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

Narrogin Post Office is a fine example of Federation Free Style architecture. The symmetrical composition employs dominant classical elements but achieves a balance through the subtle exploitation of the fabric. (Criterion 1.1)

The creative and artistic excellence exhibited in the masonry detailing is a significant achievement. (Criterion 1.2)

The strong three dimensional form of *Narrogin Post Office* establishes a presence appropriate for a civic building and makes an aesthetic contribution to the Narrogin streetscape. (Criterion 1.3)

11. 2. HISTORIC VALUE

Narrogin Post Office provides physical evidence of the growth and prosperity of Narrogin township and surrounding agricultural areas during the period prior to World War One. (Criterion 2.1)

Narrogin Post Office is directly related to the opening of the Great Southern Railway Line, and the subsequent European occupation of the Great Southern district of Western Australia. (Criterion 2.2)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

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11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

Narrogin Post Office is a focal point for the Narrogin district where social interaction and communication take place. (Criterion 4.1)

Built on the same site as the first Post Office building, *Narrogin Post Office* contributes to the town, and surrounding agricultural community's sense of place. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

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12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Narrogin Post Office is representative of the Federation Free Style applied to civic architecture by the Public Works Department under the direction of Principal Architect, Hillson Beasley. The building is also representative of a standard design which was adopted for post offices along the Great Southern Railway. (Criterion 6.1)

12. 3 CONDITION

Narrogin Post Office is in good condition and well maintained by Australia Post.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Narrogin Post Office has a high degree of integrity having maintained its original function since construction. The evolving role of Australia Post is reflected in the removal of the Telephone Exchange to separate premises and the modernisation of furnishings to accommodate an increasing commercial focus. These changes have not detracted from the integrity of the place.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Modifications to *Narrogin Post Office* since construction have involved additions to the fabric rather the removal of material. A toilet block has been added to the rear of the building and the office floor area has been extended to the west to house private post boxes. Internally, the telephone exchange partitioning and the original furniture have been removed and a new ventilation system which punctuates the ceiling has been installed. The building is substantially intact with a high degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Irene Ham-Sauman, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by Katrina Chisholm, Graduate Architect.

13. 1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Narrogin Post Office is a single-storey building constructed in Federation Free Style in 1912, to a design by Western Australian Public Works Department Principal Architect, Hillson Beasley.[1]

Prior to the late 1880s, the south-west of the State was sparsely populated by Europeans. Sandalwood cutters worked the forests, and a few settlers established themselves by selecting 16 - 20 acres of freehold land near permanent water, or taking up grazing leases of 1600 - 2000 acres.

A track developed between Perth and Albany, largely as a result of the sandalwood cutters carting their loads to the coast for export to China. The track became known as the Albany road. In 1841, a mail service was inaugurated along this route. In 1869, the Government took over the mail run, and a police guard accompanied the mail coach.[2] The mail coach made the journey each way twice a month, travelling around 30 miles a day, with seven overnight stops along the way, most of them coinciding with a police station where fresh horses were obtained for the next stage of the journey. Passengers and freight were also carried.[3]

With the desire to attract more settlers to the area, the Western Australian Government decided to establish a rail link between Perth and Albany. The desired route was along the Albany road, but York, linked to Perth by the Eastern Railway in 1881, lobbied to be included on the rail link with Albany. The Government conceded, and extended the Eastern Railway from York to Beverley, while Anthony Hordern's West Australian Land Company Ltd constructed the line from Beverley to Albany. This section of line, opened in 1889, was known as the Great Southern Railway, and was built in exchange for land grants along the route.[4]

The Government suspended its own land offers to allow Hordern's Company to sell its land grants to migrants, but the Company had difficulty attracting prospective settlers, and its freight charges were twice as high as charges on other lines. The Government grew impatient, and made land available with The Homestead Act, 1893, which granted settlers 160 acres and allowed them seven years to make improvements, and The Agricultural Bank Act, 1894, which provided long term loans to pay for the improvements.[5] In 1897, the

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1 Apperley, R., Irving, R. & Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Style and Terms from 1788 to the Present* Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1989, pp. 136-139.

2 Pederick, M. J. *The Emu's Watering Place: A Brief History of the Wagin District* Churchlands College, Perth, for Shire of Wagin, 1979, p.7-8.

3 *Yearbook of Western Australia* 1889. p.97.

4 *Western Australian Government Gazette* 25 September 1884, p491.

