Conservation, The National Trust and Historical Documentation

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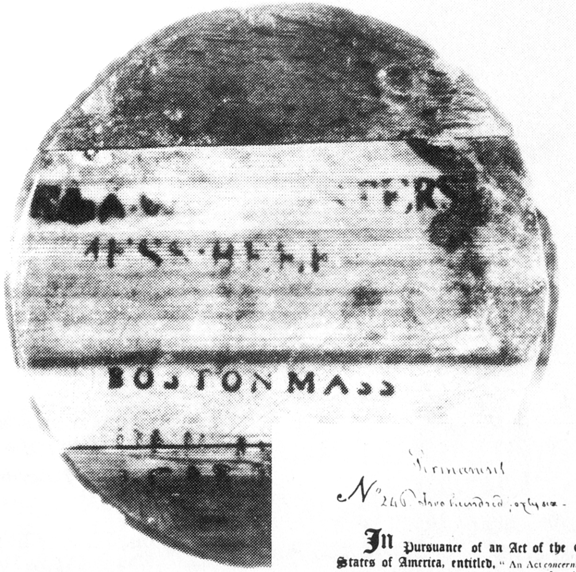
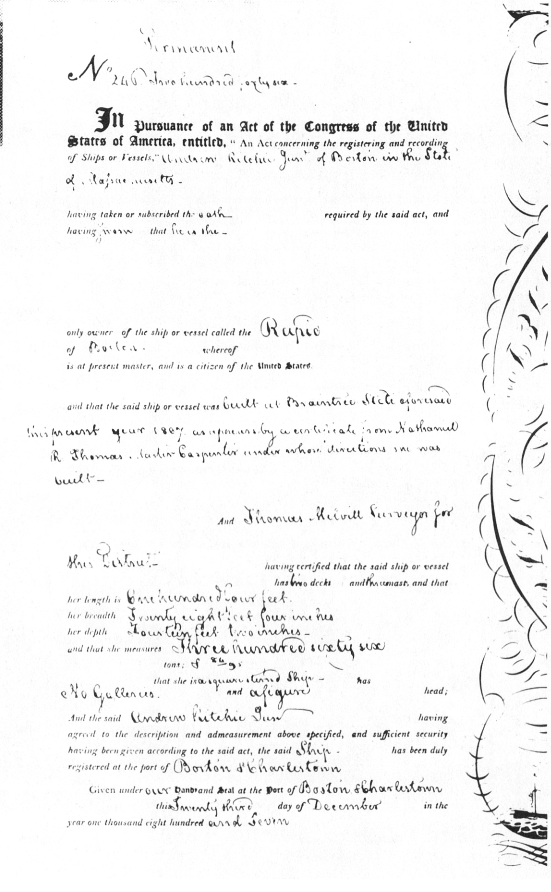
This paper was read to the Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the Battye Library in Perth, on 23 March 1983. Conservation of the physical material of our heritage, both historical and environmental, requires that the surviving material should be fully identified by reference to documentary evidence preserved in private collections, libraries and archives. High level research has been carried out on Dutch-wreck material by an independent geologist and by the Western Australian Museum's archaeologists and conservators and also on the fabric of a colonial homestead for the National Trust by an architecture student. However, the writer considers that studies of the natural environment by governmental authorities would benefit from a longer historical perspective.

Mention of the National Trust of Australia will surely bring to mind thoughts of conservation and historical documentation, but it should not be necessary to explain that the Trust is not the only conservation agency. Indeed, there are many individuals whose efforts in conservation must be honoured along with the activities of organisations such as the Western Australian Museum Trustees and their staff, the Western Australian Environmental Conservation Authority and their officers, the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Conservator of Forests and his foresters. It is one of the hazards of management that the meticulousness of the individual operator is sometimes lost when he becomes part of an organisation.

"Conservation" covers a multitude of operations, but here it is related to our "national heritage". Conservation begins with research, which results in the identification of a part of our heritage as being of importance, thus providing a reason for looking after it, involving preservation and maintenance, so that its qualities will not be lost. If an item is dilapidated, then further research will be required to identify its original condition, to which it may then be restored. Such items are material things which may be





Permanent

No 246. Two hundred forty six.

