



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

Northam Post Office (fmr) is significant for the creative composition of strongly modelled forms and stylistic decorative elements that has produced a highly unusual building with strong visual impact. (Criteria 1.1 and 1.2)

Northam Post Office (fmr) is an integral part of the Wellington Street Conservation Area comprising a series of community related buildings valued for their aesthetic and historic contribution to the town. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Northam Post Office (fmr) is important for its association with the evolution and development of postal and telegraphic services and its later use as the Headquarters of the 10th Light Horse Regiment. (Criterion 2.1)

It demonstrates a way of life in which the Postmaster and family were accommodated within the complex of the post office. (Criterion 2.1)

As Northam's first purpose-built post office, it provides a link with the era when mail was consigned in horse-drawn Royal Mail coaches and distributed throughout country district mail routes on horseback. (Criterion 2.2)

The unique design of the place was, in part, created by George Temple-Poole, Principal Architect of the Public Works Department. (Criterion 2.3, 2.4)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Northam Post Office (fmr) is highly valued by the community for its aesthetic characteristics and as a focal point for social and cultural activities. (Criterion 4.1)

Northam Post Office (fmr) contributes to the community's sense of place as the former location for communication services within and beyond the town. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

The highly unusual and aesthetically pleasing composition of *Northam Post Office (fmr)* makes this building a distinctive and an uncommon structure in the Town of Northam. (Criterion 5.1)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Northam Post Office (fmr) is representative of the Federation Free Style of architecture in Western Australia characterised by the use of eclectic elements and ornamentation, and is testimony to the skill and creativity of works constructed by the Public Works Department during the period in which George Temple-Poole was Principal Architect. (Criterion 6.1)

The imposing form of the building is representative of the civic pride attached to important public buildings in rural centres. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

Northam Post Office (fmr) is in sound condition and receives maintenance as required. Damage to the building fabric caused by vandalism is a persistent concern. A more comprehensive management program would be beneficial to the long term viability of the place.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

The building is no longer used as a post office or as a staff residence, but use by the Avon Valley Arts Centre group and music school has required little alteration to the significant form and features of the building. Alterations that have occurred, such as the insertion of temporary floor spaces, are readily removable. Whilst evidence of the post office function can be discerned in the post office counter of the mail room, it is not highly evident or obvious. The isolation of the external southern verandah from the interior detracts from the integrity of the place. Overall, *Northam Post Office (fmr)* has moderate integrity.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

The 1892 addition to the original post office structure is abrupt and stylistically very different but integral to the development of the building and contributes to the significance of the place in its own right. The fabric of this addition has a greater degree of authenticity than the original structure with the overall building displaying 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

Northam Post Office (fmr) comprises two brick and iron buildings situated on a hill at the corner of Wellington and Hawes streets, Northam. The original building (1873) is a brick bungalow form with verandah pavilions. The shingle roof was later replaced with corrugated iron.¹ In 1892, Government architect, George Temple-Poole designed extensive additions to *Northam Post Office (fmr)* which were of a completely different style to the original place.

Northam, situated in the Avon Valley 100 kilometres from Perth, was discovered by Ensign Dale and a group of explorers in 1830. Land grants were soon allocated and, by 1836, several small farms were scattered throughout the area.

On 25 March 1840, the first mail service between Perth and the Eastern districts was established and, in April 1842, a post office for Northam and the Toodyay district was opened. A Mr J T Cooke was appointed first Postmaster and paid £15-0-0 per annum.² Between 1847 and 1863, several Northam residents served as Postmaster, often conducting the postal business from their homes.

