



# 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

*Mitchell House* is a fine example of Federation Free Classical architecture applied to a domestic scale building. The classically influenced entrance portico and two-storey arcade of the west elevation create an elegant and grand building which is reflected in the spacious interiors and some interesting internal features. (Criterion 1.1)

### 11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

*Mitchell House* has historic value as the home of a WA Premier who later became Lieutenant Governor and Governor of WA. (Criterion 2.3)

### 11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

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### 11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

*Mitchell House* contributes to the community's sense of place and time because of its association with the post-gold boom era and the prosperity Northam enjoyed as a central agricultural service centre. The place is featured in many photographs, publications, and sketches used in promotional material for the tourist industry. (Criterion 4.2)

## **12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE**

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

*Mitchell House* is a rare example of the Federation Free Classical style applied to a domestic building in a rural town setting. (Criterion 5.1)

### **12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS**

*Mitchell House* is representative of a style of architecture influenced by the prosperity of the state and the town of Northam brought about by the gold boom. (Criterion 6.1)

### **12. 3 CONDITION**

The main residential structure of *Mitchell House* is in good condition having been reopened to the public after a recent change of ownership. The ancillary buildings on the site are in poor condition, especially the timber stables where past programs of management have seen a considerable loss of original fabric and the addition of inappropriate material such as the doors from the R&I Bank.

### **12. 4 INTEGRITY**

While *Mitchell House* is once again operating as a family residence, the combination of this use with guest accommodation has required alterations to internal layouts in respect of additional bathroom facilities. However, this use is compatible with maintaining the long term viability of the place. *Mitchell House*, therefore, has moderate to high integrity.

### **12. 5 AUTHENTICITY**

The external fabric of *Mitchell House* is largely intact and a sufficient amount of the significant internal detailing remains for this building to have moderate authenticity.

### 13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

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

#### 13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

*Mitchell House* (1905) is an imposing brick and iron, two-storey Federation Free Classical mansion with Italianate stucco portico and gallery which defines the corners of Duke and Hawes Streets, Northam. On the same site are wooden stables and a brick and iron wash-house.<sup>1</sup>

The town of Northam is 100 kilometres east of Perth in the Avon Valley. This fertile valley, discovered by Ensign Dale and a party of explorers in 1830, attracted agriculturists of the Swan River Colony eager to obtain large grants of land. By the 1850s, Northam was a centre for the other Avon Valley towns. During the 1890s gold boom, the extension of the railway to Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie via Northam brought prosperity to the town.

In 1891, James and Clara Mitchell and their family settled in Northam when James was appointed the first manager of the WA Bank. In the early 1900s, large parcels of land in and around the town were subdivided for residential development. In 1903, Clara Mitchell purchased three blocks of land belonging to the Church of England, on the corner of Duke and Hawes streets.

... development occurred on the hill above the eastern end of town. Northam's "nob hill" ... this region was firmly established as the most prestigious area, with the largest houses and most important residents ... a new ruling elite in Northam.<sup>2</sup>

In 1905, *Mitchell House* was erected on the Duke Street land by local builder, Simon Millington, who also owned the local brickworks.<sup>3</sup> The place, constructed of red bricks with a corrugated iron roof, had a stucco finish on the gallery and portico. *Mitchell House* consisted of six rooms and an entry hall downstairs, and five bedrooms, a bathroom and landing upstairs.<sup>4</sup> Jarrah timber was used extensively throughout for flooring, doors, skirting boards and window frames. Ornate jarrah pediments decorated the spaces above the doors of the entry hall and salon windows, and these pediments were echoed over the ornate fireplace in the salon.<sup>5</sup> Percival Brabazon was responsible for the carpentry work in the house, including the staircase.

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<sup>1</sup> Apperly, R. Irving, Robert et al *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1989), p.104; Site Plan. (Note: the wash-house is often incorrectly referred to as the 'maid's quarters'. This building had a copper boiler in it until the 1970s. The maid's room was inside the house opposite the kitchen.)

<sup>2</sup> Garden, D. *Northam: An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, Queens Park, WA, 1979), p.151.

<sup>3</sup> Correspondence between A. Guijarro and Beryl Hogan, 28 July 1995, courtesy of A. Guijarro; Molyneux, Ian *Looking Around Perth - A Guide to the Architecture of Perth and Surrounding Towns* (Wescolour Press, Fremantle, WA, 1981), p.115; *The Heritage of Western Australia; The Illustrated Register of the National Estate* (McMillan, Australia, 1989), p.106.

<sup>4</sup> Floor Plans & photographs, HCWA File PD1882.

<sup>5</sup> Edmondson, Chris. 'Northam from 1890s. Builder and Building Contractor 1900-1963' (J.S. Battye Library, Oral History Programme, 1979), pp.71-73; Correspondence between A. Guijarro and Beryl Hogan, 28 July 1995, courtesy of A. Guijarro.

