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.

11. 1. AESTHETIC VALUE*

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is of aesthetic value as a good example of a Public Works Department standard design weatherboard and corrugated iron residential building, built in country areas in the early 1900s. (Criterion 1.1)

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is a landmark on Great Eastern Highway, enhanced by the original tree plantings in the front garden which include a palm tree and a lilly-pilly. (Criterion 1.3)

11. 2. HISTORIC VALUE

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) illustrates the State Government's proactive attitude to land settlement and to agricultural and technological advancement, which involved various schemes developed from the late 1880s into the 1950s to encourage people to take up farm land, and to improve farming techniques. (Criterion 2.1)

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is an example of the Experimental Farms which were established between 1895 and 1907. Of the five farms established during this period, Merredin is the only one still in use. (Criterion 2.2)

The early occupants of *Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr)*, among them father and son, John and Harry Robinson (1904-1909), were instrumental in the development of the Farm and the establishment of the Nangeenan agricultural settlement. (Criterion 2.3)

Merredin Research Station has made significant contributions to agriculture in the State, and in Australia generally, with the development of improved strains of wheat, rye grass, and barrel medic and other legume crops. (Criterion 2.4)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

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

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is valued by the local community for its associations with the development of farming in the district. (Criterion 4.1)

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) contributes to the local community's sense of place as a familiar feature on Great Eastern Highway since 1904. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is the oldest remaining structure on the Merredin Research Station and reflects the first phase of development as a Research Station. Merredin is also the only one of the first five Farms established still in operation. (Criterion 5.1)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is a representative example of government housing provided for rural employees, and one of a series of standard plans. It represents a way of life for the Manager of the Research Station. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is in a fair condition. The interior of the place is in good condition. No maintenance has been carried out in recent years.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) has always been a residence, but is unoccupied at present and requires installation of bathroom fittings to make it habitable. The place has retained a moderate to high degree of integrity.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) shows evidence of minimal intervention to the original fabric. The kitchen is not original, although it is an early development (1919). Verandah enclosures have been added and removed, and improvements to bathroom facilities have not been completed. The place has a high degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Irene Sauman, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by Laura Gray, Conservation Consultant.

The curtilage of the place is delineated by a steel post and wire fence which surrounds the property and separates it from the surrounding open fields. The area measures 50 x 30 metres.

13. 1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Merredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is a timber and iron bungalow with verandahs on three sides, displaying some characteristics of the Federation

Bungalow style.[1] The place was constructed for the manager of the Nangeenan Experimental Farm, probably in 1904.[2] Nangeenan Experimental Farm was renamed Merredin Experimental Farm in 1911. In 1921, it became known as Merredin Research Station.

Between 1889 and 1894, 'agricultural areas' were surveyed in at least forty localities throughout the south and central regions of Western Australia, as the Government attempted to open up the State to farming. At that time, Western Australia was not producing enough wheat for local consumption and had to import flour from the eastern states. Assistance for settlers was provided under the Homestead Act 1893, which granted 160 acres with seven years to make improvements, and the Agricultural Bank Act 1894, which provided long term loans to pay for the improvements.[3]

Agriculture in Western Australia had been led by the Agricultural Society (later Royal Agricultural Society) since the colony had first been established. In 1894, the Government established the Bureau of Agriculture, which became the Department of Agriculture four years later. One of the Bureau's first resolutions involved a request to Government to finance the establishment of agricultural colleges and experimental farms.[4]

The first Experimental Farm was established in 1895, at Hamel, near Waroona in the Harvey district. By this time, agricultural areas were being surveyed on land considered borderline for agricultural and pastoral pursuits as good land became scarce. The main purpose of the experimental farm was to demonstrate the viability of this lower class land.[5] The Government does not appear to have been satisfied with the speed at which this land was taken up, however. In 1902, the Lands Department offered 'clearing contracts' as extra encouragement to prospective settlers. The scheme was first attempted at Hamel.

> The scheme originated as a means of relieving the ranks of the unemployed, and to enable persons with no - or very little - capital to make a home for themselves on the land... Further experiments are now being made in this direction in other parts of the State.[6]

The clearing contract required the settler to clear a certain amount of land for a fixed price, paid to them monthly by the Agricultural Bank. The contract extended for two years, during which time the settler was allowed to cultivate the land for his own profit. At the end of the two year period the settler could purchase his block, at a price to cover the amount paid to him for the clearing, plus interest.[7]

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1 Apperly, R., Irving, R. and Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and terms from 1788 to the present*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1994, pp. 42-45.

