



# REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

## 11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November, 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

### 11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE\*

The two-storey homestead has aesthetic impact through the large scale, quality of architecture and setting in formal, landscaped gardens. Associated outbuildings contribute to the cultural landscape. (Criterion 1.1)

The homestead demonstrates considerable achievement in design and construction through the use of local materials in a remote environment. (Criterion 1.2)

The homestead and associated buildings are arranged around a central axis with the Homestead achieving prominence through its location at the head of the main vista. (Criterion 1.3)

The buildings which make up the *Fossil Downs Homestead Group* inter-relate closely to form a pastoral precinct. (Criterion 1.4)

### 11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

The place is located on an early pastoral lease issued in the Kimberley region in 1883. (Criterion 2.1)

During World War II, Fossil Downs Homestead was the headquarters for the Army in the area. (Criterion 2.2)

The place is closely associated with the MacDonald family who pioneered the lease in 1883-5, and is still connected with this family. (Criterion 2.3)

### 11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

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### 11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

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\* For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P., *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present* Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

*Fossil Downs Homestead Group* is highly regarded in the Kimberley Region as part of an important pastoral station. (Criterion 4.1)

## **12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE**

### **12. 1. RARITY**

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### **12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS**

*Fossil Downs Homestead Group* is representative of North West pastoral stations. The group forms a well-conceived spatial arrangement and all the buildings on the site demonstrate the relationship between the residential and working functions of the station. (Criterion 6.1)

### **12. 3 CONDITION**

The Homestead has been maintained in excellent condition. The associated buildings of the *Fossil Downs Homestead Group* are in good condition.

### **12. 4 INTEGRITY**

The place has high integrity having retained its original use since its establishment.

### **12. 5 AUTHENTICITY**

The place has high authenticity. Some fabric has been introduced in the main residence, but this does not compromise the cultural heritage significance of the place.

### 13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Tanya Suba, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by John Taylor, Architect.

#### 13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The Kimberley Region of Western Australia was opened up and settled in the early 1880s largely due to Alexander Forrest's expedition of 1879. Forrest explored a portion of the Kimberley Region south of the King Leopold Ranges, and his enthusiastic reports of well watered and pastured land were received with great interest in Western Australia and the Eastern States. Pastoral leases were subsequently issued, the first being to G. J. Brockman in 1879.

Many graziers in the eastern states were tempted to take up leases in the Kimberley following Forrest's descriptions of fertile pasture land and wide flowing rivers. Among them were the MacDonalds of Clifford's Creek and the McKenzies of the Junction, near Tuena in New South Wales, the families being close friends and related through marriage. In 1879, Donald MacDonald wrote to Alexander Forrest for more detailed information on the region and although the report was favourable, he was cautious and asked his son Dan (Donald), who was already in Western Australia, to lead a small party to investigate the area recommended by Forrest. His subsequent report prompted Donald MacDonald to contact the McKenzies to formulate plans to secure a pastoral lease and take stock overland to the Kimberley.<sup>1</sup>

Dan MacDonald applied for a lease of 100 square miles of land at the junction of the Margaret and Fitzroy Rivers; the station which later became known as Fossil Downs because of the great number of geologically significant shell fossils to be found through the property.<sup>2</sup> The McKenzies paid £25 for the first year's rent. It was agreed that Alexander, William and Kenneth McKenzie would provide most of the stock, plant and equipment required while the MacDonalds would undertake the droving.<sup>3</sup>

Charles and William MacDonald departed Clifford's Creek on 26 March 1883, heading north to pick up more stock and supplies from the McKenzie properties. The 5,600 kilometre journey from Goulburn, New South Wales to the Margaret River Flats was beset by major hurdles. Tragically Donald MacDonald Senior died in a horse accident immediately prior to the droving trip.<sup>4</sup> Many cattle and horses were lost because of the drought conditions in Queensland, boggy river crossings and Aboriginal attacks on stock, while the sickness of first Charles MacDonald, the expedition leader, and later William MacDonald, delayed the ultimate completion of the trek. Arriving at the destination, near a tree marked F136 by explorer Alexander Forrest, on 3 June 1886, the trip had taken 3

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<sup>1</sup> MacKenzie, G. *Fossil Downs: a saga of the Kimberleys - Australia's Longest Droving Trip* Yeppoon, Queensland, G. MacKenzie, 1985, pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Countryman*, 18 August, 1955, p.32.