Brabazon's apprentice, Chris Edmondson, remembers the place as

An English manor house ... Northam bricks ... the roof was iron. This was before tile time ... jarrah everywhere ... its windows were finished with old English shutters. I worked there for six weeks after it was finished ... putting up the stables and putting up the fence ... made of jarrah ... <sup>6</sup>

At that time the place was known as 'Bona Vista' and the large lounge was referred to as the salon.

In the same year, James Mitchell resigned his position at the bank and stood for Parliament. On 21 October 1905, *The Northam Advocate* reported that 'there is probably no better known man in the district, and certainly none more competent to represent Northam in the State Parliament.'<sup>7</sup> Mitchell won the election and became the MLA for Northam, a position he was to hold for 28 years.

Photographic evidence of 1911, shows *Mitchell House* surrounded by an extensive lawn and Clara Mitchell playing croquet in the garden. The place has few trees and no other properties can be seen nearby.<sup>8</sup> *Mitchell House* was used as a family home and as the venue for garden parties. Clara canvassed the electorate of Northam for James, and political meetings were often held at the place. In 1919, James Mitchell became Premier of WA, and in 1921 he was knighted. During his time in Parliament he resided in Perth and travelled to and from Northam by train or chauffeur driven car. In 1933, despite Clara's constant electioneering on his behalf, it was believed that James had lost touch with his electorate. He lost the Northam seat he had held for 28 years to his neighbour A.R.G Hawke. In the same year, Sir James Mitchell was appointed Lieutenant Governor of WA and the Mitchells left *Mitchell House* to live in Government House in Perth.

In 1935, the house was purchased by Mitchell's friend, the editor of *The Northam Advocate*, Hal Colebatch, and his wife, Theodosia. Mrs Colebatch disliked the 'ugly fireplace' in the salon and Chris Edmondson and his son Frank were employed to remove it. Chris described the fireplace as 'one of those English fireplaces ... inset ... all the beautiful plaster pillars and work, and marble work in there ... all disappeared and done away with.'<sup>9</sup> In 1955, Colebatch sold *The Northam Advocate* and he and his wife retired to Perth to live. Colebatch's mother moved into *Mitchell House* as caretaker.

Between 1955 and the early 1960s, the place was converted into three flats and major alterations were made to the interior. The staircase in the entry hall was removed and the timber used to make an external staircase. The remaining timber was stored in the stables. A false ceiling and floor was constructed above the entry hall and a window added to the landing. Conversions upstairs included the addition of a kitchen, installation of panelling as dividers between the flats and the enclosure of the rear verandah where a bathroom was installed. Downstairs, the external door to the maid's

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<sup>6</sup> Edmondson, Chris. 'Northam from 1890s. Builder and Building Contractor 1900-1963' (J.S. Battye Library, Oral History Programme, 1979), pp.71-73.

<sup>7</sup> *The Northam Advocate*, 21 October 1905, cited in Lee, Wendy 'Forty Six Years of Active Service' (Graylands, WA, 1959) Battye Library HS/PR/1202, p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Photographs, courtesy Judith Crossland, HCWA File PD1882.

<sup>9</sup> Edmondson, Chris. 'Northam from 1890s. Builder and Building Contractor 1900-1963' (J.S. Battye Library, Oral History Programme, 1979), pp.71-73.

room (opposite the kitchen) was bricked in. In the late 1960s, the salon (lounge) was used as a motorbike repair shop and during this time the jarrah floors were badly damaged. The local community at this time referred to *Mitchell House* as 'Colebatch's flats.'<sup>10</sup>

In September 1967, *Mitchell House* was purchased by Ian and Jill Roe who intended to renovate the place which was in poor condition. Because an estimate of the repairs needed was more than they expected, they decided not to proceed and leased the place out instead.

In March 1970, *Mitchell House* was purchased by Alex Risco, a local photographer, artist and musician, and his wife, Svetlana. The Riscos named the place *Mitchell House* in honour of Sir James Mitchell. They carried out extensive work on the place. Upstairs, the false ceilings and partitions on the landing were removed and the rooms were painted. The staircase from the old Northam hospital was installed. Downstairs, the jarrah floors were sanded and polished and the rooms painted.