2 Although these places were often referred to as State Farms their official title was Experimental Farm.

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

4 *Bureau of Agriculture Journal*, 7 August 1894, p. 132.

5 *Journal of Bureau of Agriculture*, June 1896, pp. 829-838; Shea, Greg & French, Dr Bob, 'Background historical information for the assessment of the heritage significance of buildings on Merredin Research Station', Dryland Research Institute, Merredin, 16 December 1998.

6 'Department of Lands & Survey, Annual Report', 1903, p. 7, in *WA Votes & Proceedings of Parliament*, Paper No. 14, 1904.

7 Clifton, R. C. Under Secretary of Lands, 'Nangeenan: The Experimental Farm and the Special Settlement' Journal of Agriculture, Western Australia, November 1905, pp. 457-460.

Settlements opened up in this way were known as 'special settlements'.[8] In 1903, they were established at Nabawa in the Chapman Valley, and Narrogin and, the following year, at Nangeenan on unselected land in the Bainding agricultural area.[9] In each area an Experimental Farm was established. The scheme was administered by the Lands Department and overseen by the manager of the local Farm.

The Nangeenan agricultural area was six kms west of Merredin on the Eastern Goldfields Railway line. The Nangeenan Experimental Farm was established in June 1904, on Lots 2 and 50, designated Reserve 10009.[10] Lots 3 and 4 appear to have been added to the Farm's landholdings by 1905.[11] *Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr)* is sited on Lot 2.[12] Nangeenan was the fourth Experimental Farm established in Western Australia.[13] A fifth Farm, Brunswick, was established in 1907.

The first manager of the Nangeenan Farm was John Robinson, who took up his duties in August 1904.[14] It is not clear if he immediately occupied Merredin State Farm Manager's House, or if the place was constructed shortly after his arrival, nevertheless, it was well established by November 1905.

> Around the homestead a piece of land has been enclosed for a garden and small orchard, a few dozen trees in which are looking well; and Mr. Robinson has a small patch of vegetables, which are all that could be desired.[15]

The place was designed by the Public Works Department of Western Australia under the direction of Government Architect, Hillson Beasley. The place appears to have been constructed from one of a series of standard plans. The place was referred to as Cottage No. 9.[16] A housekeeper was employed to work at Merredin State Farm Manager's House.[17]

As well as overseeing the work on the Farm, John Robinson's job during the establishment of the settlement was to inspect the clearing work done by the settlers. His approval was required for payment. His method of checking that tree stumps were properly dug out was to go over the ground with a spike to make sure nothing was hidden beneath the surface.[18]

At the end of 1904, John Robinson reported that:

> There are 30 lots in this Settlement, ranging in area from 200 to 390 acres in extent - 23 of which have been occupied by individual settlers, but, unfortunately owing to misunderstandings, seven of the settlers have left and their agreements have been cancelled…The whole of the cancelled and vacant lots are being eagerly sought after, but I should strongly recommend that every applicant to interviewed as to

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8 Special settlements were formally established under the *Land Act Amendment* 1906, Statute No. 29, 1906.

9 Clifton, R. C. op cit.

10 Clifton, R. C. op cit.; Nangeenan Agricultural Area map from Law, F. A. *The History of the Merredin District*, Merredin Roads Board, 1961.

11 Nangeenan Agricultural Area lot allocations, CONS 5803, Microfilm, Public Records Office.

12 Site plan supplied by Agriculture WA in HCWA file P9080.

13 Clifton, R. C. op cit.

14 Shea, G. & French, Dr B. op cit

15 Clifton, R. C. op cit; Photographs, *Journal of Agriculture*, Western Australia, January 1909, facing pp. 12 & 20, confirm that it is the same building as still exists on the site. No tenders for construction of the place have been found in the *Government Gazette*.

16 Floor plan, 7 February 1950, CAMS in HCWA File P9080.

17 Shea, G. & French, Dr B. op cit, from information provided by John Robinson's granddaughter, Mrs M. Slayter of Wooroloo.