In 1863 Mr George Throssell was appointed Postmaster and ran the postal service from his business premises.³ This arrangement meant Throssell was aware of most business transactions that took place, a situation that was not liked by residents. It was a situation they realised would become more acute when the proposed Telegraph line came through.⁴

In the 1870s, the residents lobbied for a separate Post Office and Telegraph Office to be situated on high ground away from George Throssell's premises. A site was selected on Lots 141 and 142 Wellington Street (since redesigned as Northam Lot 380) and floor plans for a Post Office building were submitted to the authorities for approval.⁵

George Throssell won the tender to erect the building, and he sub-contracted the work to Thomas Wilding who began work in 1872. In the very early stages of construction, Throssell discovered he was not to be Postmaster in the

¹ Apperly, R Irving, Robert et al. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1989) p.26.

² Northam Post Office History in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam; Garden, D *Northam, An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1979) p.31.

³ Northam Post Office History in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam; Garden, D *Northam, An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1979) p. 69.

⁴ Northam Post Office History in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam.

⁵ Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) p.9.

new building, so he had all work halted. Northam residents, angered by his interference, petitioned the Colonial Secretary and building was resumed.⁶

In 1873, when construction was completed, all postal supplies and equipment were transferred from Throssell's premises. The new building was described as being 'an improvement upon the former office' and as 'having well arranged and ample rooms.' Augustus William Piesse was appointed as Postmaster with an annual salary of £70-0-0.⁷

In 1879, Mr J M Innes was appointed Postmaster and living quarters were provided at a nominal rent. Innes left the position after a year and his wife Eliza became Postmistress in 1880, a position she was to hold for fifteen years.⁸

In December 1890, repairs and whitewashing were carried out. Heavy rains in July 1891 damaged the shingles on the roof and a suggestion was made to cover the roof in iron. Further damage occurred in September 1891 and it was decided to make improvements and to add an extension. The additions were designed by George Temple-Poole. In October 1892, tenders were accepted from Northam builders, Bryan and Cody, for £975 and, on 28 October 1892, the foundation stone for the extension was laid by Harry Whittall Venn, the Commissioner of Railways and Public Works.⁹ Oldham, in reviewing Temple-Poole's work notes, stated

'This most curious building began with a grand flourish ... but the building was never completed. It terminates abruptly in a steeped parapet at the rear ... A fairly steep and high gable is centrally placed in the front, with miniature pilasters at each side. Below there are two mini-turrets.'¹⁰

In 1894, a request was made to the postal authorities for a public clock to be displayed at *Northam Post Office (fmr)* but this was not provided. In 1895, a verandah, curving almost into a semi-circle, was built around one side of the building to provide shade and shelter for the customers.¹¹

In 1895, A C Baldock was appointed Postmaster and Eliza Innes was demoted to Assistant Postmistress.¹² In May 1896, two years after it had been requested, a public clock was erected on a bracket outside the building. In

⁶ Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) pp.8-11; Garden, D *Northam, An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1979) pp. 80, 89, 157.

⁷ Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) p.11.

⁸ CSO 1879/1133 cited in Garden, D *Northam. An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1979); Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) p.13.

⁹ Government Gazette pp. 831, 859 cited in Oldham, Ray and John. *George Temple-Poole, Architect of the Gold Years 1885-1897* (UWA Press, WA 1980) p.41; Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) p.15.

¹⁰ Oldham, Ray and John. *George Temple-Poole, Architect of the Gold Years 1885-1897* (UWA Press, WA 1980) p.41.

¹¹ Oldham, Ray and John. *George Temple-Poole, Architect of the Gold Years 1885-1897* (UWA Press, WA 1980) p.41. Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) p.16.

¹² Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) pp.13, 16.

July 1899, maintenance of this clock became a subject for discussion at a Council Meeting.¹³

By 1900, as a result of the gold boom, prospectors from all over the world had come to Western Australia, quadrupling the population to 179,708 in a ten year period. Many of the newcomers made their way to the remote Eastern districts and used *Northam Post Office (fmr)* as a contact centre for mail and communications. This surge in the population caused a strain on the postal system and the facilities at *Northam Post Office (fmr)* were totally inadequate to meet the increasing demands.¹⁴

Yet another task for the overworked postal staff was discussed by the Town Council in 1900, a telephone exchange which opened by the end of that year with 33 Northam subscribers.¹⁵

In 1902, constant complaints regarding inadequate facilities, delivery delays and the distance that the Post Office was from the business areas, led to many requests for a new Post Office to be built in a more central position.¹⁶ *Northam Post Office (fmr)* became the focus of much correspondence between the Town Council, Chamber of Commerce and the Postmaster General's office.¹⁷ A letter from the Town Clerk summed up the general feeling regarding the building.