<sup>3</sup> MacKenzie, G., *Op. Cit.*, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Oral History interview with Maxine MacDonald by J. Thomson, 10 October 1966, OH 44, p.1.

years, with only 327 of 700 head of cattle and 13 of the original 60 horses surviving the experience. It was not long before a rough camp was set up on the Margaret River and work commenced on establishing the pastoral station.<sup>5</sup>

Although the discovery of gold at Hall's Creek in 1885 produced a market for meat, it was approximately nine years before a profit was shown by the partners. Although some cattle were lost to Aboriginal spearings, the cattle numbers on Fossil Downs Station increased so that the MacDonalDs and McKenzies were in a good position to capitalise on the market opportunities brought by the gold rush of the 1890s.<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime, Dan MacDonald joined the partnership which now saw the three MacDonald brothers running the property and the McKenzies financing most of the running and development costs. However, in c.1900, the McKenzies sold their interest in Fossil Downs to the MacDonalDs. Charles MacDonald, who served as a Justice of the Peace in the district, died in 1903, and his younger brother William, whose son Kimberley was named after the region he loved, died in 1910. The management of Fossil Downs subsequently became the responsibility of Dan MacDonald.<sup>7</sup>

Fossil Downs Station prospered under the management of Dan MacDonald who expanded the pastoral concerns to include adjoining leases and enhanced the breeding quality of the cattle by infusing Red Poll cattle into the Shorthorn herd. In the 1920s Sidney Kidman bought a half share in Fossil Downs for £75,000; however in 1928, Dan MacDonald repurchased the share, with financial assistance from his brother Duncan, to become the sole owner again. In 1931, Dan MacDonald's son, William (Bill) entered the partnership. When Dan MacDonald died in 1939, William assumed control of the operations of Fossil Downs.<sup>8</sup>

William MacDonald, who had studied architecture at Sydney University, wanted to build a homestead for his new bride, Maxine. The original timber and iron homestead, which was located adjacent to the Forrest tree and near the MacDonald's first camping spot, about 14 kilometres from the present homestead, was badly damaged by termite infestation. It was demolished prior to the outbreak of World War Two.<sup>9</sup> The footings of the new house designed by William MacDonald were set out on New Year's Day 1939.<sup>10</sup>

Using his early training as an architect, William began designing and building a magnificent home, utilising material from the bed of the Margaret River - sand to

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*; MacKenzie, G., Op. Cit., pp. 6-18 & 21 & *West Australian*, 13/09/1985, p.30.

<sup>6</sup> MacKenzie, G., Op. Cit., pp. 28-33.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, pp. 19 & 37.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> Oral History interview with Cecil Kelly by Michael Adams, 1982/3, OH 540, p.291; *Daily News*, 20 August 1986, p.15 & Kelleher, P. *Historic Buildings of the Kimberley Region of WA*, 1988, p.126.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, Kelleher, P., p.127.

make building blocks and beautiful slabs of slate for floors. When war broke out in 1939, the project was held up - to be completed later.<sup>11</sup>

Maxine MacDonald described an incident during the construction of the house:

Our bricks for the homestead were made here...They had a big nine foot square cement mixing bowl, where the bricks were made and then they were tipped into the mould to harden and when they had hardened were stacked along the edges of the bank. One day a pilot flew over me towards the wet sand. We hadn't had any rain on the homestead at all, in fact we hadn't even seen any lightning. But the plane flew over and dropped a note to the effect that the Margaret River was running much higher up and running very strongly. We left the homestead and went down to the river. We got there about half past two and started to carry the bricks out - there were 10,000 of them. The bank itself was about 7 feet steep and we worked from 2.30 to 8 o'clock the next morning. We had skin off our hands and our legs were just about falling off but we did get them all out and the river came down some half an hour later...I don't think any of the bricks would have been found if we had not got the note from the pilot to say that the river was coming down.<sup>12</sup>

However the formwork, which had been left until last, was swept away by the water.

Maxine MacDonald further describes the type of timber used to construct the Homestead:

The beautiful looking roof timbers that look like jarrah and karri are not jarrah or karri. Neither jarrah or karri grow up here. They are Leichardt pine and fig. Both trees are native to this country. The Leichardt pine when cut is a very vivid orange colour with a very pungent pine smell. The fig is quite a soft wood. The big heavy beams you can see out on the back verandah there are what we call black heart, a very hard timber...Most of the timber was hauled in by donkey wagons on the Fitzroy River.<sup>13</sup>

When World War Two commenced, the house was almost complete, with all the walls standing; however no windows or doors fitted. During the war Fossil Downs Station was the headquarters for the Army in the area, who were firmly convinced that the Japanese would invade. Two guns were mounted on the upper level of each of the homestead wings, which were at that stage open to the sky. Maxine MacDonald, who was one of the few white women to remain in the area, was actively involved in code work for the services.<sup>14</sup>

