

#### 4.05 *The Transformation of the Tent*

tents

**the framed tent**

**transitional examples**

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#### *tents*

The tent in the modern sense, of a fabric envelope supported on a minimum number of vertical poles and braced with guys, was more the exception than the rule in the nineteenth century. Early examples might consist of a sail or tarpaulin draped over a pole in an *ad hoc* fashion, and later the framed tent, as discussed below, was more common. The pole draped tent did not last long in Australia, but was more institutionalised in New Zealand. At Canterbury these V-shaped structures were - it is alleged - later thatched with grass, and one illustration shows the end wall weatherboarded.<sup>1</sup>

More conventional tents might likewise be given thatched roofs. Near Roebourne in Western Australia, Charles and Eliza Broadhurst and their family lived in 'a small tent completely surrounded by and covered in with a screen thatched with reeds.'<sup>2</sup> When William and Elizabeth Mayhew reached Roebourne in 1869 there were only about thirty permanent buildings and their promised accommodation was unavailable, but they were given a tent with a roof made of rushes.<sup>3</sup> After various changes they spent some time in a bark hut, as mentioned above, before returning to Perth. It sounds as if the Broadhursts had a double roof and double walls, and the Mayhews probably a double roof only.

The range of conventional tents was probably wider than that available today, especially in larger models like the military bell tent. Our purpose here, however, is to review only those which resembled or which evolved into permanent buildings. One brought from England by E G Bucknall in 1843 was:<sup>4</sup>

a tent, 21 feet by 12 with two poles and other proper supports. I have erected it in a field and got it in complete order. it looks like a cottage and as the sides are perpendicular, the whole of its dimensions are available. It is strongly fastened to the ground with ropes and iron pins or plugs, and it is made waterproof.

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1 N P Bevin, 'Corrugated Iron: a NZ Perspective' (BArch, University of Auckland, 1983), p 43.

2 Susan Hunt, *Spinifex and Hessian* (Nedlands [WA] 1986), p 41, quoting Colonial Secretary's Office, 1866, vol 581, no 100.

3 Hunt, *Spinifex and Hessian*, p 51, quoting Colonial Secretary's Office, 1869, vol 646, 4 January 1869.

4 E G Bucknall to Stephen Bucknall, 19 April 1843, in Graeme Bucknall & Lorna McDonald [eds], *Letters of an Australian Family, 1827-1880* (Carisbrook [Victoria] 1983), p 56.

### *the framed tent*

The commonest form of tent was similar to this in appearance, but was not supported merely by poles and ropes. rather it was a house-shaped timber frame over which was drawn either a tailor-made envelope or a more ad hoc assemblage of tarpaulins. In 1842 the *Port Phillip Herald* carried an advertisement:<sup>5</sup>

To be let near the church at Richmond five capacious tents on wooden frames, floored and with doors (one having a brick chimney and stove with cooking apparatus) ...

In 1855 Henry Jones, a Castlemaine tentmaker, was advertising 'house covers', and this would have been a standard way of encasing better quality sawn timber frames.

At the Victorian gold mining town of Maldon, on the Tarrangower diggings, most early tents consisted of a frame of saplings draped over with canvas or calico, while the better examples had frames of sawn timber. They would require a fly to make them reasonably weatherproof, and were often improved by adding an inner lining, typically of green baize, to give some insulation, while a fireplace and chimney of stones, sods, or mud-daubed timber might be added at one end. An advertisement in 1858 referred to

A canvas Tent and Fly, 24 x 12, lined throughout with blankets, and inside with green baize and carpeting, with boarded floors and large chimney, kitchen and fowl house detached. Price £30.

Others had wallpaper linings or brick chimneys, while others again had slab sides and weatherboard fronts, but were nonetheless roofed in canvas.

### *transitional examples*

The framed tent, could be and often was transformed by stages into a conventional cottage. In the 1850s Mary Spencer found that the shop-houses in the main street of Beechworth 'were chiefly canvas or cloth on the outside, with wooden sides or corners, and wooden window frames and doors', while nearby Wangaratta consisted of a dozen framed canvas cottages, four brick houses and two brick inns.<sup>6</sup>

There is plenty of evidence at Maldon of the transformation of such tents into cottages. The Tarrangower Hotel was advertised for sale in December 1854 as 'the Frame work of a large Public House ... 62 x 37 feet, built of sawn timber, with a king post principle [*sic*] roof, and could be removed at very small cost,' which clearly indicates that it was not yet clad in boarding. Similarly Robert Walker advertised in 1858 a 'cottage' framed in American pine, 'fit for being weatherboarded', and Dr Bourne in 1859 a strong frame building 'intended for weatherboarding and shingling'. The transition was probably

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5 *Port Phillip Herald*, 1 February 1842, quoted in J M McMillan, *The View from Docker's Hill* (Melbourne 1993), p 14.