Accommodation and conveniences ... extremely meagre and primitive ... originally built some 25 years ago when Northam was a mere village and added to some 10 years ago, is completely out of harmony with modern requirements.¹⁸

The constant barrage of demands for a new building were finally acted upon by the Postmaster General's Office. On 26 August 1905, a site was purchased for a new post office signalling the 'death knell' of *Northam Post Office (fmr)*.¹⁹

Extensive correspondence between Northam residents and the Postmaster General's Department continued during 1906 and resulted in a detailed assessment being made of the condition of *Northam Post Office (fmr)*. Any hopes held by the department that *Northam Post Office (fmr)* could be repaired, renovated or extended were dashed by Postal Inspector Piesse's report of 12 June 1906.

old ... the official portion is comparatively new (erected October 1892) the quarters are ... outer walls of official portion of the building are rubble granite ... roof covered with corrugated iron. The public are not using the building because of its position ... the old one should not be enlarged.²⁰

13 Northam Council Minute Books p.47.

14 The History of the Post Office in the Colony of Western Australia 1829-1901, Battye Library Requisition Number 59259, p. 63.

15 Northam Council Minute Books pp. 103-110, 112, 116, 143; Cornell. Public Relations Office letter in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam.

16 Northam Council Minute Books p. 352.

17 Correspondence (1903-4) in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam.

18 Correspondence (1903-4) in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam.

19 Northam Council Minute Books p. 676. Correspondence (1905) in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam; Government Gazette cited in Goodacre, Jan, *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) p.17.

20 Correspondence (1906) in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam.

In May 1906, the population of Northam was estimated at 5,000, an increase of 1,000 in three years.²¹ Despite this increase there was still no action on building a new post office.

An article on 11 March 1907 in the *Northam Advertiser* summed up the general feeling and frustration about the delays stating:

Our Post Office is a disgrace to a town the size and importance of Northam. Even the clock in front of it has been in a state of suspended animation for about a year.²²

During the following year, building of the new Post Office commenced and, in early 1909, equipment including letter pillars in *Northam Post Office (fmr)* was transferred to the new Post Office, only the switchboard being left behind.²³

In 1909, *Northam Post Office (fmr)*, together with a portion of the land, was officially transferred to the Department of Defence for use as a Military Headquarters. A storeroom was erected and, in 1913, the verandah was remodelled, a wash house built and partitions erected to form various offices. A photograph taken in 1914, shows men of the 11th Battalion in front of *Northam Post Office (fmr)*. During the years of World War I, volunteers and members of the 10th Light Horse trained at the Drill Hall of *Northam Post Office (fmr)* three times a week.²⁴ It continued to be used by the Department of Defence until 1976 when the place 'said farewell to the 10th Light Horse, to whom it had played host for 70 years.'²⁵

The Northam Town Council resumed responsibility for the place and offered it to the Avon Valley Arts Society, a community group who needed larger premises. An inspection by society members to estimate the cost of restoration and refurbishment found *Northam Post Office (fmr)* in a poor state of repair. The Arts Society took control of the building and, with a Federal Government Grant of \$64,000 and a great deal of volunteer labour over the next three years, *Northam Post Office (fmr)* was 'scrubbed, scarped, plastered and painted. Partitions removed, guttering on rotunda removed for repairs and the grounds were landscaped'.²⁶

In 1979, during the state's 150th anniversary, HRH Prince Charles visited the refurbished *Northam Post Office (fmr)*, now an Arts Centre known as the 'People's Place'. Premier Sir Charles Court officially opened the Arts Centre and gardens of *Northam Post Office (fmr)* on 28 April 1979.²⁷

21 Correspondence (1906) in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam.

22 *Northam Advertiser* in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam.