Following the war, work on the Homestead recommenced:

When the building of the homestead was resumed in the 1940s, the blacks were willing helpers in the massive task of bringing the material for the structure from the river, mixing it for William's capable hands to place in position, and all hands rejoiced to see the building rise and take shape... The building of the large homestead took a long time, as much of the material had to be shipped from Perth

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<sup>11</sup> MacKenzie, G., Op. Cit., p.53. The current owner Annette Henwood states that the interior floors are polished cement. Conversation by Tanya Suba with Annette Henwood on 15 July 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Oral History interview with Maxine MacDonald by J. Thomson, 10 October, 1966, OH 44, p.2.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> MacKenzie, G., Op. Cit., p.53.

to Derby and brought to the site by wagon or motor truck, but it was a labour of love and they felt a great sense of achievement when it was finally completed.<sup>15</sup>

Following the completion of the homestead, work commenced on the gardens which flourished using the abundant water from nearby Margaret River.

In June 1951, air freighting of live cattle from Fossil Downs to the Northern Territory was initiated by Charles Shultz, who was the first to undertake such transportation methods.<sup>16</sup>

William MacDonald erected a memorial to Charles, William and Donald MacDonald, located near the Forrest tree at the original settlement site. Consisting of the hub of the axle of the original bullock wagon, it was unveiled by Lady Gardiner and blessed by Rev. Ken Beckett in 1953. The memorial stands as testimony to the first crossing of the continent by a four-wheeled vehicle during the epic overland cattle drive from Goulburn in New South Wales to Fossil Downs.<sup>17</sup>

William MacDonald died in 1963, and his wife, Maxine, continued to manage the property. In June 1965, Maxine's daughter, Annette was married to John Henwood at Fossil Downs Homestead and they subsequently took over the management of the pastoral station. Initially living in Fossil Downs Homestead, Annette and John Henwood moved into their own house built in the late 1960s. Referred to as the 'Court House', the house was constructed on the site of the tennis courts adjacent to the homestead.<sup>18</sup>

Through the 1970s, Fossil Downs Station endured one of the worst beef recessions and then in March 1983, a big flood resulted in massive stock losses of over 5,500 head of cattle and considerable damage to the homestead and station buildings. With the water levels being 2 metres higher than the previous record flood of 1914, a 1.8 metre river of water flowed through the homestead, destroying antiques, furniture and furnishings, including the billiard table brought from Broome after the town was bombed in 1942. The floods caused some structural damage to the building in the form of cracking. Damage to the station was estimated at \$3.25 million.<sup>19</sup> Since then there have been other floods in 1986, 1991 and two in 1993 which are marked on a wall of the homestead.

The homestead, on pastoral lease 3114/704, was classified by the National Trust of Australia (WA) on 4 June 1985.<sup>20</sup>

Maxine MacDonald died in 1988 and is buried in the cemetery at Fossil Downs alongside her husband Bill MacDonald.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.54.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p.57.

<sup>17</sup> Oral History interview with Maxine MacDonald by J. Thomson, 10 October, 1966, OH 44, p.1 & *West Australian*, 23 April, 1962, p.8.

<sup>18</sup> Conversation by Tanya Suba with Annette Henwood, 15 July 1997.

<sup>19</sup> *West Australian*, 17 July, 1983, p.9; 25 January, 1986, p.2 & *Daily News*, 20 August, 1986, p.15.

<sup>20</sup> National Trust Assessment Exposition, 04/06/1985.

<sup>21</sup> Conversation John Taylor & Tanya Suba with Annette Henwood, 15 July 1997.

## 13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

*Fossil Downs Homestead Group* is located on an elevated level area to the south eastern side of a long stony ridge. The homestead was constructed during the period 1939-1948, and is approached via a loop roadway that passes thirteen other associated buildings of varying ages, usage, construction, and design styles.

The entry to the homestead group is via a gate to the west. As one proceeds along the roadway travelling east, to the left is the dominating stone ridge which forms a natural northern boundary and 'backdrop' to the group. In the shelter of this ridge to the left (and in clockwise order) is first passed a large open steel machinery shed (Building 1 - see plan). Building 2 is a two-storey and single level stables/feed-room/loft/store constructed with masonry walls and 'corrugated iron' roof. Building 3 is the men's quarters constructed with stone walls, surrounding verandahs on cast concrete columns, and a ventilated 'corrugated iron' roof. Building 4 is a two-storey accommodation structure, with concrete block ground floor walls, framed and lined upper floor, and south side balcony framed in steel. Documentary evidence indicates Building 4 is built on the site of an earlier station homestead at this locality on the pastoral lease (the original 1880s homestead was located 14 kilometres distant). Building 5 houses the cook's 'flat' upstairs, with kitchen and dining rooms downstairs; and is similar to Building 4 in both style and construction materials. Building 6 is a store and is also similar to Building 4 in style and construction materials. Building 7 is the diesel engine room and walk-in cool room. These appear to be lightweight prefabricated structures and are situated on a further elevated location slightly up the side of the ridge.

