

LOCAL MATERIALS  
IN  
EARLY NORTH QUEENSLAND HOUSING

The variability of attitudes and reactions demonstrated by early European explorers and settlers to the new North Queensland environment leads to the conclusion that their perception of the tropics was an entirely subjective one (Sumner, 1974B). Yet when the proposed period of residence in North Queensland was sufficient to warrant the construction of a dwelling, the realities of the situation were more strongly manifested. In the absence of industries for the manufacture or processing of building materials, and with slow, infrequent and unreliable transport facilities for their import, early houses were limited to locally available building materials - the natural, the organic, or the hand-made. It might be expected that a close relationship between environment and dwelling would thus ensue; the following account of the use of such materials for early North Queensland dwellings reveals, however, that the majority of the early settlers responded to the constraints of their new situation with some degree of adaptability, but with an even greater degree of persistence in established, and foreign, cultural and behavioural patterns.

Some of the various local materials required building techniques different from those of traditional European construction, while structural modifications were necessitated both by the properties of the materials themselves and by the shortage of skilled builders. Before turning to the materials, however, several important considerations bearing on early North Queensland dwellings must be mentioned. First, the mildness of the tropical climate meant that bodily comfort could be attained with minimal shelter. As one early English settler wrote:

Men can live almost wholly in the open air  
without great inconvenience or danger.  
(Capper, 1865)

Secondly, the importance of financial considerations led to minimal expenditure on housing:

The first houses were crude enough...The  
main problem then in life was to raise the  
means to support such homes. (Camden, 1911)

Furthermore, many immigrants viewed North Queensland either with uncertainty, or as a merely temporary place of residence; they were thus reluctant to erect permanent houses.

For these as well as other reasons, early North Queensland dwellings were frequently temporary, makeshift structures. This aspect of housing conditions was usually commented on in the Report by the Queensland Government

Statistician which accompanied each Census. In 1861, the recent occupation of most parts of the state was offered as explanation of "the most temporary description of tenements", and, in 1864, the desire was expressed that

the large proportion of places of shelter of the most temporary nature... (are) destined to give place shortly to more permanent erections.

This development was slow in realisation, however, and the "Act for Taking an Account of the Population in 1871" proclaimed that

"dwelling" shall mean any house building booth tent hut or other erection under which any person usually sleeps.

Although tents, included by this definition, were widely used in early North Queensland, these will not be further considered in the context of this discussion, as they represent an imported, manufactured form of shelter. In the following examination of the use of the various locally available building materials, the temporary nature of most early North Queensland houses will become obvious.

### Bark

The Aborigines around Sydney Cove showed the early settlers there how to obtain and use bark, but in North Queensland hostilities between Europeans and natives usually precluded any such cooperation (Reynolds, 1972). The bark huts of North Queensland failed to take advantage of the inherent properties of the material, and attempted instead to conform to a European building tradition with vertical walls, openings for door and windows, and a gable roof. Daintree's photographs show such bark huts at the Cape River goldfield; one is shaped like a simple tent, with the sheets of bark supported by a single ridge pole; another (said to be one of Daintree's favourite photographs) shows a compact hut with low bark walls, a steep bark roof held down by saplings, and an ingenious, asymmetrically positioned door (Bolton, 1970).

Although such bark dwellings were common enough in the early days of North Queensland settlement, the use of bark as a wall-material was not recorded in the Census until 1911, by which time it accounted for only 2% of all North Queensland dwellings. Bark shelters were used, as might predictably be expected, in areas of either very recent or temporary settlement, giving way in time to more permanent and more waterproof homes.

#### Numbers of Bark-walled Dwellings in North Queensland, 1911.

Palmer District	139
Kennedy District	153
Clermont District	75
Etherbridge District	60
Herberton District	95

In the following Census, in 1921, bark was combined with other minor materials, "Wattle & Dab, Bushes, etc".

which are further discussed below.

Bark was recorded as a roofing material, however, in the second Queensland Census, in 1864, when it accounted for 60% of all North Queensland roofs. The constructional technique employed here was as primitive as the material; overlapping sheets of bark were simply laid over a support of poles, and held down from above by bearers of laced saplings. Henry Lawson's "Old Bark School" was such a building:

It was built of bark and poles, and the roof  
was full of holes  
And each leak in rainy weather made a pool.

Apart from the discomfort of leakage, bark roofs were also easily removed by strong winds. The *Port Dennison Times Almanac* (1861) recorded that on February 3rd, 1860, a "very severe gale" removed many roofs in the town, and one month later a "yet heavier gale"

blew the roofs off the houses and blew down  
many of the houses as well. Nearly all the  
verandahs in Herbert Street (the main street)  
were blown away.

#### Grass and Brush

Grass as a wall material was not as common in early North Queensland dwellings as bark, but frequent examples of its use may be found. While Charles and Lucy Gray were waiting for completion of their slab house at "Glendower" in 1868, they occupied a

hut made entirely of thatch, with an opening  
in one gable for a window, at the other  
for a door which did not exist. (Gray, 1965)

Alexander Kennedy built himself a "rough homestead" at "Buckingham Downs" in 1877, consisting of

a framework of bush timber over which was  
laid a roof and walls of cane grass and  
rushes from the creek. (Fysh, 1970)

Corfield (1921) describes a similar "lignum hut" used as an overnight staging-post between Charters Towers and Hughenden in the 1870's, and records that the Muttaborra Hotel at that time was also a grass hut.