In Pursuance of an Act of the Congress of the United States of America, entitled, "An Act concerning the registering and recording of Ships or Vessels," Andrew Ritchie Jun^r of Boston in the State of Massachusetts.

having taken or subscribed the oath required by the said act, and having sworn that he is the

only owner of the ship or vessel called the Rapid of Boston. whereof is at present master, and is a citizen of the United States.

and that the said ship or vessel was built at Braintree State aforesaid this present year 1807 as appears by a certificate from Nathaniel R. Thomas Master Carpenter under whose directions she was built.

And Thomas Melvill Surveyor for this District having certified that the said ship or vessel has two decks and three masts, and that her length is One hundred four feet. her breadth Twenty eight feet four inches her depth Fourteen feet two inches and that she measures Three hundred sixty six tons; & 84/95 that she is a square sterned Ship has No Galleries. and a figure head;

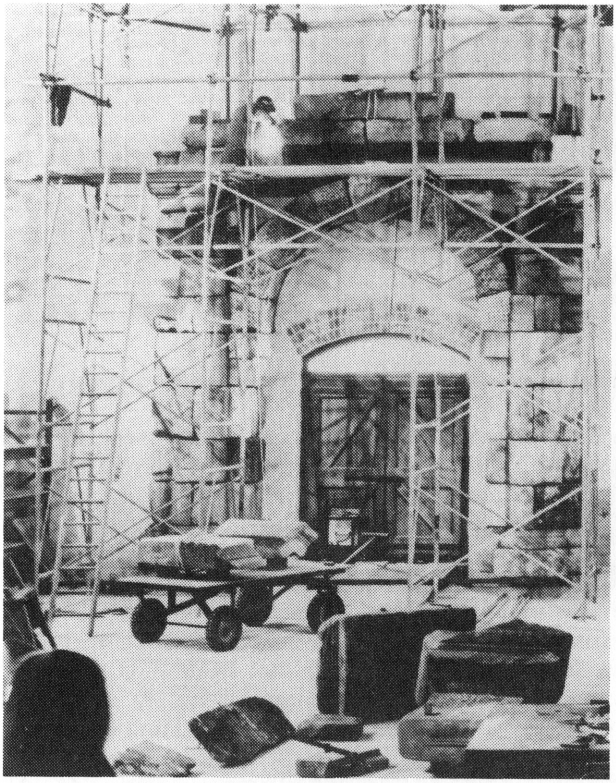
And the said Andrew Ritchie Jun^r having agreed to the description and admeasurement above specified, and sufficient security having been given according to the said act, the said Ship has been duly registered at the port of Boston & Charlestown

Given under our Hand and Seal at the Port of Boston & Charlestown this Twenty third day of December in the year one thousand eight hundred and Seven

***Top:** Beef barrel from the* Rapid, *end view.*

***Bottom:** Customs registration of the* Rapid, *23 December 1807.*

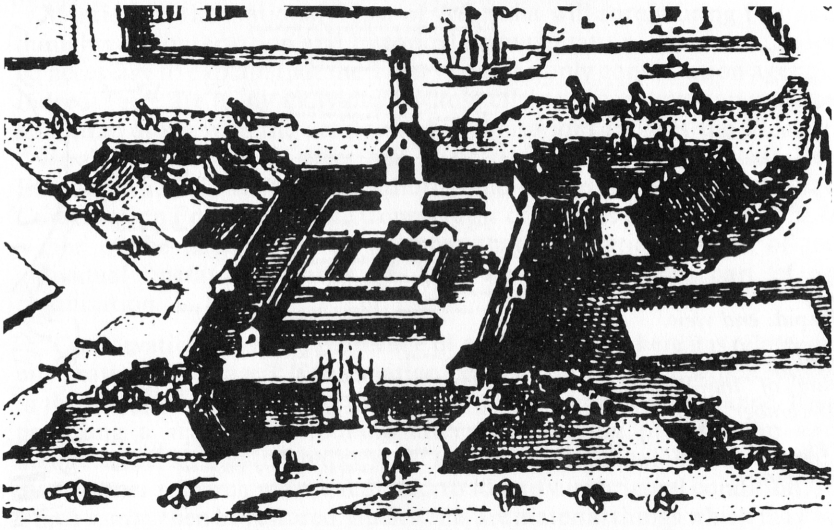
(Photos courtesy WA Museum)



Top: Batavia *arch under construction at the WA Maritime Museum in Fremantle.*

Bottom: *View of* Batavia *in 1628, taken from Pieter vanden Broecke's voyage to the Indies showing waterport under construction.*

(Photos courtesy WA Museum)



located, inspected, charted, described, photographed, and above all explained so that conservation may be justified.

