erected around the property. Extensive gardening and planting has been carried out. The interior needs painting and decorating in parts.

12 Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Elza and Barry Briegal, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878.

13 Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Elza and Barry Briegal, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878; Town of Northam Council Minute Book, 1982.

14 Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Elza and Barry Briegal, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878.

15 Plan of *Byfield House* courtesy of V. Henderson.

16 Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Valmai Henderson, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878.

Byfield House has a special significance to one of the new owners. As a child, Mrs Henderson walked past the place each day on her way to school, she and her husband were married there and celebrated several wedding anniversaries there when it functioned as a restaurant.

A number of alterations have occurred to the interior of *Byfield House* since it was built, but with the exception of the roof damaged in the earthquake, the exterior fabric retains its authenticity. Photographic evidence in October 1995 shows *Byfield House* in good condition.¹⁷

Byfield House forms part of the Northam Heritage Trail established in the Bicentennial year.¹⁸ The place is widely photographed, sketched and painted and used in promotional material for the tourism industry. It is currently used as a family home.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Byfield House is located on a generous sized block comprising three lots defined by Gordon, Duke and Chidlow streets south of the town centre of Northam. The house is a two-storey brick and tile building with an imposing tower defining the entrance and is surrounded by a landscaped garden. Built in 1904, *Byfield House* is at the higher end of Northam affording views back across the town.

The two storey red brick building is square in plan with protruding bay windows and entrance porch. A wide verandah with a corrugated iron, bullnose roof surrounds the main structure, supported on decorated timber posts with a timber balustrade and wrought iron consoles and valance. The spacing of the verandah timber posts on the north-west, Chidlow Street elevation is suggestive of the location of a previous flight of stairs to the garden where the balustrade is now continuous. The house is characteristic of the Federation Queen Anne style with tuck pointing to the brick work, a complex roof shape covered with terracotta tiles and punctuated with gabled dormer windows.¹⁹

The Italianate styled entrance of the Gordon Street elevation forms an imposing tower although the pyramidal roof is now flattened where once there was a balustrade and flag pole. The entrance porch has a decorative tiled floor and marble steps with a single rounded arch opening at ground floor and two rounded arches in each of the three sides of the upper floor above the stucco balustrade.

The external walls of the house are constructed in red brick laid in Flemish bond with black tuck pointing to the lighter coloured brick quoins of the corners of the building and window and door openings. The brickwork has applied decorative stucco details to the front entrance facade.

A small red brick building adjacent to the southern corner of the main house is constructed in red brick laid in stretcher bond and has a skillion roof of

¹⁷ Photographs of *Byfield House*, October 1995, HCWA File PD1878, pp.1-11.

¹⁸ *Northam/Katrine Heritage Trail* (WA Heritage Committee, 1988).

¹⁹ Apperly, Richard et al. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present.* (Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989) pp.132-135; National Trust of Australia (w.A.) Built Environment Committee, Assessment Exposition, October 1979.

corrugated iron. A window opening with iron bars is located in the south-west elevation away from the house and a door faces Burnside Avenue. This structure reputedly provided accommodation for an Italian P.O.W. during World War Two.

Internally, the central entrance hallway leads from the main entrance to the morning room at the rear. An enclosed narrow staircase with three winding risers at the bottom separates the hallway from the adjacent sitting room with a main bedroom on the other side. Two central rooms on either side of the hallway have doors opening onto the verandah. An additional door to the Burnside Avenue verandah opens off the passageway between the dining and sitting rooms. Behind these central rooms is the service area of the house with a laundry and bathroom on one side and a kitchen on the other side of the morning room. The plastered ceiling to the morning room is rounded about the four corners. An internal window has been inserted in the wall between the sitting and morning rooms, possibly at the time when the place operated as a restaurant. Access to the back verandah is through the kitchen that also provides access to the cellar via a steep staircase obscured behind a timber enclosure. A diagonal channel has been cut into the concrete floor of the cellar and leads to a drain in the base of the external wall. Brick walls are partially rendered and painted. Timber stairs lead to a hatch up to the verandah but access has been sealed.

Upstairs, the staircase from the ground floor arrives at a central hall opening onto the bedrooms, bathroom and a lobby to the balcony. A steep, narrow, timber access ladder, leading to a hatch onto the roof, is also located within this hall. The walls of these upper rooms are principally plasterboard and are unlikely to reflect the original planning. Central beams in the ceilings of each of the bedrooms may also be indicative of alterations to the original planning. Narrow corridors extend from the rectangular shape of the bedrooms into the roof space and terminate in dormer windows which provide interest to the exterior elevations. Plasterboard walk-in-ropes have been constructed within the roof space between these corridors in the two rear bedrooms. An access hatch into the roof space has been provided in a wall of the south bedroom.

The hallway leads to a lobby which has a clear glazed, timber framed door and highlight onto the balcony offering views in three directions over the town of Northam through the rounded arches. The floor surface is painted sheet metal.

The conversion from family residence to military headquarters, flats, restaurant and back to a residence has seen substantial changes to the planning of the upper floor with almost all walls and ceilings having been replaced and relocated. Obvious alterations to the ground floor planning include the insertion of arches in the internal, north-east wall of the dining room.

13.3 REFERENCES

No key references.