4.06 Of Huts in General

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the itinerant builder

There is considerable evidence, especially in the period 1830-1860, of a substantial informal building industry in the eastern colonies, comprising itinerant splitters and sawyers who engaged in other building operations as necessary. Their origins were often doubtful and their status unclear, but they constituted an indispensable supply of skilled labour. In South Australia, for example, both settlers and government officials:[1]

> were obliged to employ banished men (not asking if they were expirees or runways), who had been well trained to work as convicts, but were skilful splitters, sawyers, pincers, and builders of huts. High wages were paid to them.

It was men such as these who generally built a squatter's dwelling, rather than the squatter himself or his employee.

The typical early squatter's home was described by the Hon R D Murray, who toured the settled areas in 1841-2:[2]

> In the centre stands the principal hut, with two or three others intended to serve as offices. Their whole appearance is characteristic of a half-savage state of existence. The walls are constructed of that material known in the colony as 'wattle and dab', or, in other words, a frame of wicker-work overspread with mud, and support a roof covered with rolls of bark which the wooden stretchers that press them down can scarcely keep from resuming their original circular shape. Two or three windows, or port-holes, admit the light, while a huge, misshapen chimney of turf flanks one end of the dwelling in front, which, on the whole, may be considered a pretty fair specimen of a bush hut.

When Alfred Joyce bought a run in 1844 the improvements consisted of 'two very primitive huts, a log sheep yard, fifty hurdles and a watch box'. It was not long before he laid timber

1 *** J W Bull, *Early Experiences of Life in South Australia* (2nd ed, London 1884), p ...
2 R D Murray, *A Summer at Port Phillip* (Edinburgh 1843), p 191.

slabs on the earth floor of his hut, installed a proper door in place of the hurdle which had served the purpose, fitted glass windows, and replaced the bark roof with shingles. Itinerant splitters could be called upon to split slabs, palings and shingles, and a little later to pit-saw proper flooring boards. Sawn stuff was in general use only for sheep battens, floors and roof framing, while everything else was of slabs and squared timber.[3]

An article in the *Town and Country Journal* in 1881 discussed the lack of skilled labour in the bush, and was the first of a series designed to provide guidance for employers of unskilled labour. Having stressed that 'Buildings designed for temperate climates are quite unsuitable here,' it unselfconsciously went on to list the sources upon which the forthcoming articles would draw, nearly all of which were British. It is instructive to consider them. They include Robert Scott Burn on *Carpentry and General Framing* and *Bricklaying and Masonry*, and many of the technical series published by Spon and by Weale. The other contributors who are named seem mostly to be authors in the series of Weale's *Rudimentary Treatises:* Tredgold (presumably referring to his *Carpentry and Joinery*); Dobson (author of five works in the series: *Building; Brick and Tile Making, Foundations and Concrete Works; Masonry & Stone Cutting; Pioneer Engineering*); Swindell (*Well Sinking and Boring*); Heather (*Use of Instruments*); Allen (*Cottage Building*); Burnell (*Limes and Cements*); Bland (*Arches, Piers and Buttresses*); Brooks, (*Dwelling Houses*); Beaton (*Quantities and Measurements*). Some of these seem of very dubious use to the average country dwelling builder, and two are surely completely irrelevant - Baker (*Subterranean Surveying*) and Stevenson (*Civil Engineering in North America*). Some of the titles cited other than these in Weale's series are of equally marginal relevance.[4]

homestead forms

Amateurs are much addicted to various theses about homesteads, of which the typical one is that they arise in three stages the squatter's primitive hut, the comfortable farm building he put up for his family, and the pretentious mansion built for him in the boom years. Commonly, so the story runs, all three stages may still be seen either adjacent to each other or embedded one inside the next like the layers of a pearl. Of these two stereotypes the former was being applied to Canadian houses as early as the 1830s, when the 'Backwoodsman's' *Sketches of Upper Canada* described the 'glaring and staring red brick house' built close to the road so as to conceal the frame dwelling 'which at one time the proprietor looked upon as the very acme of his ambition'. The frame house is now used as