23 Correspondence (1909) in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam; Photo B/L 4326B/32/34; *Northam Advertiser* in Australian Archives, Reference: Northam; Garden, D *Northam. An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1979) p.197.

24 *Northam Advertiser* cited in Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) pp. 23-24, 26, 31, 33; Garden, D. *Northam. An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, WA, 1979) p. 208; Figure 4.

25 Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) p.44.

26 Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) p.57; *West Australian* April 1986.

27 Photo 10; Goodacre, Jan. *The Northam Post and Telegraph Office 1872-1992* (Avon Valley Arts Society (Inc), Northam, 1992) pp.58-59; *West Australian* April 1986.

A National Trust assessment in October 1979 noted that the original (1873) part of *Northam Post Office (fmr)* was being used as a caretaker's residence and described the place as a

highly unusual brick building set on a stone foundation ... features a rather ornate pediment over the entry, a hexagonal verandah ... and a crow stepped gable . internally there are high ceilings and jarrah floors. The building is historically significant ... the first permanent Post Office in Northam and architecturally significant ... (for its) idiosyncratic design.'²⁸

Since opening as an Arts Centre, *Northam Post Office (fmr)* has become a focus for arts, crafts and music activities in the Northam Community. Its situation in the Wellington Street Historical Precinct, which includes *Old Girls School* and *St Johns Church and Parish Hall*, is an attraction to tourists keen to see nineteenth century architecture in a country town.

Photographs taken in October 1995 show *Northam Post Office (fmr)* in good condition and busily in use as an art, crafts and sales centre which is open to the public. Although some alterations have been made to the interior, including turning the Chubb safe (former armoury) into a kitchen, boarding up service windows for security reasons and adding stairs to give access for storage, *Northam Post Office (fmr)* retains its authenticity.²⁹

Northam Post Office (fmr) contributes to the Northam Community's sense of place and is historically important as the first Post Office in Northam, and later the Headquarters of the 10th Light Horse Regiment. Sketches and photographs of the place are used on cards, leaflets, and in material for Northam and Avon Valley tourist promotions.³⁰ Considered to be architecturally unique because of its unusual design, it also represents a way of life no longer practised, that of a postmaster and family living on the premises where they work. Oldham comments that *Northam Post Office (fmr)* is '... typical of the most exuberant and uninhibited taste of our goldrush years.'³¹

13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Northam Post Office (fmr) is located on Lot 380 Wellington Street. Where Hawes Street once intersected Wellington Street, it now terminates short of the intersection and a landscaped pathway completes the distance. The place forms part of the Wellington Street Conservation Area and is close to the community related series of buildings comprising the *Avon Valley Arts Centre Workshop* (1878) and *St John's Anglican Church and Parish Hall* (1889,1897).³²

The building has an irregular form and distinctly different styles due to the two different periods of construction. The earlier L-shaped portion facing

²⁸ Enquiry with the National Trust; *The Heritage of Western Australia. The Illustrated Register of the National Estate* (McMillan, Australia, 1989) p.107.

²⁹ Photo 1-11.

³⁰ Battye library, PR 8679/NOR 13.

³¹ Oldham, Ray and John. *George Temple-Poole Architect of the Golden Years 1885-1897* (UWA Press, WA 1980) pp.38-39.

³² Australian Heritage Commission. *The Heritage of Western Australia. The Illustrated Register of the National Estate*. (Macmillan, Melbourne, 1989) p. 107; Molyneux, Ian. *Looking Around Perth: A Guide to the Architecture of Perth and Surrounding Towns*. (Wescolour Press, East Fremantle , 1981) p. 114.