Long before money began to flow into conservation projects a young geologist, Phillip Playford, was attracted by an outback legend concerning an old Dutch wreck on the coast of Western Australia, 160km north of Geraldton. In 1954 he obtained the support of West Australian Newspapers Ltd., for an expedition to the site. Material evidence in the form of coins, campsites and other relics verified the existence of a wreck, but such material evidence required explanation. Playford commenced a voluminous correspondence with many archivists in the Netherlands, South Africa and Java. A subsequent visit to the site in 1958 permitted the identity of the wrecked ship to be established as the *Zuytdorp*, which left Cape Town for Java on 22nd April, 1712.

From documentary sources, Dr Playford was able to reveal the history of the *Zuytdorp* up to that date, to describe the officers and crew as well as the cargo, including the coins. The coins found at the wreck site were identified as having been produced at several Dutch mints and loaded onto the *Zuytdorp* for the use of traders at Batavia. An excellent account of the whole operation was published by the Royal Western Australian Historical Society in their journal *Early Days* in 1959.[1] The writer acknowledged the aid given by the distinguished historian/archivist, Mrs M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofsz of the Algemeen Rijks-archief, The Hague, as well as the staff of the Maritiem Museum, Rotterdam; the Koninklijk Kabinet van Menten, The Hague; the Rijks-archief, Middelberg; the Historisch Sheepvaart Museum, Rotterdam; the Government Archives at Cape Town and the Arsip Negara at Djakarta in Java. The great news value of wrecks ensured continuous press coverage.

The inauguration of the new Western Australian Museum with its staff of expert marine archaeologists and conservators guaranteed that the material from this and other wrecks would receive careful conservation and display. Divers have located material from many other wrecks scattered along our coastline. Jeremy Green, Graeme Henderson, Scott Sledge and their associates have raised this material for conservation in their laboratories while the work of identifying the pieces by reference to documentary resources around the world is undertaken. Very recently Graeme Henderson was able to catalogue the material of a wreck at Point Cloates about 120km south of North West Cape. There was an intact barrel of beef, inscribed BOSTON MASS. MESS BEEF. The latest coin date was 1809, so it seemed that the ship might have been out of Boston shortly after 1809. When correspondence with the United States proved uninformative, Graeme Henderson went to Boston to search the archives there. On the second day he turned up a shipping paragraph in an old newspaper, reporting the loss of an American China Trader the *Rapid* in January 1811 — captain and crew safe.[2] That was the vital clue which

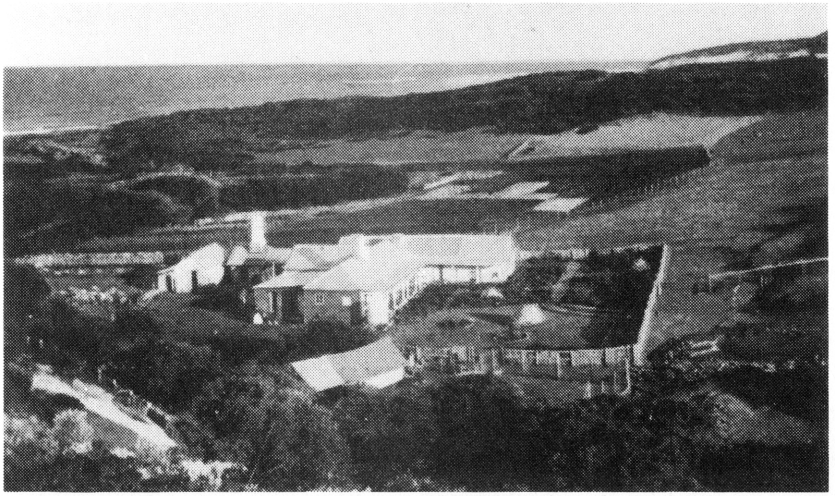
permitted the piecing together of a history of the *Rapid* and several salvage operations.