3 Alfred Joyce [ed G F James], *A Homestead History* (Melbourne 1949 [1942]), pp 53, 62, 79, 80.

4 *Town and Country Journal,* 4 June 1881, p 1077. Some other works cited are Molesworth, *Pocket-Book of Engineering Formulae;* Hurst, *Architectural Surveyor's Handbook;* Yeoman, *Dictionary of Daily Wants;* Spon, *Workshop Recipes* [actually *Receipts*], Tomlinson, *Cyclopedia* (*Cyclopedia of Useful Arts and Manufactures, &c*) and Templeton, *Workshop Companion.* There are many others including the American works of 'Vause' [Calvert Vaux, *Villas and Cottages*] and 'Woodwood' [George Woodward, various]. This presents a very strange picture. For example R S Burn's *Colonist's and Emigrant's Handbook,* and Young's *Every Man his own Mechanic,* would be far more relevant than most of the books cited.

a kitchen; the substantial log house which preceded it has become 'a chapel of ease to the stable or cowhouse'; and the original shanty or log hovel is now the piggery.[5]

In Australia the first building was more commonly altered stage by stage, until it made no sense to call it the first, second or third homestead:[6]

> well, we pulled down the chimney and lengthened the hut 8 feet, & put up the chimney as it was before, at the end decently, [and] took down the front slabs & made the whole front a mud wall, took off the roof & put on one with gable ends & forming a skillion 7 feet broad behind, & a verandah 5 feet broad in front & the plate 6 1/2 feet high. The [verandah] rafters rest two feet up the rafters of the hut, so the verandah & skillion are much higher than our old verandah. The roof is carried on to shelter the chimney, it being mud, instead of round stuff as before.

There are doubtless many cases where the evolution does in fact conform to one of the theoretical models, but one should remember, when looking at buildings which seem to belong to the first stage of this evolution, that very crude outbuildings were often attached to sophisticated homesteads and that it is quite unreasonable to assume that the most primitive building a site is the earliest. William Howitt, however, did describe a squatter's hut which, in conformity with the ideal pattern, had taken second place in the 1850s to a small but more sophisticated house nearby:[7]

> ... there is a broad verandah on the sunny, that is the north, side of the house, and the whole has a rough and picturesque aspect. At each end there is a chimney, built externally of wood and lined some four or five feet high [1.2 - 1.5 m] in the inside with slabs of granite to present the wood catching fire. These fire-places are very capacious - I suppose nearly six feet [1.8 m] square, and the fire is laid on the hearth. In the room where we were first located, the bare wood of the walls had no lining, and the chinks between the slabs were often wide enough to put your hand through. There was no ceiling, but all open to the roof ... the room at the opposite end of the building ... was lined and ceiled with canvass ... but the floor was still mud.

5 *Architectural Magazine*, II, February 1835, p 72.
6 William Bucknall to Albert Bucknall, 21 May 1872, in Graeme Bucknall & Lorna McDonald [eds], *Letters of an Australian Family, 1827-1880* (Carisbrook [Victoria]) 1984), p 166.
7 William Howitt, *Land, Labour, and Gold* (2 vols, London 1855), I, p 129.

chimneys

The most important, and certainly the most substantial part of these huts, seems always to have been the fireplace and chimney. According to J K Andrews, who was in the Goulburn Valley of Victoria in the later nineteenth century:[8]