The jarrah doors and pediments above the doors and windows in the entry hall and salon were French polished. The stucco finish of the portico and gallery was painted and the gallery floors were totally replaced. The kitchen was renovated and wooden sleepers from *Fmr Northam Railway Station* and stone from the recently demolished Northam R&I Bank were used as decoration around the hotplate. A set of glass doors salvaged from the R&I Bank were hung in the stables, and the copper boiler was removed from the wash house.<sup>11</sup>

Alex Risco purchased large mirrors from the local drapers to hang in the salon and used the room as a studio for his photography business. A bedroom upstairs was used as a darkroom and drying room. The gardens and fishpond were re-established. The sewerage and drainage system, damaged by tree roots, was completely replaced and the whole house rewired. Circa 1975, the original jarrah fence was removed.<sup>12</sup> A massive pile of stones, originally the facade of the R&I Bank, were dumped in the garden with the intention of building a Classical Garden as a backdrop for wedding photographs. They were never used for this purpose and the stones remained in a pile untouched for nearly twenty years.

In September 1977, the place was purchased by Susan and Quentin Ward. Before the Wards took possession of the place, the Riscos held an auction in the grounds of *Mitchell House*. Amongst items offered for sale were 30' jarrah timbers (possibly from the original staircase). Once they moved in, the new owners received a letter from the Riscos welcoming them to the house and commenting that Sir Frederick Sampson had described *Mitchell House* as '... one of the most beautiful houses in WA.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Memo - Conversations between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Alex Risco, March, April, June 1995, HCWA File PD1882.

<sup>11</sup> Memo - Conversations between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Alex Risco, March, April, June 1995, HCWA File PD1882; Photographs p.3-36, HCWA File PD1882.

<sup>12</sup> Memo - Conversations between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Alex Risco, March, April, June 1995, HCWA File PD1882.

<sup>13</sup> Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Sue Ward, 1995, HCWA File PD1882; Copy of letter p.17A, HCWA File PD1882.

The Wards continued the renovations to *Mitchell House*, dismantling the remaining earlier external additions made by Colebatch. The stairs and trellis enclosures at the rear of the house were removed and replaced with a lace panel balustrade and custom-made cast-iron spiral staircase. The kitchen was modernised, damaged doors repaired and rooms painted. On 2 December 1978, a Centenary Celebration was held for Northam Primary School in the grounds.<sup>14</sup>

A National Trust report of 25 October 1979, noted, 'The careful restoration efforts of two successive owners have not completely returned it to its original grandeur ... other rooms have walls inappropriately painted.' On 11 March 1981, *Mitchell House* was classified by the National Trust. A photograph of the time shows a criss-cross fence on the Hawes and Duke street corner.<sup>15</sup> During the 1980s *Mitchell House* was the venue for balls, large formal dinner parties, and fetes. It was also the setting for a Channel 7 television programme. In 1984, *New Idea*, a national magazine, featured *Mitchell House*, stating, '... a former Governor's home has once more come alive.' Around this time a brick, concrete and lace-panel fence was erected along the Hawes Street frontage.<sup>16</sup>

In 1988, a Bicentennial publication shows *Mitchell House* on the Northam Heritage Trail and forming part of the Wellington Street Conservation Area.<sup>17</sup> In December 1992, the Wards vacated *Mitchell House* and moved to Perth. The place was leased out and offered for sale during the next two years. Advertisements of the time described *Mitchell House* as '... fully restored with a lavish use of jarrah, a grand home built to impress.'<sup>18</sup>

In January 1995, *Mitchell House* was purchased by the owners of the nearby Shamrock Hotel as extra accommodation for hotel guests and as their family home. The place was renamed 'Sir James Mitchell House'. Between January and June 1995, the rooms in *Mitchell House* were painted, floors were polished and ensuite bathrooms were added to upstairs bedrooms. The gardens were partly re-established. In June 1995, when Premier Richard Court officially opened *Mitchell House*, Judy Crossland, the sole surviving grandchild of Clara and James Mitchell, was amongst the guests. Photographic evidence at the time of the opening shows the place in good condition.<sup>19</sup>

## 13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

*Mitchell House* is located at the corner of Hawes and Duke streets in the Town of Northam. The house is well sited at the higher, eastern end of the town in an area favoured by the more prominent residents of Northam and commands views over the Avon Valley. *Mitchell House* is in proximity to the

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14 Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Sue Ward, 1995, HCWA File PD1882; Photographs p.3, 12, 13, 17, 20, 21, HCWA File PD1882.

15 Enquiry with the National Trust, Northam File, *Mitchell House*, 11 March 1981.

16 *New Idea*, 10 November 1984, p.49; Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Sue Ward, 1995, HCWA File PD1882.

17 *Northam/Katrine Heritage Trail*, (WA Heritage Committee, 1988), pp.14, 19.

18 *Real Estate Press*, 22 January 1993.

19 Memo - Conversation between Carolyn Denham-Shade (researcher) and Antonio Guijarro, 1995, HCWA File PD1882; Photographs pp.24, 29, 34, 37, 38, 40, 41 & Floor Plan p.42, HCWA File PD1882.