There is quite a romantic story of the stone archway which, on its way to Java, went down in the wrecked *Batavia* in 1629 on the Abrolhos Islands, 45km north west of Geraldton. It is now re-erected in the Fremantle Maritime Museum in Cliff Street, once again demonstrating the effectiveness of combined work of researchers and conservationists. However, it may be eclipsed by reconstruction of part of the hull of the *Batavia* itself from the actual original timbers, which have been raised from the sea floor. Further accounts of these activities have been written by Jeremy Green[3] and other specialists.

The general news value of these discoveries has led the Museum to adopt a relaxed attitude to marine archaeology staff contacts with the media, to which the staff has responded by producing numerous papers for a variety of journals, where careful references have been made to documentary sources. The public may therefore refer from the more general official reports to the historical detail upon which they rest.

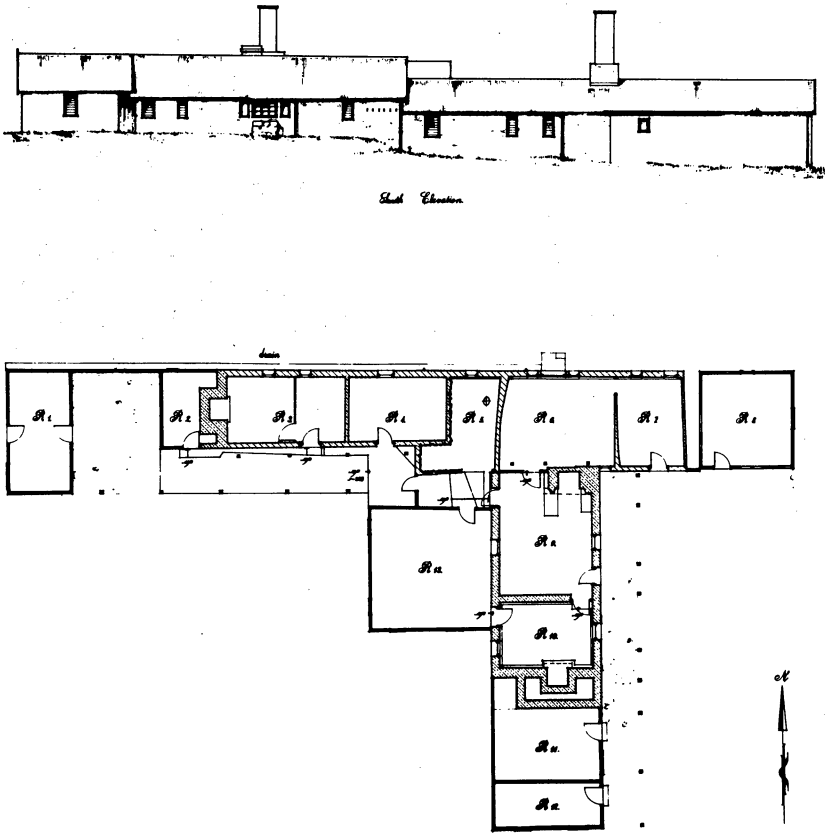
The coastal waters of Western Australia contain one of the largest collections of historic shipwrecks in the world, so dangerous were those coasts to the Dutch Java-bound ships in the seventeenth century. The Western Australian Maritime Museum at Fremantle, with its staff of highly qualified men and women, has established itself as one of the world's foremost centres of maritime archaeological research and restoration. It is party to an international agreement with the Australian Commonwealth Government and the Royal Netherlands Government by which the materials recovered from the wreck sites are shared between the Dutch and the Australians.