18 Clifton, R. C. op cit.

> capability, and also make himself conversant with the district and its capabilities before entering into an agreement.[19]

The first wheat crop in the new settlement was planted in 1905. One hundred and fourteen acres were planted on the Nangeenan Farm, while the eighteen contractors working on their own lots planted a total of 600 acres. Results were favourable, resulting in the conclusion that:

> A farmer in this part has the advantage of being so much nearer the market on the Eastern Goldfields, and the season being earlier than in the more western portions of the State, he gets a better price for his produce, and, notwithstanding the possibility of an occasional failure owing to insufficient rainfall ... the experiment seems well worth continuing.[20]

Crop results the following year confirmed 'in a most emphatic manner what can be done in the drier portions of our vast territory' when a farmer follows 'the system of dry farming, in an intelligent manner'.[21]

In 1907, John Robinson took up another position with the Lands Department and his son, Harry, took over the position of manager of the Nangeenan Experimental Farm for a few years, also residing in Merredin State Farm Manager's House.[22]

The Experimental Farms were required to train students and migrants although it is not clear if Nangeenan took on students in the early years.[23] Some experimental work was carried out at the Farms, and on private land in various parts of the State, but little emphasis was placed on this work due to the lack of trained agricultural scientists.[24]

In 1907, a surplus of wheat above domestic requirements resulted in lower prices to the farmers, and attention was turned toward lowering production costs. Farming methods in Western Australia were considered 'slipshod' and inefficient by Professor W. Lowrie, the new Director of Agriculture appointed in 1908. He recommended the Experimental Farms be closed as they had served their demonstration purpose and were unsuitable for experimental work.[25]

When Lowrie departed in 1911, James Mitchell, Minister at that time for both Lands and Agriculture, reorganised and decentralised the Department of Agriculture, dividing the State into three sections, each under a Commissioner. G. L. Sutton, who had worked with William Farrer on wheat-breeding experiments in NSW, was appointed Commissioner for the Wheatbelt.[26] The Experimental Farms were removed from Lands Department control and placed under the Department of Agriculture. Nangeenan Experimental Farm was renamed Merredin Experimental Farm,

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19 'Report from the Manager of the Nangeenan Experimental Farm, Department of Land Titles, Annual report 1904', p. 60, in *WA Votes & Proceedings of Parliament*, 1905.

20 Clifton, R. C. op cit.

21 Report from the Manager of the Nangeenan Experimental Farm, Journal of Agriculture, Western Australia, January 1907, p. 40.

22 Shea, G. & French, Dr B. op cit.

23 'Students for Experimental Farms', *Department of Agriculture Journal*, September 1903, pp. 238-239.

24 Shea, G. & French, Dr B. op cit.

25 ibid.

26 ibid.

reflecting Merredin's development as the administrative centre of the district.[27]

The new purpose of the Experimental Farms was to produce pure seed wheat of standard varieties for sale to farmers, and to develop new and improved varieties of wheat which would be more prolific, disease resistant, of better milling quality and generally more suitable to Western Australian conditions than existing varieties.[28] This work required qualified people and, in 1921, a system of cadetships was established to facilitate professional training. All Stations, including Merredin, appear to have accommodated students during their university vacations to provide practical experience. Experimental Farms were renamed Research Stations to reflect their new status.[29]

The establishment of Research Stations was ongoing over the years, as various agricultural areas, and various types of agriculture, were established around the State. Gascoyne, Avondale (Beverley), Wongan Hills and Salmon Gums Research Stations were established in the 1920s; Kimberley and Esperance Downs in the 1940s; Wokalup, Newdegate, Swan, Stoneville and Badgingarra in the 1950s; Medina and Mt Barker in the 1960s; and Vasse and Manjimup in the 1980s.[30] The largest numbers of Stations opened coincided with the establishment of the Group Settlement scheme (1920s) and War Service land settlement (1950s).

Of the five Experimental Farms established between 1895 and 1907, only two, Nabawa (Chapman) and Merredin continued as Research Stations. Narrogin was developed into an Agricultural school run by the Department of Agriculture and later the Education Department, Brunswick was subdivided for settlement, and Hamel became the Forests Department's nursery.[31]

From their inception, the Farms held Field Days which were well attended by farmers in the various districts. Plant breeding work carried out at the Stations made the most spectacular contribution. The wheat variety 'Bencubbin', was developed at Merredin Research Station and became the premier wheat variety in Australia. Merredin also produced a superior strain of Wimmera rye grass for pastures, and improved strains of barrel medic and other legume crops.[32]

The buildings at Merredin Research Station were continually upgraded and increased in number as activities expanded, but the site of building activity moved to a more central position on the Station. While the original farm buildings (not extant) were situated behind Merredin State Farm Manager's House, new buildings were constructed about 850 metres further east.[33] The oldest building on this later site is the barn, which dates from about the 1920s.[34]

A site plan of 1966 also shows five cottages at this site, one of them the manager's quarters, indicating that Merredin State Farm Manager's House has not been occupied by the manager of the Research Station since at least

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27 ibid; 'Centenary 1894-1994: Profiles of Progress', Department of Agriculture, 3-fold brochure.

