



**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 November 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

#### PRINCIPAL AUSTRALIAN HISTORIC THEME(S)

- 7.7 Defending Australia
- 8.14 Living in the country and rural settlements

#### HERITAGE COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA THEME(S)

- 306 Domestic activities
- 401 Government & politics
- 404 Community services & utilities
- 501 World Wars & other wars
- 701 Other – Women at war

#### 11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE\*

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* forms a significant cultural environment, consisting of a regular grid formation and rectangular concrete slabs, which contrast with the surrounding natural environment. (Criterion 1.4)

#### 11.2 HISTORIC VALUE

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* is a significant remnant of a World War II mobile hospital installation in Australia. (Criterion 2.1)

The location of *2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* demonstrates the importance of Merredin as a regional centre during World War II, well removed from the threat of war. (Criterion 2.2)

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* is associated with the servicemen and women of the World War II Army medical services, in particular the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS), The Volunteer Aid Detachments (VADs)

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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 and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.  
For consistency, all references to garden and landscape types and styles are taken from Ramsay, J. *Parks, Gardens and Special Trees: A Classification and Assessment Method for the Register of the National Estate*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991, with additional reference to Richards, O. *Theoretical Framework for Designed Landscapes in WA*, unpublished report, 1997.

and the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC), and with the injured soldiers who were treated there. (Criterion 2.3)

The major buildings of *2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* were constructed by prominent local West Australian firm J. B. Hawkins & Son. (Criterion 2.3)

### **11.3 SCIENTIFIC VALUE**

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* has the potential through archaeological investigation to provide additional information about army life. (Criteria 3.1 & 3.2)

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* is capable of providing considerable information on the structure and operation of a mobile Army hospital established under wartime conditions and could inform on army life in a medical installation. (Criteria 3.2 & 3.3)

### **11.4 SOCIAL VALUE**

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* presents a rare example on Australian soil of the difficult and primitive circumstances under which the Australian Army medical services had to work. (Criterion 4.1)

## **12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE**

### **12.1 RARITY**

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* is extremely rare as a site that contains physical evidence of a World War II mobile hospital installation in Australia. (Criterion 5.1)

### **12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS**

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### **12.3 CONDITION**

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* is in fair condition with considerable damage from environmental factors and vandalism at different times.

### **12.4 INTEGRITY**

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* has a high degree of integrity as a remnant site informing of the original function.

### **12.5 AUTHENTICITY**

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* has a high degree of authenticity as a remnant site.

### 13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentation for this place is based on the heritage assessment completed by Irene Sauman, Historian and Laura Gray, Heritage and Conservation Consultant, in January 2006, with amendments and/or additions by HCWA staff and the Register Committee.

#### 13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

During World War II, a number of military support installations were located inland along railway routes. At Merredin, the RAAF No. 10 Stores Depot, a HD/HF communication facility and the 2/1 Australian General Hospital (2/1 AGH,<sup>1</sup> an Army facility) were established and hundreds of service personnel were stationed in the town. The unit had been stationed at Gaza in the Middle East for two years before returning to Australia in mid-1942. In June that year, personnel and equipment were despatched by train from Adelaide to Western Australia, where a hospital was to be set up at Merredin.<sup>2</sup>

The decision to locate an experienced unit in rural WA was a surprise to many, but the bombing of Broome and Darwin by the Japanese earlier in 1942 heralded the possibility of an invasion in the northwest with resulting casualties. Merredin was far enough from the coast that enemy planes could not reach it without refuelling, and as a central railway junction, the injured could be transported in from various directions. £43,000 was provided initially under War Cabinet Minute No 1573 to establish and outfit a hospital for 1,200 patients and 400 staff.<sup>3</sup>

The site chosen was the unused aerial landing ground Reserve 20811 close to the railway line on Merredin Peak and adjacent to the Railway Dam. Trucks with hospital equipment, tents and camp equipment were unloaded from the train at Kalgoorlie and driven to Merredin with the soldiers from the unit, while the officers and nurses continued on to Perth. A camp was set up on the site at Merredin and hospital equipment was stored in a disused flourmill, from where a large amount of it was reported to have been stolen.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of any Perth firm being able to 'expeditiously' provide pre-fabricated buildings for the 2/1 AGH at Merredin, the Perth office of the Commonwealth Works Department let a tender in August 1942 to J. B. Hawkins & Sons for construction of: an operating theatre and x-ray block; four kitchens; six shower and ablution blocks and ten latrines for males; one shower, ablution and latrine block for females; and a meat house, laundry and boiler house. Ward accommodation was to be provided in the form of transportable army huts. The ablution and latrine buildings had concrete floors, while the other buildings constructed were designed to be relocatable. Presumably this meant they had suspended timber floors. The buildings were all timber-framed and either clad with weatherboards, fibrolite sheeting or, in

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<sup>1</sup> In its early years, the 2/1 AGH was also referred to as the 1<sup>st</sup> AGH.