By comparison, the reports to the Western Australian Environmental Protection Authority tend to carry an air of anonymity and their lists of references often contain little more than accounts of observations of the environment. I refer to the two most substantial reports, the *System 5 Study*[4] and *System 6 Study*[5] of the Western Australian environment. These contain accounts of careful observations of the material evidence they deal with, whether wetlands, coastal vegetation, plateau forests or valley thickets with their flora and fauna. Unfortunately the flowers of past years are no longer there to be listed. The reports sometimes ignore the facts that these parts of the environment have been subjected to nearly 200 years of European influence; and that historical documentation still exists, chiefly in the Battye Library, but also in Government department records. Here and there beneath the anonymity of a report hastily prepared to meet a Minister's requirements, assumptions about the precise effects of human interference with the environment have not been checked against the historical evidence in explorers' and surveyors' plans, notebooks and reports, and in settlers' diaries, letters to the Surveyor General, and



Top: *Ellensbrook 1910. (Courtesy Ian Heppingstone)*

Bottom: *Gable end of Room 4 at Ellensbrook showing earlier room projecting into Room 5. (Courtesy Andrew Boughton)*



Top: *Ellensbrook south elevation.*

Bottom: *Ellensbrook plan showing lay-out of rooms. (Courtesy Andrew Boughton)*

contemporary newspapers.

An essential ingredient of any statement about the present condition of our environment is a detailed history of land use in a particular area which will reveal the effects of human intervention since the days of original settlement. The most careful description of a piece of wetland or a count of vegetation on an ironstone plateau will not tell us where the flowers have gone and will always be insufficient to justify assumptions about the events which may have produced the conditions now clearly evident. The Department of Conservation and Environment would be well advised to extend its work to the history of land use, so as to provide the necessary background for their current surveys.

Like most conservation authorities, the National Trust suffers from lack of finance and from the difficulties of publishing suitable texts to justify its proposals. But what is the National Trust in Western Australia and what can it do about conservation?

After some political wrangling during 1962 and 1963 the Act of Parliament giving statutory authority to the National Trust of Australia (WA)[6] was passed in 1964. The authority given to the National Trust did not primarily relate to conservation. Firstly it was to "establish and maintain ... a public educational institution"; secondly "to provide for the holding of classes, lectures, seminars, exhibitions, meetings and conferences"; thirdly "to print, publish, sell and distribute books, advertisements and publications"; fourthly to "employ ... a director, or director of studies, teachers, lecturers, tutors, research workers ... secretaries." Not until sub-clause twelve was there any mention of the Trust's conservation responsibilities, "to take such steps as may be necessary or desirable to manage and preserve any buildings, places or things of national or local importance as aforesaid from time to time, owned by or under the control of the Trust".

"The buildings, places and things" which were to be entrusted to the Trust were described in sub-clause (a) of the Schedule of objectives as those "which are of national or local importance by reason of educational, historical, architectural, traditional, legendary, artistic, literary, scientific, antiquarian, archaeological or other special interest attaching to them and of places of natural beauty and the flora and fauna thereof". Here we have the origins of the Trust's activities concerning buildings, places and things on the one hand, and places of natural beauty and their flora and fauna on the other, sometimes interpreted as *the built environment* and *the natural environment* respectively.

For the first eight years of the Trust its activities were severely limited by lack of government support for the obligations placed upon it by Parliament. Government funding was limited, but, added to membership fees, provided enough for small secretarial activities. Strong support was

given by the wonderful fund-raising activities of the Women's Committee of the Trust. Donations of property and funds from private sources enabled the Trust to acquire the Old Farm, Albany; Blythewood, Pinjarra; and Bridgedale, Bridgetown, but were insufficient for restoration.

In spite of these financial limitations, the Trust has been able to develop a project for identifying those buildings and places it considers to be of major importance.[7] This operation has proved to be of considerable educational value. Indeed, identification has been so readily accepted, that many people have made urgent appeals for preservation, while others have taken the opposite course and ordered the bulldozers into action before the public can organise against demolition. The subsequent formation of the Australian Heritage Commission established the convention that items identified — or classified — by the State Trust should be accepted for the National Heritage List. This leaves the problem of conservation still to be faced.

Because of the cost involved, most of the conservation carried out in Western Australia has been limited by the availability of Federal funds through the Australian Heritage Commission. To those funds we owe most of the restoration of historic properties which are now open for public inspection and they also provide for many surveys of significant areas of the natural environment.