5 *Statutes of Western Australia* Perth, Govt. Printer, The Homesteads Act, 1893, No. 18 of 1893; The Agricultural Bank Act, 1894., No. 21 of 1894.

Government purchased the Great Southern Railway, and all land grants, from the West Australian Land Company Ltd for £1,100,000, and the Great Southern district began to flourish.[6]

The township of Narrogin developed as a major railway station, and the maintenance and administration centre of the Great Southern Railway. On a surveyed town plan, the post office was sited near the station, a normal situation for towns established along a railway line. The first mails were handled at Mr Chipper's general store.[7]

A post office was built in 1892, on the corner of Rowley and Fortune streets, to a George Temple Poole design. It was constructed by J. Mackie, who also built the 1893 Wagin post office. Like many of Poole's post office designs, this building had only one room for postal services with the rest of the building as living quarters for the Postmaster.

Between 1900 and 1914, there was great demand for land along the Great Southern Railway route. Disillusioned miners joined other migrants to take up farming land. The population of Narrogin grew rapidly during this period.

A telephone exchange was opened in 1908, with 28 subscribers. In October 1909, an article appeared in the *Narrogin Observer*, stating the need for a new post office; however, the Divisional Inspector believed the current building would suffice for some time to come.[8] The local council did not agree with this assessment, and argued on the need for a new post office building to match the Town Hall, proposed for the other side of the street. By February 1911, the Divisional Inspector was claiming that floor space was insufficient and that, while he believed there was room to extend the front of the existing building, a new building was probably a better idea.[9] In 1912, tenders were called for a new post office.

Narrogin Post Office was built by J. Park at a cost of £2,496.[10] The new building was sited to the left of the original post office, facing Fortune Street.[11] This pattern of first post office located near the railway station, soon too small to cope with increased population and expanding communications networks and in need of replacement within twenty years, was repeated in many Western Australian country towns along the railway lines.

Hillson Beasley, the designer of *Narrogin Post Office*, was the most eclectic of the four principal architects employed by the Western Australian Public Works Department between 1885 and 1925, when that department was responsible for the design and construction of the State's post offices. In 1926,

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6 *Yearbook of Western Australia* 1897, p.69.

7 Pustkuchen, O. E. *The Way Through: The Story of Narrogin* Artlook Books Trust, Perth, for the Town of Narrogin, c.1981, p.173.

8 Newspaper clipping, PMG Files, Australian Archives 1243/07, 6 March 1908; Letter, PMG Files, Australian Archives 192/13, 22 October 1909.

9 Letter, PMG Files, Australian Archives 192/13, 4 July 1911.

10 Documents, PMG Files, Australian Archives 192/13.

11 Plan, PMG Files, Australian Archives K1201/1 WA 11883, 1956 (See Supporting Material).

responsibility for this work passed to the Commonwealth Postmaster General's Department.[12]

The old post office building was first used as living quarters only, and then as departmental offices. A trunk line equipment (TLE) building had been built behind the old post office, and in 1961 it was decided to demolish the old post office building and extend the TLE building to house the telephone exchange, then housed in *Narrogin Post Office*, as well as to provide offices and amenities. This extension doubled the size of the existing TLE building, and put the frontage on Fortune Street, level with the front of *Narrogin Post Office*. According to Pustkuchen, the new TLE building 'would have gained a great deal if the front of the old building [the 1892 Poole post office building] could have remained as a facade'.[13]

Narrogin Post Office serviced an extensive, growing area, and several non-official, smaller agencies, in conjunction with a shop, were set up to look after surrounding districts.[14]

Minor repairs and renovations have been carried out to *Narrogin Post Office* at various times over the intervening years as service needs have changed. While the downgrading of services on the Great Southern Railway in the 1970s and 1980s, created a population drift from the area, the township of Narrogin is large enough to require a full Post Office service for some time yet.

The interior of the building received the current standard Australia Post fitout in 1994-95.

13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Narrogin Post Office is a single-storey masonry building constructed in the Federation Free Style located at 22 Fortune Street.[15] The post office is situated in a landscaped, commercial street in the town centre and is adjacent to a single-storey telecommunications building on the site of the previous post office and quarters. A bituminised carpark is located at the rear of the site with two sheds providing miscellaneous storage facilities.

Narrogin Post Office is similar in design to other post offices constructed along the Great Southern Railway at Wagin and Katanning in the same period. The orthogonal form is lent a solid and substantial appearance with the use of masonry walls formed by a random laid stone plinth and English bond brickwork. The contrast in texture between the two masonry materials is further enhanced by the considerable modelling of the brickwork and the selective application of cement render. The hipped terracotta tiled roof has a finial at the front apex and is crowned with a prominent ventilator making interesting skyline features.