<sup>2</sup> Simpson, Sheila, *Medical Pathfinders: A history of 2/1 Australian General Hospital, 1939-1945*, 2/1 AGH Association, Sydney, 1990, pp. 9-33. This history is based on the 37-volume war diary of the 2/1 AGH, held at the War Memorial Museum, Canberra.

<sup>3</sup> '1<sup>st</sup> AGH, replaced by 2/1, then 125 AGH Merredin', National Archives, Melbourne, Series MP742/1 Item 259/7/139, 1942-44. Photocopy viewed courtesy National Trust office, Perth.

<sup>4</sup> Simpson, op cit, pp. 33-40.

the case of the ablution blocks, with corrugated iron. Roofs were of corrugated asbestos.<sup>5</sup>

While the hospital buildings were being erected at Merredin, the 2/1 AGH detachment in Perth established a hospital at Guildford Grammar School, which had previously been occupied by the American 5<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital. Patients housed in camps to the north as far as Geraldton were moved to the Guildford AGH, which opened on 11 August 1942. The plan was to transfer the patients to Merredin when that facility became functional, and although Guildford was better equipped with buildings and facilities than Merredin, it was the Merredin site that was to be the headquarters of the 2/1 AGH unit.<sup>6</sup>

The contract for construction at Merredin called for completion in October 1942, but the corrugated roofing and the Army huts for the wards had still not arrived by 14 November when the 2/1 AGH received its first 148 patients. The Hospital at that time was equipped with 264 beds and all patients and staff were housed in EPIP (European Privates Indian Pattern) tents, initially with dirt floors. For desert conditions, and generally when buildings were not available, the double EPIP tent had proved to be the most satisfactory and was used for wards and operating theatres at the battlefield.<sup>7</sup>

In November 1942, the unit at Merredin consisted of five medical officers, nine other officers, 34 members of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), eleven members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) and Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS) and 143 ORs (other ranks than officers).<sup>8</sup>

Professional nurses had volunteered for service at the outbreak of war in 1914 and formed the AANS, which was accepted as a member of the Australian Imperial Force to serve overseas. The VADs were established at that time as assistants to the professional staff of the Australian Army Medical Corps and the AANS, in a limited capacity. In 1941, the Military Board gave approval for VADs to serve in military hospitals and overseas, and in early 1942, the AAMWS was established, with many VAD members joining that Service. AAMWS were employed as nursing and ward orderlies in the main, but also worked as postal clerks, diet supervisors, cooks, radiographers, laboratory assistants, telephonists, dental orderlies, hairdressers, operating theatre assistants, clerks and troop-train orderlies, among other positions.<sup>9</sup>

When the first patients arrived at Merredin there was no electricity connected, drainage was incomplete, and half the surgical equipment was still in use at

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5 Commonwealth Works Department, Perth, 'Merredin – erection of hospital', National Archives, Perth, Series PP280/1 Item M1942/43/14, 1942; Photographs, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, photograph database at <http://cas.awm.gov.au>.

6 Simpson, op cit, pp. 33-40; 'Guildford Grammar School, 110 AGH', National Archives, Melbourne, Series MP508/1 Item 259/707/389, 1942. Photocopy viewed courtesy National Trust, Perth.

7 European Privates Indian Pattern (EPIP) tents were cotton tents made in India, [www.diggershistory.info/pages-asstd/abbreviations.htm](http://www.diggershistory.info/pages-asstd/abbreviations.htm); Stout, M. & Duncan, T. *War Surgery and Medicine*, Historical Publications Branch, Wellington, NZ.

8 Simpson, op cit, pp. 33-40.

9 Tucker, Eileen (Riley), *We Answered the Call: AWAS of Western Australia and their mates*, Cloverdale, E. Tucker, 1991, p. 3; Mount-Batten, Betty J., *From Blue to Khaki: The enlisted voluntary aids and others who became members of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service and served from 1941-1951*, Wollstonecraft, B. J. Mount-Batten, 1995, pp. 50-51 & a list of AAMWS who served with the 2/1 AGH in 1943, pp. 78-79.