It is clear from the Act that the Trust has the power to conserve, preserve or restore its *own* buildings and places, but it has never been authorised to compel people to conserve their own property. Such powers have not yet been given to anyone. All responsibility for conservation lies with the legal owner. The Trust, however, has the authority to say to individuals and institutions that they own an historic building (place). Pointing out that this is believed to be a valuable part of our heritage the Trust hopes the owners will look after that building or place. Trust members would like to add that they hope Parliament will eventually pay some compensation to private owners for their conservation efforts, and provide adequate finance to permit its own National Trust to carry out its statutory duties, educational and conservationist. By their experience Trust members have been informing themselves of some of the basic concepts of conservation; therefore the description of identified buildings and places has improved considerably over the years. That inevitably leads to the necessity of revising earlier descriptions of the significance of many of the buildings already listed. It is probably quite obvious that preservation and restoration of a building (place) may be performed wrongly unless the conserver has a clear idea of its important features.

Conservation is clearly the outcome of public concern about its heritage and is promoted by various agencies set up to draw attention to the importance of the past. The functions of the National Trust as set out in its

Act relate initially to education but extend to preservation; an important part of the educational function is the identification and promotion of significant items of the national heritage. Therefore, those items have been "classified" (the term used in Western Australia) and then listed by the Australian Heritage Commission. The classification statement is intended to be a concise exposition of significance and to contain the answer to the question: Why is this building (or place) important enough to be identified as a valuable part of our heritage?

Such identification will not guarantee preservation (conservation). That requires detailed information concerning parts of the fabric, and it requires substantial financial support. Let us look at a particular item of this State's heritage and observe, first, the form of the Trust's identification and, second, the way in which a researcher has presented the material evidence concerning the fabric of the structure so that conservation may be undertaken when finance becomes available.

Let me use as an example the Trust's classification — or identification — of the homestead "Ellensbrook" founded in 1857 by Alfred Bussell. The formal exposition in 1978 set out to explain, among other things, why the homestead was a significant part of our heritage. Its precise location is 250km south of Perth mid-way between Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin, about five kilometres north of the mouth of the Margaret River and one kilometre from the sea. The Trust stated that Ellensbrook was

> "built, probably in the late 1850s, by Alfred Pickmore Bussell, an original Augusta settler, and named in honour of his wife, Ellen, nee Heppingstone." Its original construction is partly wattle and daub and partly vertical laths and battens, and it is particularly interesting to note the use of driftwood. The original house has been altered and added to over the years — parts sheeted in timber weatherboard and others in asbestos cement panels — but the whole retains a great unity and charm. Roofs are of corrugated iron sheet. The house is beautifully sited, near to a former mill pond, not far from the beach and close to a waterfall. The waterfall was called by the aborigines 'Meekadanabee', or the moon's bathing place.[8]

Though this statement relates chiefly to Ellensbrook farmhouse, you will notice that attention was also directed to its beautiful surroundings.

The Bussells, together with the Molloys and the Turners, were the principals of the party of settlers who arrived at Fremantle in the *Warrior* in March 1830 and settled first at Augusta near Cape Leeuwin, and later moved north to Busselton on Geographe Bay. Ellen was the daughter of Robert Heppingstone, a member of the party. The story of the early years of the experiences of the Bussells forms the theme of *Cattle Chosen* by E.O.G. Shann. The copious letters and diaries of the Bussell women provide valuable information on the process of Western Australian colonisation. Much of this material is held by the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History in Perth.

In 1980, Ellensbrook captured the attention of an architecture student, Andrew Boughton, of the University of Western Australia who used it as the subject for a piece of research into the history of Western Australian architecture.[9] The evidence he gathered proved so fruitful that his report developed into a 73-page thesis which is a detailed history of a Western Australian homestead in the extreme south-west of the State. In 1857, at the time of the selection of the Ellensbrook site, it was very isolated, lying mid-way between the small and thriving Busselton settlement and the virtually abandoned Augusta settlement, about 45km (nearly 30 miles) from each. The earliest settlers had developed their "farming and grazing" practice of farming while living closer to settlement. It consisted of dairying in the house paddocks of the homestead and depasturing cattle over large surrounding areas of bushland. In the late 1850s and early 1860s settlers began to move further inland. Alfred and Ellen Bussell were among the pioneers of this movement.

In his research into the history of the fabric of Ellensbrook homestead, Boughton made extensive use of documentary evidence to explain the material evidence before him. His list of references relates to the Bussell diaries and to unpublished letters chiefly to and from members of the Bussell family, some held by the Battye Library and some by descendants of the family. He also consulted Lands and Surveys Department original plans and Ellensbrook land titles from the Registry of Titles and obtained copies of several early photographs, some historic in their own right — one taken about 1890 and others of 1910, 1940, 1951 and 1970.