> the chimney was made of logs, nicely fashioned as other chimneys are. The fireplace is about 6 ft x 5 ft [1.8 x 1.5 m] - some larger, for safetys sake the place is lined with pug, ... about eighteen inches [0.45 m], and four feet [1.2 m] high. From an iron bar up and across the chimney, trace (plough) chains are fixed; on these hang the large or smaller boiler, the 3 gallon [14 litre] water fountain and or the ordinary size tea kettle, and when needed a frying pan saucepan, or a campoven [*sic*], a pot hook with a 'sort of a swirl' held the saucepan. The cooking utensils were of cast iron. As the settler increased in riches and knowledge, an iron crane was introduced to the fire place, this was like a one bar (top) gate and held with simple gadgets, the hanging cooking vessels, and did away with long chains and heavy lifting, the kettles and pots could be brought on and off the fire with little effort, a camp oven was used for baking - (bread, meat, potatoes + some kinds of puddings) placed in the fire-place, a fire under and above.

H W Haygarth, like Howitt, described a chimney built of wood with a lining of stones to stop it catching fire.[9] There were also more ramshackle structures, such as Lady Franklin found at the hut of the squatter Mundy in 1839. This was[10]

> ... a good chimney of stones in the lower part but the upper, not completed, is formed first by a barrel over which is an old tea chest and some movable plants to shift according to the wind.

At Paynesville, Gippsland, chimneys were formed of what sounds like wattle and daub, being 'constituted of poles and interwoven with sticks hurdle fashion and faced with mud'.[11] A few years later at Seaspray, campers would build 'A large fire place of semi-circular shape' outside the tent. 'A quantity of stout ti-tree saplings are cut in pieces of about four feet [1.2 m] in length and then driven into the ground fully twelve inches [0.3 m]; heavy clods of earth are then piled up in rows to the same height against them.'[12]

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8 J K Andrews, 'History of Merrigum' (manuscript, Merrigum [Victoria] 1954, copy supplied by Anne Tyson, 1997), p 61.

9 H W Haygarth, *Recollections of Bush Life in Australia* (London 1848), p 16.

10 M Brookes, *Riders of Time* (Melbourne, 1967), p 70.

11 *Illustrated Australian News*, 7 June 1879, quoted in Coral Dow, 'Ti Tree and Reeds', *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, 21 (March 1997), p 4.

12 Coral Dow, 'Ti Tree and Reeds', *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, 21 (March 1997), p 7, quoting the *Gippsland Times*, 7 February 1887.

According to Sandy McCrae chimneys could be of brick or split she-oak, but their own chimney resembled the one described by Howitt and was of stringybark plastered outside with mud and lined internally with stones.[13] George McCrae recalled that[14]

> ... the chimney was constructed of hardwood boards nailed across a framework of slabs, tapered towards the top, and plastered internally with mud. The fireplace, lined with rough stones, composed quite a room in itself.

This appears to be typical enough, for J H Kerr visited the property of an Indian major settled in Victoria whose fireplace could have accommodated the whole family,[15] and Boldrewood mentions a wooden chimney lined with stones which, he says, worked well without smoking.[16] In the fifties too, James Armour found a fireplace in a shearers' hut which was large enough for a man to sit at each side when the fire was low - in fact quite the traditional inglenook.[17]

In the gold rushes the craziest chimneys appeared, and at Bendigo in 1853 William Howitt found them[18]

> ... extraordinary pieces of architecture; some are built of horizontal, some of perpendicular timbers, up to the eaves (sic) of the tent, and then tapered away to some height, covered with bark, or sheets of tin which have lined packages. Others, again, are covered with bullock-hides, and some with sheepskins, and not put on in any very orderly style. A considerable number are surmounted by dry casks - American flour barrels - which make the upper shaft of the chimney ...
> Our tent itself is now accommodated with a substantial open fireplace, made of solid pieces of boughs, of about nine or ten inches diameter each, fitted together at the corners, and neatly plastered at the joints with clay. From this frame springs an obelisk-like chimney of poles, covered with green bullock-hides, which, altogether, displays a degree of shapeliness and neatness that may be looked for in vain far around.