28 Shea, G. & French, Dr B. op cit.

29 ibid.

30 'Centenary 1894-1994', op cit.

31 Department of Agriculture Induction booklet, 1969.

32 Law, op. cit.,, p. 25.

33 Merredin Research Station, Buildings file 564-56, 1956-1966, Public records Office; Photograph, 1909, op cit.

34 Information from physical inspection.

that time.[35] However, the place continued to be occupied by other Department employees, including some who worked at the Dryland Research Institute in Merredin. This Institute was set up as an adjunct to the Research Station. It occupied an office in Merredin until the early 1980s. At that time a new building was constructed for the Institute on the Research Station, on the corner of Crooke Road, about one km east of the farm buildings.[36]

Merredin State Farm Manager's House had a new kitchen built in the back verandah section in 1919, replacing the original separate kitchen building. The chimney was rebuilt using the original chimney bricks.[37] Later repairs and renovations to the place were carried out by the PWD in the early 1950s, and involved rebuilding the back section of the house.[38] The existing kitchen units have been dated at this period.[39] Later renovations, begun in the 1990s, have been left unfinished.

In 1999, the manager of Merredin Research Station continues to occupy his 1960s quarters. He is in charge of all the research carried out on the Station. Agriculture WA employs about 40 people at Merredin, the majority in advisory, research and administrative positions with only a small number still involved in farm work. The Dryland Research Institute building is currently undergoing extensions as Merredin Research Station continues to expand its research function.[40]

Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is unoccupied. Agriculture WA anticipate removing or demolishing the place as part of future development of the Research Station. Merredin Historical Society has expressed an interest in relocating *Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr)* to Merredin, but have no finances available and no specific plans for use of the place.[41]

13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is located south of Great Eastern Highway between Nangeenan and Merredin, about six kilometres west of Merredin. It is set back from the road approximately 120 metres, and 90 metres from the parallel Goldfields pipeline and access road on the south side. *Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr)* is situated within Agriculture WA's Merredin Research Station and is located approximately 850 metres south of the entry, where staff residences, operational area and a barn and other farm buildings are located. The place is surrounded by open fields although a steel post and wire fence delineates the curtilage of the property.

Within the curtilage, there are a number of original and more recent plantings, stones delineating gardens and paths, a steel framed steel clad garage, a Hills hoist clothes line, and a concrete slab with evidence of a brick 'copper'. The original plantings, including a palm tree, peppermint tree, bougainvillea and lilly-pilly, and the stone-defined garden layout, are all on the north side (front) of the dwelling. The recent plantings, garage, clothesline and concrete laundry slab are of no heritage value.

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35 Site Plan, 13 December 1966 from Merredin Research Station, Buildings file, op cit.

36 Telephone conversation with Greg Shea, by Irene Sauman 13 May 1999, Memo HCWA File 9080.

37 Notes from CAMS file on Merredin Research Station.

38 Floor plan, 7 February 1950, CAMS, op cit.

39 Information from physical inspection.

40 Telephone conversation with Greg Shea, op cit.

41 Report by Laura Gray, Regional Wheatbelt Heritage Adviser, 21 December 1998.

Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) displays some characteristics of the Federation Bungalow style, and also demonstrates a response to the rural location of the place.[42] The characteristics of the style appropriate to this place include; freestanding rural location, verandah under a broken back roof, symmetrical facade, French doors, simple chimney and a simple rectangular plan.

The construction of the building is typical of regional dwellings of the period, with timber framing, cladding and floor, and corrugated iron roof construction. The building comprises four original main rooms, with the kitchen and bathroom enclosed under the former rear verandah. Verandahs surround the remaining three sides of the dwelling.

The roof is a corrugated iron hipped roof at a pitch of approximately 30 degrees, with a break pitch for the surrounding verandah roof. The verandah floor on the north side and the north half of the east and west sides has been replaced with spaced 0.075 (3") jarrah boards. The remainder of the verandah floor is no longer in place. The verandah stumps have subsided and the posts on the west side are propped up with extra timber. The original 0.125 (5") posts are in place along the east side but the north side has 0.100 (4") square replacement posts.