The decrepit Ellensbrook homestead nestles in the coastal landscape beside Ellen's Brook, partly sheltered by low sandhills covered by sparse coastal vegetation. The residence still stands, a string of small rooms, the earliest being those of the western wing nearest the sea. There are eight in a row west to east with a wing of four rooms in line southwards from the sixth room. From the physical evidence above one would guess that the rooms were built at different stages but in the order of the numbering, numbers 1 — 8 above; that the stone walled rooms 9 and 10 were built during a period of relative prosperity and that rooms 11, 12 and 13 were additional rooms lightly constructed.

Fortunately for the history of colonial architecture it is not necessary to depend upon guesswork. Unlike most histories of homesteads, we have for Ellensbrook the documentation of the early stages of construction in 1857, contained in the diary of Ellen and Alfred Bussell.[10] One can therefore follow the progressive construction of the early part of the homestead from 1857 to 1865.

There is even a reference to the first shelter the Bussells erected on the day they arrived at the site in the rain, an unexpected phenomenon in March. They set up a frame of bush timber as protection for the night,

covering it with bark from the paper-bark trees all around them, so much better than boughs of trees or rushes from a blackboy. The paper-bark tree is a Melaleuca with bark consisting of layer upon layer of fine paper-like material. I would like to suggest that this original shelter became part of the first hut which is the oldest part of Ellensbrook today. We know that bush-men, whether farmers, explorers or surveyors, were adept at the task of quickly running up a shelter for the night, learned, presumably in the first instance, from the Aborigines.

Though it seems obvious that the rooms should be numbered in the sequence suggested above, documentary evidence requires that room number 4 should be identified with the first hut. Ellen's diary of events commences after the completion of this hut, but the references to it establish its priority, and its method of construction can be readily compared with rooms numbers 3, 5, 6 and 7. Room 1 is a much more recent structure which replaced the second hut now demolished. The builder was Cheesewell, a ticket-of-leave employee who almost certainly constructed the rooms referred to in this paragraph, during the two-and-a-half years before his death in 1859 at the age of 66 years.

In the diary we see such references as "Cheesewell slabbing and splitting rafters" (cutting slabs from the small trunks of the paper-bark trees and splitting some slabs into rafters) — there, for walls of the house, are those slabs set upright in the ground; there are the rafters in the existing roof structure. "Cheesewell putting on the bark" — there it is, on the rafters, clearly paper-bark; almost certainly gathered by the Aboriginal employees.

Ellen spent the first year without a fireplace in the hut, cooking outside over an open fire. Work began in a kitchen, room 3, before Christmas when Cheesewell cut the limestone for the first chimney. For the first time mortar was required — "Cheesewell built a lime kiln" (where limestone was burned to produce lime for the making of lime mortar) — there it is, the lime mortar still bonding the stones of the fireplace and still adhering in places as waterproof rendering on the split-timber walls. The rendering was also extended to the walls of the first hut, probably replacing an earlier rendering of mud. "Cheesewell added roof rafters and battens" — there they are, covered by tattered remnants of bark, other battens holding the bark in place. He laid flag-stones for the floor — one cannot actually see them now because they have been covered with concrete; and the roof has been covered by corrugated iron.

The details of the erection of rooms 5, 6 and 7 are not given in the diary, but the methods of construction were the same — there is the evidence still visible. These rooms are wider than numbers 4 and 3 and the roof is one foot higher. The higher roof was so constructed that it also covered about four feet of the roof of the first hut, room 4, and thus gave protection from

the weather to its eastern end and to about four feet of the external wall. Thus, a considerable part of the oldest structure has been preserved almost completely intact for one-and-a-quarter centuries, providing unequivocal material evidence of the external wall structure, the gable end, the roof structure, the roof cladding of paper-bark and the projecting end of the ridge beam, which was a carved ship's mast found washed up on the beach. Inside the original hut the mast is covered with asbestos sheeting, hiding the soot that so depressed Ellen.