Guildford. Meals were prepared in open kitchens, but were described as excellent despite the conditions. All laundry was initially sent to Northam by train, and later to Perth. Flies and dust were a problem. The corrugated roofing for the buildings did not arrive until early February 1943, and late that month 52 men, including 29 Army personnel, were still employed on construction work at the site. One of the jobs that was ongoing for some time was the installation of timber flooring in the ward tents and the replacement of service tents with huts.<sup>10</sup> Three prefabricated huts were provided for dental, eye, nose and throat, pathology and dispensary services. These huts were constructed of hardboard for the walls and roof, and were dark and hot, so louvred skylights were planned to rectify the shortcomings. These huts and some other approved work added another £5,800 to the outlay.<sup>11</sup>

Contracts for electrical and water supply work were let separately. The 2/1 AGH was connected to the Goldfields Water Supply Pipeline, which fed into tanks around the site, but an emergency supply was established in the event that the Pipeline was damaged by enemy action and this was used in conjunction with the Pipeline service. The additional supply comprised three 7,000 gallon storage tanks located on the Peak, which were filled with water pumped up from *Railway Dam, Merredin*. From there the water gravitated through a pipeline to the hospital. Physical evidence pinpoints the location of the tank, and a 1943 photograph of the 2/1 AGH shows the pipeline running down from the Peak.<sup>12</sup>

In January 1943, there were 267 admissions to the 2/1 AGH and staff numbers comprised seven medical officers, six other officers, 40 AANS, 13 AAMWS and 164 ORs. Many male nursing orderlies were being replaced by AAMWS by February. In March and April 1943, conditions deteriorated with heavy rains causing local flooding and problems with drainage. Gumboots became standard wear on the site because of the mud. Muresk College was investigated as a possible alternative location for the hospital, but the facilities there needed considerable modification.<sup>13</sup>

Lack of leave was causing dissatisfaction, so sporting equipment was provided and various activities organised to alleviate the situation. Electric light was installed in all the buildings in April, and requisitions were put in place for materials to light the wards, recreational tents and messes. In May, a Red Cross recreation hut and store and an education workshop were erected. From photographs, these appear to have been of hardboard construction.<sup>14</sup>

On 22 June 1943 it was reported that work was nearing completion, and that extra construction works and extra site works associated with the sloping site and clay soils had added approximately an extra £15,000 to the approved

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<sup>10</sup> Commonwealth Works Department, Perth, Item M1942/43/14, op cit.

<sup>11</sup> '1<sup>st</sup> AGH, replaced by 2/1, then 125 AGH Merredin', Report of A. E. Stohr of the Army Board of Business Administration, 10 March 1943, National Archives, Melbourne, Series MP742/1 Item 259/7/139, 1942-1943. Photocopy viewed courtesy National Trust office, Perth.

<sup>12</sup> Commonwealth Works Department, Perth, Item M1942/43/14, op cit; '1<sup>st</sup> AGH, replaced by 2/1, then 125 AGH Merredin', Report of A. E. Stohr, Item 259/7/139, op cit; Photographs 053098-150100, 1 July 1943, Australian War Memorial, op cit.

<sup>13</sup> '1<sup>st</sup> AGH, replaced by 2/1, then 125 AGH Merredin', Item 259/7/139, op cit.

<sup>14</sup> '1<sup>st</sup> AGH, replaced by 2/1, then 125 AGH Merredin', Item 259/7/139, op cit.

£48,800 expenditure. This figure was met with considerable disbelief by the Director-General of Works in Melbourne, and a telegram was sent on 14 July 1943 ordering all work at the site to stop immediately. The reasons for the over-budget costs were not accepted by the Melbourne head office, and the extra amount was put down to 'over expenditure'.<sup>15</sup> Total cost came to £64,198 13s, and it was noted that the adoption of the 'cost plus system' of construction had proved costly.<sup>16</sup>

In July 1943, the 2/1 AGH closed to patient intake. The threat to the North West had passed and the unit was ordered to New Guinea. It began to pack up at the end of July 1943. The site was to be taken over by the 125 AGH with 200 beds. Approval was received to replace the tented wards with huts but this work did not go ahead. On 27 September 1943, the 125 AGH was deleted from the Order of Battle and the 200 bed hospital was cancelled, to be replaced by the 40 Australian Camp Hospital (ACH) with 90 beds.<sup>17</sup>

In 1944, the over expenditure at the 2/1 AGH was still being dealt with. All work, or proposed work, was stopped on the project on 15 September 1944.<sup>18</sup> In 1945, the Department of the Interior considered acquiring the site, but as it was a Reserve and largely bushland this was considered unnecessary.<sup>19</sup> One of the buildings was used as a youth centre for some time after the war, but the fate of the rest is not known. None of the structures remain.