The main homestead (Building 8) is a half-hexagon shaped two-storey building with concrete floors, cavity concrete block walls, timber roof frame and 'corrugated iron' roof sheet. Feature stone floors are found to the verandah and rear enclosed areas. At the time of inspection, the main homestead was used for guest accommodation. The main homestead terminates the drive into the property and commands the prominent position as the termination of the vista as one approaches from the west. To the south of the homestead is a small fenced cemetery containing three graves.

Continuing around the loop driveway to the south side, Building 10 is occupied by the proprietors of Fossil Downs Station. This building is also known as 'the Courthouse' for having been constructed on the old tennis court location. Building 11 is a cottage currently used by the Proprietor's daughter, and Building 12 is a long garage of all steel construction and sloping side walls. Building 13 is an old welding shed of framed construction with painted 'corrugated iron' clad walls and roof. The old fuel pump is located alongside the north eastern corner of this building. To the south of Building 13 is the open Saw Mill (Building 14) under a painted barrel roof of 'corrugated iron'. Another building is visible some distance away to the south east of the main homestead group, and this structure apparently houses some ablution facilities for station hands.

The main homestead is separated into three distinct wings of two levels each. The east wing has an enclosed rear verandah with stone floor at



ground level. A mark on the wall some 1.5 metres above the floor in this area near the rear doors records the peak flood level experienced in March 1983. The central double volume entry hall houses the staircase, under which is concealed a bar service. The entry hall also provides access to the rear verandah and to the formal entertaining rooms - the billiard room and the lounge room. These three main rooms in the east wing also have coloured polished concrete floors in excellent condition. The billiard room houses a large table and exceptional stone beehive shaped fireplace. Steel beams and lifting mechanisms have been inserted into the ceiling over this room to provide the means to lift the table above flood level. A similar mechanism has been provided over the piano in the lounge room to lift that item to the ceiling in the event of flood also. At first floor level in this wing are located the main bedroom and two smaller bedrooms. The north wing houses a kitchen and dining area at ground level, and large dormitory style room at the upper level. The upper level of the south wing houses the ensuite bathroom off the main bedroom, and the office. The office was moved from the lower level to the upper level in this wing in an attempt to more easily cope with the flooding.

The homestead could be described as of a Inter-War Functionalist style <sup>22</sup>, although this would simply classify the design by time (Inter-War c.1915 - c.1940), and the material usage indicator (reinforced concrete and metal framed windows). The simplified style of the homestead is not entirely representative of Functionalist Style, and reflects the difficulty of procuring labour and materials in remote locations. The overall effect of the main half hipped roof to the east wing, the concrete sill and lintel blocks, the repetitive horizontal framing lines in the windows, and the unpretentious detailing is essentially modern - and of the 1930s design ethos. The somewhat curious geometry of the plan form is well conceived and resolved to form the courtyard and sheltering verandahs, and overall the spatial planning relationships are well suited to the living style of the Kimberley climate.

All the buildings are in very good condition. The proprietors of the property are particularly fastidious in the care of the main homestead. This building is exceptionally beautifully kept; and furnished in an interesting, attractive manner. Maintenance of the buildings is obviously undertaken on a regular basis, and the gardens and grounds generally exhibit a very well ordered and kept appearance.

### 13.3 REFERENCES

Kelleher, P. *Historic Buildings of the Kimberley Region of WA*, 1988.

MacKenzie, G. *Fossil Downs: a saga of the Kimberleys - Australia's Longest Driving Trip* Yeppoon, Queensland, G. MacKenzie, 1985.

National Trust Assessment Exposition, 04/06/1985.

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<sup>22</sup> Apperly, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present.* pp. 184 -187. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1994.

Oral History interview with Maxine MacDonald by J. Thomson, 10 October, 1966, OH 44.

*West Australian*, 13/09/1985, p.30.

#### **13.4 FURTHER RESEARCH**

The following source could reveal additional information about *Fossil Downs Homestead Group*:

Shepherd, M.G., *Burn to Billabong: MacDonald Clansfolk in Australia, 1788-1988*.

Information regarding the type and extent of fossils on the property.

Opportunity for further archaeology under buildings on former sites (Buildings 4 and 10).

Investigation of the graves on the property.