The rare material evidence of construction and the contemporary diary statements are the two distinguishing features of Ellensbrook. Though there remain puzzling features of the later rooms, they were built more recently, providing clearer evidence of the past because they have suffered less dilapidation.

The future of this rare piece of architectural history is by no means secure, but conservationists are obtaining a clearer picture of their objective — to restore the really significant parts of the fabric. Even if Ellensbrook were in a convenient location, conservation would be very expensive, but its isolation multiplies the expense at a time when finance is just not available. In the meantime the devoted Friends of Ellensbrook are minding the building, but the Trust is still extremely perplexed about a situation of contradictory options and opportunities. Yet they are in no doubt about the value of Ellensbrook as a prime object for conservation, offering fascinating evidence, both material and documentary.

The National Trust has also been active in research concerning the natural environment — river margins, coastal areas, trees — and has recommended numerous items of the natural environment for inclusion on the Heritage List. I wish to record its interest in colonial gardens, but not only those of city mansions. Not surprisingly the evidence is scarce, but the small band of garden researchers is slowly gathering material. Their greatest obstacle is that these old gardens have been almost obliterated by many years of prosperity, since the passing of colonial austerity, and more particularly with the introduction of piped water in farm residences. We should realise that our old gardens were normally watered by a housewife with a can of waste water; lawns were quite out of the question.

Mrs Oline Richards has become interested in the garden at Blythewood, home of the McLarty family at Pinjarra, about 85km south of Perth, which in 1971 was declared one of the reasons for the importance of the homestead, set as it is in the "mixed garden ... of the time ...". The recently revised publicity brochure[11] shows an early photograph of the garden and an artist's recent sketch of the homestead garden to reveal its general character, based on information held in records of the Trust. A sketch plan of the garden was made by Miss Joan McLarty, who remembers riding her tricycle along the sanded parts of the garden in the first decade of the

century. She also loaned for copying a photograph of the garden of her childhood, made by Burcham of Bunbury who seems to have been attracted by the garden's reputation for colourfulness and productiveness: a large section was a no-nonsense vegetable garden.

The material evidence provided at the moment by the garden is most confusing, but the researcher is now aided by some oral evidence, a sketch and a photograph. No doubt more references will become available in letters or diaries or further oral evidence. Then the Trust will be able to set about the restoration of the garden, confident that real efforts have been made to guard against error.

The Australian Government has recently accepted international responsibility for conservation. The National Trust of Australia has adopted the recommendations of the Venice Charter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) as modified by the Burra Charter[12] to suit Australian conditions. The significance of these developments has been outlined by Dr J. Kerr in the New South Wales Trust publication, *The Conservation Plan 1982.* In it he suggests that the first step in conservation is to gather, analyse and summarise all relevant documentary and physical evidence and to define the significant parts of the fabric. Only then should the conservation policy be converted to a working plan.

To honour these obligations, the National Trust will need greater financial support and will be drawing ever more frequently on the resources of the holders of documentary material of all kinds, such as held by the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, by the State Library, the Western Australian Museum and the Royal Western Australian Historical Society. As the Australian community learns to appreciate more fully the importance of its historical background, it will surely create a vigorous demand for extended archival services.

FOOTNOTES

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2. Henderson, G. "Three early post Australian settlement shipwreck sites: HMS *Pandora* (1791), the *Sydney Cove* (1797) and a site near North West Cape." *The Great Circle,* Vol 2, No 1, April 1980; "American China Trader *Rapid* (1811)..." *ibid,* 3, 2, Oct 1981.
3. Green, J. "The Lost Gateway", *Hemisphere,* Vol.26, No.21, 1981, pp.46-50.
4. Western Australia. Department of Conservation and Environment: *System 5 Study,* Report to the Environmental Protection Authority, 1980.
5. *System 6 Study,* Report to the Environmental Protection Authority, 1981.
6. Western Australia. An Act, National Trust of Australia (WA), No.85 of 1964.
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9. Boughton, Andrew. Ellensbrook. Unpublished thesis, Univ. of Western Australia, 1980.
10. Ibid. pp.18-19.
11. Staples, A.C. *Old Blythewood,* National Trust of Australia (WA) 1981.
12. The Australia ICOMOS Guidelines for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance ("Burra Charter"). 1979.