In 1948, 11 acres in the southwest corner of Reserve 20811 was excised for an Aboriginal camping reserve at the request of the Department of Native Affairs.<sup>20</sup> It was designated Merredin Lot 810, Reserve 22862. It was the second Aboriginal Reserve provided at Merredin, the first being the two-acre Reserve 21925, which had been gazetted in 1939 to provide a place for people when receiving medical treatment. Merredin hospital, being a wholly government run facility with a resident District Medical Officer, was the only medical facility between Kalgoorlie and Northam that would accept Aboriginal patients, although they were apparently segregated from other patients. This first reserve was part of a gravel quarry and the Road Board laid on water to a corner of the site and provided sanitary conveniences at a cost of £320. The site was used intermittently as required.<sup>21</sup>

In 2006-07, a brick ablution facility and a steel-framed pergola style shelter were erected on the Reserve, with an associated carpark and a new gravel track that leads past the National Trust interpretation panels for the 2/1 AGH site. A steel framed and roofed shelter was in process of erection over the

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15 Commonwealth Works Department, Perth, Item M1942/43/14, op cit.

16 '1<sup>st</sup> AGH, replaced by 2/1, then 125 AGH Merredin', Item 259/7/139, op cit.

17 '1<sup>st</sup> AGH, replaced by 2/1, then 125 AGH Merredin', Item 259/7/139, op cit.

18 '1<sup>st</sup> AGH, replaced by 2/1, then 125 AGH Merredin', Item 259/7/139, op cit. No information on the 40 ACH at Merredin has been located and it is doubtful that the unit actually occupied the site. The 40 ACH is known to have been stationed at Narrogin.

19 'Merredin - proposed acquisition of land originally used for an AGH', 1945, National Archives, Melbourne, Series MP742/1 Item 259/7/205. Photocopy viewed courtesy National Trust, Perth.

20 Department of Native Affairs (1936-54) became Department of Native Welfare (1 Jan 1955), Aboriginal Affairs Planning Department (1 Jan 1972), Aboriginal Affairs Department (1 Jan 1994), and Department of Indigenous Affairs (1 July 2001). It is referred to here as 'the Department'.

21 Department of Native Affairs (DNA), Merredin Reserve for Natives, SROWA, WAS 2030 CONS 1733 Item 1937/0819.

plaque in May 2007. There have been some plantings of trees native to the district, which are at present little more than seedlings.<sup>22</sup>

In 2007, the Shire of Merredin produced an interpretation plan with the primary purposes of transmitting to the public the heritage significance of Merredin Peak. The plan recognises the importance of both the World War II remains and the Aboriginal Reserve and recommends interpretation to assist visitors in understanding each of these elements.<sup>23</sup>

### 13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* is located around 400 metres to the east of Benson Road, at the east side of the Merredin townsite, north of the railway line and Great Eastern Highway, and 200 metres past the entry and car park to *Railway Dam, Merredin*.

The extant physical elements of *2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin*, comprising 16 identifiable remnant concrete slabs of former buildings, associated septic tank remnants and drainage elements is located another 200 metres to the northeast of the car park entry to the *Railway Dam, Merredin*, nestled close to the base of Merredin Peak, on the south east side. The site is a rectangular form grid aligned on a northeast/southwest axis and a gravel track leads into and around the site following the original tracks of the grid; however, the track is not continuous throughout the grid. The grid layout is not clearly interpreted on the ground as it is terminated at a number of intersections to guide the visitor around the site. The natural environment has regenerated on the site, with mallee and other native plantings.

The one way access track edged by treated pine bollards, loops around a small rectangular grid to the southwest where slabs 1 and 2 are located, together with some interpretive signage, and curves around to the north and the original grid alignment to the northeast, several hundred metres, before slab 3, and then 4a and 4b are located on the southeast, on the southwest side of an intersecting track. At that track intersection there is a drainage detail with signage indicating an original date marked into the concrete. The date reads 2/10/42. On the northeast side of slabs 4a and 4b and parallel to them, on the northeast side of the northwest/southeast grid, are slabs 14, 15. The northeast direction of the continuous grid is blocked by treated pine bollards, and the track turns left (northwest) where there are 3 slab ruins that evidence similarities in size and layout, along the south west side of the track. The track then turns at right angles and proceeds for 20 metres or so before turning again on a parallel southeast direction, with slabs 8, 9 and 10, similar to 5, 6, and 7, but located on the northeast side of the track. At the grid juncture, southeast and southwest tracks are blocked by bollards, so the track turns left up the original grid line, with slabs 11 and 12 on the left (northwest), and 13 on the right. The track turns again at right angles across the northeast of the site and right angles again, down the parallel main grid line to the southwest. The southwest corner of the former hospital site, including slabs 1

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<sup>22</sup> Information provided by Graham McCafferty, Midland Branch, Department of Indigenous Affairs. None of these structures yet appear in Landgate or Google Earth aerial photos.