The chimneys at the Green Hill diggings in 1860 were much the same as those of Bendigo,[19]

> ... with the lower part roughly built of stones topped by corpulent old casks, very much awry, and looking as rakish and dissipated as such portly shapes could look; one or two more chimnies were of the common rag-bag and stick order of architecture, consisting of a few slabs or sticks dabbed with mud and swathed round with wraps of old canvas tied together, looking exactly like great cut fingers, clumsily

13 McCrae, *Georgiana's Journal,* p 60.
14 McCrae, *Georgiana's Journal,* p 154.
15 Kerr, *Glimpses of Life in Victoria,* p 38.
16 'Boldrewood', *Old Melbourne Memories,* p 46.
17 James Armour, *The Diggings, the Bush and Melbourne* (Glasgow 1864), p 13.
18 Howitt, *Land, Labour and Gold*,I, pp 377-8.
19 Louisa Meredith, *Over the Straits: a Visit to Victoria* (London 1861), p 255.

> bandaged up; others again were designed in more rural taste, being the trunks of growing trees, with hollows in them ....

The use of casks or barrels on chimneys was not an exclusively local characteristic, for pork barrels were used in the same way during the American Civil War.[20]

In Queensland there was a government specification for the construction of iron-lined slab chimneys in post and telegraph offices of the 1880s:[21]

> Form chimneys as shown with stumps and plates all as before, sheeted on top with six inch by two inch slabs of hardwood. Studs to be three inch by three inch all framed as shown with gathering formed of sawn scantling; the lower part of the chimney to be closed in with slabs fixed vertically and secured with one inch by one inch fillets well nailed; the shaft to get weatherboards all as before specified; line shafts and gathering inside with stout sheet iron well nailed at top and bottom, rivetted along joints. Fill in up to floor level, and line fireplace up to height shown with large flat stones set in ant bed mortar and floated with same.

diggers and selectors

Of diggers' dwellings in general it is necessary only to say that log and slab huts have already been discussed, and perhaps to quote Howitt once more on one typical ethnic characteristic:[22]

> You may generally distinguish the abodes of the natives of Ireland, by their picturesque resemblance to the cabins of the Green Isle, being more remarkable for their defiance of the symmetry than any others. They seem to be tossed up, rather than built, and are sure to have sundry black poles sticking out of the top, and pieces of sacking or old breeches hung up before them, here and there, to keep the wind from drawing all the smoke down into the interior.

After 1862 the land became available for selection, and miners and others with little capital settled down to agriculture, needing buildings which were cheap, but no longer necessarily portable. The census figures actually show a decrease from twenty-eight per cent to five per cent in the proportion of temporary dwellings between 1861 and 1871, but this would be largely attributable to the number of tents on the goldfields which disappeared or were converted to cottages, while on the other hand many more or less primitive buildings were

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20 D E Nelson, '"Right Nice Little House[s]": Impermanent Camp Architecture of the American Civil War', in Camille Wells [ed], *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, I* (Columbia, Missouri, 1987), pp 86-7.

21 Quoted in Donald Watson, *The Queensland House* (Brisbane 1981), p 4.5.

22 Howitt, *Land, Labour and Gold*,I, pp 377-8.

probably classified as permanent. During this period a large number of both traditional and mongrel methods of building in timber, masonry, mud and wattle-and-daub seem suddenly to have come into their own.

the bough shed

The 'bough shed', with a roof of boughs and with either open sides or walls also of boughs, became an institution. The idea is so basic that it may not seem to call for much explanation, but it is so widespread that some account must be attempted. A small example appears in one of the Holtermann photographs of Gulgong in 1872, a square bough-roofed bay standing at the eastern end of a bark roofed dwelling.[23] But most known examples are later, and they are commonest in Queensland.