Wellington Street Conservation Area comprising the *Avon Valley Arts Centre Workshop* (1878) and *St John's Anglican Church and Parish Hall* (1889,1897).

The place comprises the main two storey structure of the house, a simple, brick and iron roof building adjacent to the east elevation and timber stables towards the eastern boundary. A brick wall provides some privacy from public view although it is not continuous across the Hawes and Duke Street intersection. The dense plant growth and mature evergreen trees between the house and street boundaries provide further privacy restricting the views of the arcade and entrance portico. In the south-west corner of the site, a wire-net covered pond is obscured by palm trees and shrubbery and the brick paved path leading to the front entrance from Hawes Street is well shaded. On the north side of the residence, little maintenance has been carried out to the garden which is less dense there at present, consisting of bare earth and a few trees.

*Mitchell House* is built in the Federation Free Classical Style with an Italianate styled main entrance porch facing Hawes Street and a two-storey stucco, balustraded arcade to the Duke Street elevation.<sup>20</sup> These imposing features lend a stability and grandeur to the residence appropriate to the status of the original owner, Sir James Mitchell.

The building is constructed in stretcher bond red brick with a stone base below ground floor level and has a corrugated iron roof. The prominent arcade and entrance porch enhance the orthogonal plan shape of the building. The oval arch of the entrance portico reveals the jarrah front door and is crowned with a gable pediment. The stucco arcade of the west elevation encloses the timber verandahs of the ground and first floors and is composed of five rounded arch openings with an identical arch in each of the return ends. A stucco balustrade surrounds each verandah with a short flight of stairs to the garden located centrally on the west side at ground level. The two-storey verandah of the east elevation is by contrast of more common timber and iron construction offering views over the Avon valley countryside from the first floor. An unsophisticated, lightweight, timber pergola extends from this verandah over part of the brick paved courtyard created by the adjacent buildings and entrance drive off Hawes Street. A spiral, wrought iron staircase in the south-east corner provides external access to the upper floor verandah.

Window & door openings are embellished with quoins and entablature in each of the elevations and wooden shutters have been attached to the windows of the entrance elevation.

Internally the entrance portico leads into a double volume hall with a jarrah staircase to the upper floor. The original stair was removed when *Mitchell House* was converted into flats and the current replacement, from the old Northam Hospital, is not necessarily in the same location or follow the original configuration. The three doorways leading off the hall to the surrounding ground floor rooms have heavy and impressively detailed timber pediments.

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<sup>20</sup> Apperly, Richard et al. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. (Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989) pp. 104-107; Australian Heritage Commission. *The Heritage of Western Australia. The Illustrated Register of the National Estate*. (Macmillan, Melbourne, 1989.) p. 106.

Of the ground floor rooms only the hall and salon retain any significant evidence of the former grandeur of the home. The other rooms maintain the high ceilings and proportions of a turn of the century residence but have surface finishes and fittings of a contemporary nature and provide private, residential accommodation for the current owners. The salon is a rectangular room with jarrah floor, plastered walls and a high ceiling with a chandelier and ceiling rose. A wide arch opens onto a sitting area around the fireplace with a massive surround. Windows on either side of the fireplace have a similar pediment detail to the door heads of the hall. French doors lead out onto the west verandah. The external faces of these doors are currently being treated, having been stripped back leaving the timber exposed.

Upstairs, the guest rooms retain some of the proportions of a stately home with few significant details and features remaining, although a fireplace with an Art Deco styled surround and tiled hearth is still in existence in the north-western guest bedroom. French doors provide access to the western verandah from the bedrooms. The east verandah is accessible from the two guest rooms on this side of the house with a new door having been inserted into an earlier opening in the north-east corner verandah wall. Surface finishes throughout the upper floor are varied and simple with carpet to the timber floors and plaster walls and ceilings. Ensuite bathrooms with ceramic tiled floors and new sanitary fittings have been incorporated into the guest bedrooms.

Adjacent to the ground floor kitchen and laundry is a single storey brick structure with a corrugated iron roof. Predominantly open to the courtyard, there is also a small store with a door in this elevation. Behind, is a disused toilet. Previously the servant's quarters, this is currently used as a workspace and for miscellaneous storage.

The stables on the east side of the courtyard, of timber construction, are in poor condition. It is the owners' intention to restore this structure and provide further accommodation for paying guests. Glazed doors with a painted R&I Bank logo on the glass have been incorporated into the west elevation.

The principal building of *Mitchell House* is structurally sound and in good condition having recently been refurbished and opened to the public as a guest house. Maintenance and treatment to the fabric are ongoing with professional advice being sought to ensure the longevity of the existing fabric. The poor condition of the courtyard, pergola, outbuildings and landscaping currently detracts from the grandeur of this stately residence.

### 13.3 REFERENCES

No key references.