<sup>23</sup> Merredin Shire Council, Mulloway Studio & Paul Kloeden, 'Interpretation Plan: Merredin Peak Reserve [WA]', Final Issue 20 April 2007.

and 2 and the interpretative signage, falls within Lot 810 and is not included in the curtilage for the place.

The intersecting grid lines of former roads are identified by drainage details at the crossings, particularly along the southeast grid track, heading southwest. After two intersections with the previously mentioned grid line intersections, slab 4b, the only red concrete slab, is evident on the right (northwest), and some distance further southwest, there are slab and block concrete remnants on the southeast side: slab 16. From slab 16, the track continues southwest, swerving to the west around a brick structure under construction on the southeast side, and another 50 metres or so adjoins the entry point and becomes a two-way track.

The concrete slabs are all rectangular in their footprints, and most have a central corridor evident. Most of the remaining slabs clearly show the interior layout by the concrete kerb build-ups delineating each room. They also show the entries in most cases, where brick rendered stairs remain in varying degrees of ruin. The possible ablution buildings 5-10, all have the same layout and brick pits in the same relative location on those where it still remains, with the slab 8 pit being the best example. Some slabs, such as slab 3 and 16, clearly evidence a more service-oriented function with concrete block mounts for possible machinery, and slab 16 also evidences pit areas associated with the concrete blocks. The slabs are in various states of damage with considerable subsidence from the action of rabbits, more mechanical vandalism or intervention such as on slab 2, or from tree roots and plant material.

One hundred metres to the northwest is the base of Merredin Peak. The concrete pipe supports remain on the rock showing the alignment of the water pipe to the hospital from the tanks that were located on the east side of the Peak.

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* is in a generally fair condition.

### 13.3 COMPARATIVE INFORMATION

A range of military hospitals were established in Australia and overseas following the declaration of World War II, with a total of more than 100 wartime hospitals operating within Australia.<sup>24</sup>

The first military hospitals in Perth were 'Lucknow', a private hospital on Stirling Highway, Claremont, which became the 10 Australian General Hospital (AGH), and another in Queenslea Drive, Claremont, known as 'Knutsford', which was converted to a hospital for the women's services. Both were staffed by members of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS).<sup>25</sup> Other military hospitals in Western Australia were the 110 AGH Hollywood, 118 AGH and 38 Australian Camp Hospital (ACH) at Northam, the 39 ACH at Rottneest and the 125 AGH Guildford.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> National Estate database entry for *Ryhndarra*, Yeronga, Queensland.

<sup>25</sup> Hobbs, Victoria, *But Westward Look: the story of nursing in Western Australia, 1829-1979*, UWA Press, Perth, 1980, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> Critch, Mary, *Our Kind of War*, Perth, Artlook, c.1981, pp. 125-31, 204-05; Mount-Batten, op cit.

At Claremont, Hollywood and Guildford, the hospitals occupied existing buildings. The AGH and ACH facilities at Northam would have been similar to that of the 2/1 AGH at Merredin. The site of the Northam 118 AGH is now occupied by the C. Y. O'Connor College of TAFE. A plaque was installed in 1998 to commemorate the 1,000 bed hospital which occupied the site from 1941-45.<sup>27</sup> No listing was found in the HCWA database for the Rottneest ACH.

The AGH and ACH facilities at Northam would have been similar to that of the *2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin*. No listings were found in the HCWA database for these sites, or for the site of the Rottneest ACH.

No World War II remnant military hospital site was located in the National Estate database. The majority of hospitals appear to have occupied existing buildings, or those constructed at the time have been completely removed.<sup>28</sup>

*2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* is a rare remaining mobile army hospital site from World War II. At Claremont, Hollywood and Guildford the hospitals occupied existing buildings.

#### **13.4 KEY REFERENCES**

National Archive files relating to the construction and use of 2/1 AGH Merredin, as referenced.

Department for Planning & Infrastructure file for Reserve 22862, held at State Records Office WA.

#### **13.5 FURTHER RESEARCH**

Archaeological investigations of *2/1 Australian General Hospital (ruins), Merredin* may reveal much about the functioning of the place and life at the hospital.

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<sup>27</sup> *Avon Valley Advocate*, 28 November 1998, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Register of the National Estate database.