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12 Pope, B., Bush, F., Bloomfield, W. & Kelsall, D. *Historical and Architectural Assessment of Post Offices in Western Australia* National Trust of Australia (WA) for the National Heritage Commission, 1993, p.17.

13 Pustkuchen, O. E. op. cit., p.173.

14 Letter, PMG Files, Australian Archives K1209/1 Box 20/2078/96, 13 December 1868.

15 Apperly, R. et al, op. cit., pp. 136-139.

The symmetrical south elevation to Fortune Street is dominated by the central Diocletian window motif. Brick voussoirs of alternating depth form the semi-circular arch surrounding the window which is highlighted with a rendered keystone. A triangular pediment supported on timber brackets has been inserted, rather incongruously, into the central panel above the sash window. The wide brick panels flanking the feature window have a central slot window with rendered sills and a keystone of exaggerated height. Every fourth course is rusticated brickwork, creating an interesting shadow play and emphasising the quoins. This detail is repeated in the brick piers of the east and west side elevations and columns of the external lobbies. The hipped roof over the front section of the south elevation is supported on closely spaced timber brackets above a rendered frieze which is continuous around the building. The boxed eaves are lined with timber boards.

External lobbies are located at each side of the front elevation set back slightly from the main building line. Semi-circular brick arches on two sides of the lobbies provide public access to the post office, although a glazed screen has been placed across the opening of the eastern arch adjacent to the telecommunications building. The voussoirs and quoins of the arches exhibit similar brick detailing to the central features already outlined. A rendered panel is placed over the keystone of the arches breaking the line of the parapet cornice which is at a lower level to the main roof. Both external lobbies have brick paving and timber boarded ceilings. Post boxes are located in the west lobby and a flat roofed, brick extension housing private mail boxes protrudes from the west elevation.

Above the stone plinth of the side elevations, the wall is divided by brick piers into four bays each, with a brick arch surround to the Diocletian window motif comprising a central sash window, fixed sidelights and glazing bars in the upper fanlights. The windows are absent on the two bays of the west elevation closest to Fortune Street where the building has been extended to accommodate private boxes and the adjacent bay where the fireplace is located. The brick chimney with rendered capping is evident above the roof at this point. Horizontal stucco bands have been applied to the brickwork between the piers at the springing point of the arch and level with the top of the keystone, in a restrained use of the 'blood and bandages' style. A brick lean-to with a corrugated iron, skillion roof extends to the north from the side elevations. The brick and bond are the same as for the rest of the building but without the decorative detailing. A cement render has been applied to the base of the wall in keeping with the horizontal line of the stone plinth.

The current standard Australia Post fitout divides the interior space of *Narrogin Post Office* into a public foyer and retail section at the front of the building and a general work area behind. Whilst similar, the partitioning layout is not identical to the post offices at Wagin and Katanning. A heavy metal door in the west corner of the north wall leads to the strong room, constructed in reinforced brick walls. The adjacent timber door opens onto a corridor leading to a set of stairs and lower level staff rooms. The double doors in the centre of the north wall provide access to the rear verandah and service platform which are enclosed with weatherboard cladding and a roller door.

The new fitout to the post office is approximately three years old and it is likely that many of the internal finishes were upgraded at that time. Walls are plastered and the timber floor is carpeted. Only the high, painted, timber board ceiling retains any of the atmosphere of the original construction although this has been punctuated with a regular array of holes associated with the mechanical ventilation system. Vertical venetian blinds are suspended across the windows of the side elevations.

Since the construction of *Narrogin Post Office*, major alterations to the fabric have been the addition of the staff toilet block in 1956 and the extension to the west to house private post boxes, incurring the removal of one of the feature windows.[16] Partitioning for the Telephone Exchange in the north-east corner of the office has been removed and the fireplace has been boarded up. There have been alterations to the location of openings in the north wall and also within the two front lobbies. Openings immediately to the south of the entrance doors have been bricked up, although the flat arch lintels remain.

Two storage buildings are located on the site. In the north-west corner is a corrugated clad shed with an iron roof and a smaller weatherboard shed is situated immediately behind the Staff Toilet Block, on the west boundary.

Narrogin Post Office is in good condition and well maintained.

13. 3 REFERENCES

No key references.

[16] It has not been possible to determine the exact date of the latter extension although it does not appear on the drawings for the renovation in 1956.