6 J M McMillan, *The Two Lives of Joseph Docker* (Melbourne 1994), p 251.

accelerated by two factors. One was the decay of the canvas, which accounts for a number of examples which had fabric walls and shingle or bark roofs. The other was the incidence of thefts effected by cutting a hole through the fabric, of which there were many reports, thus explaining other reports of buildings with slab sides and canvas roofs. The lining of partition walls and ceilings in hessian or calico did not present such serious problems, and remain common in country cottages (not merely converted tents) into the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

A surviving house at 9 Reef Street, Maldon, presents evidence of the process. It consists of three gabled units placed one behind the other with the gables parallel, in typical cottage fashion. It is clear that each was moved to the site separately because the walls are doubled where they join, with a gap in between. The central unit appears to be the original one, because it shows indications of blocked windows and a former front door step, and it also retains fragments of canvas, indicating that this was the cladding before it was weatherboarded.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence of a similar transition in a more primitive structure is found in a slab hut at Castle Road, Warrandyte, Victoria, owned by the National Trust. This hut was revealed when a house was demolished in 1989 to expose from within it a single room structure with slab walls, a bark roof, a door, a small window, and a fireplace and chimney. Subsequent investigation has shown that this was in turn developed from an earlier structure. Within the east and west sides are frames with four intermediate vertical poles or studs, mortised and tenoned into a top plate, and seemingly too light to support either the bark roof or the slab walls. The original structure is therefore believed to have been a framed tent. In the south elevation there is no such framing surviving, and this seems to have been the entry end of the tent, which could be fully opened out by tying the flaps back. The north end contains the fireplace and its the structure is inaccessible. The bark roof may have been added first, causing the structure too lean, because when the window was built into the slab wall the frame had already to be packed out to keep it in a vertical plane. Another indication that the original frame was too light is the presence within the east wall (and doubtless the west wall as well) of a criss-cross pair of hoop iron braces. A Ewbank nail found within the slab additions suggests a date for these not long after 1870, and hence an even earlier date for the original tent.

The tradition continued into the twentieth century. At about the time of the Great War William and Ellen Sear were living at the Brown Coal Mine near Morwell, Victoria, the site which subsequently became Yallourn. Their house was a tent with a floor of packed earth and a 'tin' (doubtless iron) chimney at one end 'bricked' with stones from the river. Gradually it was replaced with split slabs and bark walls, until it had become a permanent hut.<sup>9</sup>

At Mount Isa in Queensland, a mining field discovered in 1923, the first permanent houses evolved from the canvas tent in the time honoured fashion, and 'tent houses' remained common from the 1930s to the 1950s. They were long narrow buildings with canvas walls and roof, and a completely separate iron roof on a lightweight timber frame, acting just like

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7 Miles Lewis, *The Essential Maldon* (Richmond [Victoria] 1983), pp 31-2.

8 Tony Dingle, 'Our House' (typescript 1997), p 1.

9 George Sear, 'The Sear Family: Gippsland Miners', *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, 9 (December 1990), p 4.

the fly of a conventional tent. In this they would seem to be the descendants of the buildings at Roeburne already mentioned. Iron or timber cladding might later be added to the walls for reasons of security or weatherproofing. Hogan illustrates a surviving example in Fourth Avenue, and quotes its description in 1937 as a 'three roomed house, walls of galvanised iron and drum roof; roof of galvanised iron, partitions of iron and wood, floor boards and earth'<sup>10</sup> Some such structures, pieced together from sacks and bags, might be better described as shanties than tents, particularly during the depression of the 1920s-30s.

#### *the fever tent*

At a more public level the 'fever tent' became a common feature of hospitals and asylums. It was the outcome of the fresh air craze in general, the belief that fresh air had curative powers in relation to specific diseases, and the epidemics of the early twentieth century. The original drawings for the 'canvas huts' or fever tents at the Kew Lunatic Asylum in Melbourne show what was in effect a permanent structure, albeit canvas clad. The main floor was carried on stumps, and the verandah posts were earthfast, braced to flat plates set well below ground level.

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10 Janet Hogan, *Building Queensland's Heritage* (Brisbane 1978), p 119.