The symmetrical front faces north towards Great Eastern Highway and the Goldfields pipeline. The central front door is flanked by French doors each side. The central hallway has a room each side before opening into the largest room, with another room on the left (east). In direct line with the hallway is a door into the vestibule, formerly the rear verandah. Left from the vestibule is the bathroom, and on the right is the kitchen.

The main four rooms are all lined with horizontal tongue and groove painted boards. Most of the timber framed fly wire air vents have been removed from the upper walls of the rooms. They are still on site. The original 0.225 (9") architraves, skirtings and door frames are still in place, as well as the two doors to the front rooms, although the other doors have been removed. The remaining doors and French doors for the most part still have the original hardware. The front and back doors each have a fanlight above. French doors open onto the verandah from rooms 1, 2 and 3 while a single door has been used to replace the French doors in room 4.

The ceilings in each room are lined with painted ripple iron. The floors are 0.135 (5") jarrah tongue and groove boards. Rooms 1 and 3 have fireplaces back to back. The mantel and surround has been removed from room 3, but the mantelpiece in room 1 is still in situ.

The kitchen has been added at a later date than the original four rooms, and the roof is pitched lower than the adjacent verandah roof. There is no visible evidence to indicate the original location of the kitchen. The internal north wall of the kitchen is the external weatherboards of the main dwelling. The remaining internal walls and the ceiling, lined on the rake, are horizontal boards. There is a Metters stove built into a recessed space with a brick chimney. A basic c. 1950s kitchen cupboard and sink unit is installed and the wall behind it shows evidence of previous fixtures and fittings. The kitchen floor is lined with 0.100 (4") boards.

The vestibule and bathroom floors have been concreted in recent times. Aluminium framed windows are in place in each of those rooms. The walls are lined with Gyprock sheeting. There are no architraves, skirtings or other

[42] Apperly, et. al., op cit.

details. The bathroom is incomplete, with PVC preset pipes in place in the concrete floor. The back door is a timber ledge and brace door.

Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) has been vacant for a number of years, and some attempt has been made to restore the place with the removal of the verandah enclosure on the east side, replacement of the verandah floor boards, concreting of the bathroom and vestibule floors, and the relining of the walls and ceilings and installation of aluminium framed windows in those two rooms. A septic system was also installed. However the restoration was not completed.

Roof sheets and flashings are rusted and lifting in places, the timber trims are weathered, and the gutters and downpipes are rusted and falling off. Where the verandah stumps have subsided, the posts do not support the verandah roof which has collapsed on the east and west sides. The weatherboards on the rear (south) are weathered and some of the kitchen lining is missing. Although the external doors were painted in the recent renovation, they are weathered with flaking paintwork.

The external condition of the place confirms the lack of maintenance and presents opportunities for vandalism. The internal condition of the place is very good. There is no obvious evidence of termites or moisture ingress and the internal fabric is relatively intact.

Overall the condition of the place is fair to good. The integrity of the place is moderate to high. While it has continued in its residential function it is not currently habitable. The place has a high degree of authenticity, with minimal changes taking place to the original fabric.

In the Nangeenan area, the place is one of only two remaining of a number of similar weatherboard dwellings constructed at around the same time. The other remaining example, built c. 1910 for farmer Robert Owen Robertson, is still occupied as a farm homestead. This house has a detached stone kitchen building, still intact, constructed in 1912. *Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr)* has French doors instead of the double hung sash windows which feature in the Robertson house.

COMPARATIVE INFORMATION

Of the early Experimental Farms, Nabawa (Chapman), Hamel, Brunswick and Narrogin are no longer in the hands of Agriculture WA. Narrogin passed to the control of the Education Department, and is a high school in 1999. Nothing is known of the current integrity of the original buildings. Hamel became the site of the Forests Department's nurseries; Brunswick was subdivided for settlement after operating for a few years as an Experimental Farm specialising in dairying; and Nabawa became the Chapman Research Station which operated into the 1990s, before being sold to a local farmer. The integrity of the early Chapman buildings is also not known.

Avondale, at Beverley, is in good condition and is a 'living museum' as well as a working Research Station, however, it reflects a different period of construction, having been established in the 1920s. Merredin is the only one of the original five Experimental Farms still operating in its original function.

Merrredin State Farm Manager's House (fmr) is one of only two remaining of a number of similar weatherboard dwellings constructed at around the same time in the Nangeenan district.

13. 3 REFERENCES

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13. 4 FURTHER RESEARCH