Constance Ellis describes a changing station on the mail route to Charleville in 1889 which was simply a sapling frame with a roof of mulga boughs.[24] A few years later she and her husband, living in a tent at 'Noondoo' station, built themselves a dining room with walls and roof of green boughs.[25] Across the border in South Australia the Pope family, storekeepers at Innamincka in 1900-13, would often sleep out in 'a big lignum shed, six or seven feet high, with a gap at the bottom so we could have air underneath'.[26] At Innamincka station homestead, five kilometres away, there was another bough shed, described in the 1920s as:[27]

> constructed on the lines of a coolgardie safe, to form a spacious room made with wire netting, boughs, saplings and leaves. Guttering contained holes through which water was played between layers of wire netting and leaves, which composed the walls.

The watering of the walls is a tradition almost certainly brought to Australia from India in the 1830s, as will be discussed below.

In Western Australia, Campbell and Charles Deland, when mining at Hayes New Find in 1897, had two tents and a 'dining room ... of boughs laid on a framework of sticks but the walls are trans [?sans] everything.'[28] Bough sheds were also common in the Northern Territory, but there is no reason to believe that they first evolved there, nor is there any evidence for the suggestion that they derived from Aboriginal building forms.[29]

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23 Keast Burke [ed], *Gold and Silver* (Melbourne 1973), pl 77.
24 C J Ellis, *I Seek Adventure* (Sydney 1981), p 4.
25 Ellis, *I Seek Adventure*, p 68.
26 H M Tolcher, *Innamincka* (Innamincka [South Australia] 1990), p 17.
27 Elizabeth Burchill, *Innamincka* (Melbourne 1960), p 77.
28 Charles Deland to Effie Wyllie, 21 May 1897, in M R Best [ed], *A Lost Glitter* (Netley [South Australia] 1986), p 170. See also pp 175, 207 & pl 25.
29 A H Voisey, 'House Types of the Northern Territory, Australia', *Australian Geographer*, III, 3 (November 1937), p 29, quoted in Bridget Jolly, 'Solomit in Australia and its European Context' (PhD, University of South Australia, 1998), p 10.

wheat bags & iron

While all these *ad hoc* methods are found to some extent in farm buildings of every period, the indications are that they were most common from the 1860s and the 1930s. Between these dates the wheat bag dwelling emerged. Southern Cross, on the Western Australian goldfields, consisted in 1895 of three or four brick buildings, others of wood or iron, and the remainder of 'canvas and bags'.[30] Hannan's, nearby, had comprised only five or six bag shanties until it experienced a minor boom and acquired fifty good commercial buildings.[31] One such building was photographed in 1905 at Bridgetown, Western Australia, while in 1908 every sort of hybrid combination of second hand hessian bags and corrugated iron could be found at Diamond Creek, outside Melbourne. In about 1900-20 huts clad in bags or other hessian material were commonly used by new settlers in the Victorian Mallee.[32] The use of hessian as a base for cement rendering is a more sophisticated development, which will be discussed below. Kerosene tins, which were always common building components on farms, probably enjoyed their heyday in the 1920s, as will appear below.

It is these later periods that provide the richest variety of vernacular building, and the structures themselves will only come to be fully documented and understood when there has been a coordinated survey of them, and a detailed study of the land selection records. The survey is the most urgent need. Time and bushfires continue to take their toll, and there are few farmers today who will preserve a bark roof when it can so easily be replaced in corrugated iron. These buildings are disappearing silently and rapidly and without check. Opinions may vary as to their aesthetic merits but their value as historical artefacts is beyond dispute. We can no more let these buildings be destroyed than we could allow all the works of colonial artists to be pulped. If one reader is able to bring about the preservation of one structure, then this book will not have been written in vain.

30 Campbell Deland to his parents, 18 June 1895, in Best, *A Lost Glitter*, p 29.
31 Campbell Deland to his parents, 29 September 1895, in Best, *A Lost Glitter*, p 55.
32 Janet Lynch et al, *A Vision Realised* (Underbool [Victoria] 1988), pp 44, 108, 120, 126, 134, 139; Jocelyn Lindner et al, *Kow Plains and Beyond* (Cowangie [Victoria] 1988), p 26.