Wellington Street and Prince Road is abutted by a wing which follows the alignment of Hawes Street with an octagonal shaped room and encircling verandah at the end. The Federation Free Style characteristics and Arts and Crafts influences of the latter addition are in stark contrast to the simple Victorian Georgian Style of the cottage.³³

The 1873 portion of the building is constructed in Flemish bond brickwork with a corrugated iron bull-nose verandah supported by pairs of timber columns with a timber lattice balustrade facing Wellington Street. Where the verandah turns the corner to face Prince Road, the balustrade is formed from timber boards. A corrugated iron verandah also protects and shades the building on the internal side of the L-shape. The main roof of corrugated iron is set at a steeper pitch to the verandah roofs.

The later addition is constructed in Flemish bond brickwork and stone with a corrugated iron roof which abuts the earlier work in a crow-stepped, brick gable forming a distinct division between the two sections of the building.

The stone is rough-hewn on the face and random laid. Above this masonry is brickwork. Brick is also used for the quoins around openings and at wall junctions. A fairly steep and high gable is centrally placed in the front, with miniature pilasters at each side. Below these are two mini-turrets, and then, on the left side, is a wide entrance, recessed, with a door angled at each side. This entrance is balanced on the other side of the building by a wide arched window.³⁴

The encircling verandah sheltering the public service counter at the southern end of the building makes a rather idiosyncratic composition. The weighty robustness of the tapering stone walls contrasts with the more delicate timber detailing in the radiating eaves lining and brackets on wide brick columns supporting the verandah roof. As the verandah windows are boarded up and there is no direct access from inside there appears to be little relationship between this curious feature verandah and the rest of the building, although the effect is not aesthetically displeasing.

Entering the building from the footpath adjoining Hawes and Wellington streets, the lobby and octagonal shaped former mail room have brick plastered walls, jarrah floors and high ceilings. The timber post office counter is still evident around the southern end of the mail room with other interesting features including the timber panelled ceiling and a thin, iron arch spanning the width of the room just below ceiling level. The corner strong room, which currently serves as a tea preparation area, has a cast iron door and substantial locking device.

On the northern side of the lobby, an awkward triangular shaped space, appropriate only for storage, has been formed where the angled wing abuts the orthogonal Wellington Street elevation. Further storage and office equipment are located in the adjacent room which has had a mezzanine level and timber access ladder inserted.

As the floor levels between the two wings of the building vary, with the floor level of the earlier period of construction lower than that of the later period, a

³³ 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. 42-45 and 116-119 [136-139].

³⁴ Oldham, Ray and Oldham, John. *George Temple-Poole, Architect of the Golden Years, 1885-1897*. (University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1980) p. 41.

temporary platform has been inserted into the office behind the lobby raising the floor to the same level as other rooms used by the Avon Valley Arts Centre. Timber stairs lead down to the southern verandah. Other rooms of this wing are accessed from the passage off the Wellington Street verandah so the conflict of floor levels does not arise elsewhere.

Rooms used by the music school are of simple, domestic construction with brick walls and timber floors although these are concealed by various surface finishes including plaster, carpet and linoleum. The southern end of the verandah has been enclosed with asbestos lining to form a storeroom.

Two small brick structures with corrugated iron roofs are located behind the enclosed verandah. The w.c. structure has the common curved roof.

A red brick bathroom addition with a corrugated iron roof of minimal pitch adjoins the south-west corner of the L-shape. Sliding aluminium windows are located in the west wall with access provided by a door from the west verandah. The addition is highly unsympathetic with the rest of the building.

Northam Post Office (fmr) is structurally sound and adequately maintained. Vandalism places a strain on the maintenance program explaining why the mail room windows have been covered and the inconsistent balustrade treatment to Wellington Street and Prince Road. Glazing in the feature arched windows has been replaced this year. Plans to remove the temporary platform in the Arts Centre office and repaint internal walls should be commenced shortly.

13.3 REFERENCES

No key references.