The locally available cane grass, lignum, or even grassy *Xanthorrea* tops proved suitable as materials, and provided that a builder was familiar with the production of thatch, a grass roof was a good alternative to bark. Joseph Hann, who had learned thatching in his native Wiltshire, made a thick roof for his slab house at "Maryvale", as did Robert Christison for the first log hut at "Lammermoor". As late as the 1950's, the old dining-room building at "Toorak" had a steep grass roof.

"Bushes, rushes and spinifex" were not recorded as wall material until the 1911 Census; from a state total of 266 such dwellings, only ten were not located in North Queensland, while the greatest numbers were recorded at Somerset (90), Cairns (62) and Mackay (55). This large number of inferior dwellings at Somerset could be accounted for by

the difficulty of transport and the shortage of labour; the government buildings there were of pre-cut timber, imported from the South. But the existence of grass houses in larger towns, and particularly on the humid tropical coast, requires another explanation. The same situation is obvious from the 1921 Census figures for roofing materials, where the class "Thatch, bark and bushes" included 56 such roofs at Cairns and 73 in the Pioneer area. These grass dwellings were probably built for, or by, the Kanakas who were employed in the sugar industry in these two areas. At Pioneer Mill in 1889 there were "four large grass houses for the Kanakas, one for Chinese and another for Malays", as well as a Kanaka hospital with walls and roof of grass (Connolly, 1964).

A simple form of construction, often favoured in drier inland areas, was the bough shed, an open-sided structure of bush timber covered by a thick, flat layer of leafy bushes or shrubs. The grass hut at "Glendower", mentioned above, had a separate "kitchen" of this kind. Because of their ease of construction, bough sheds were favoured as temporary shelters, providing relief from the sun, as at local race meetings. A very large open bough shelter, however, was recently erected at Middleton for travellers on the interstate tourist buses.

### Slab

Timber, in various forms, was the most popular wall material in North Queensland homes until quite recent times. When an early settler decided to construct a solid and permanent dwelling, his dependence on local materials also meant a timber structure, frequently in the form of slabs, lengths of wood split from the native trees. The absence of alternative materials thus combined with the lack of skilled workmen to make the early slab huts simple in form and modest in dimensions.

There were two methods for the erection of slab, horizontally and vertically. In New South Wales, the horizontal style was used for early houses, and the cruder vertical style for outbuildings (Freeland, 1972). In North Queensland, the reverse often seemed to apply. Dwellings, particularly the better ones, were frequently constructed of horizontally-laid slabs, held in position by vertical supports. Such structures demanded a certain amount of time and skill, but the result was a pleasant and durable home, such as the homesteads at "Maryvale", "Wambiana", "Peak Downs", "Retro", "Gunnawarra" and "Meekatharra", or the old Strathmore Hotel (Sumner, 1974a).

Outbuildings are normally of ruder construction than dwellings, and here vertically placed slab was often used, as in the buildings at "Saltern Creek", "Beaufort" and "Minerva". The Statistician's Report for the 1881 Census mentions dwellings of "strong slabs of hardwood standing vertically on squared beams or slipped horizontally into the upright timbers".

An interesting slab hut was "the station at Townsville" as drawn by Mark Watt Reid, whose exploration and recommendation encouraged Robert Towns to found the port of Townsville. Reid's hut was of vertical slab, with an earthen floor, a small front "verandah" and a slab chimney. The

dwelling was surrounded by a low wooden picket fence.

Lucy Gray also described the new house at "Glendower" as being made of thick slabs of wood placed up and down and kept in place by thick horizontal beams. Her brother-in-law, Robert Gray, lived on the adjoining "Hughenden" property in

a substantial house, built of horizontal slabs many of which I dressed and put in myself, the frame having been erected by the overseer and a carpenter. (Gray, 1913)

The difference in building practice may be partially a reflection of the nature of the local timbers. The small eucalypts of much of inland North Queensland would provide only short lengths of straight, usable slab, which would have to be placed horizontally. On the other hand, the shortage of labour probably occasioned a desire for lighter pieces and relative ease of construction.

One important property of early slab structures was their mobility. The early settlers, unaccustomed to both the seasonality and the variability of North Queensland rainfall, frequently built their dwellings too close to the waterhole and were substantially flooded in a wet year. However, as Rachel Henning reported:

It is not much to move a slab house, all the woodwork takes down and puts up again.  
(Adams, 1969)

The slab hut at "Wambiana" is another example of relocation (Sumner, 1975).

### Logs

The term "log hut" seems to have been used in the early days for what would more correctly be described as slab (Sumner, 1974a), and true log structures were rare. The quality of the local timbers was undoubtedly a factor here, as the native eucalypts do not have the smooth, straight trunks required by this method of construction. Furthermore, the technique of notching and fitting corners was not familiar to settlers of predominantly British origin, and the method is time-consuming.

A rare example of log structure was Robert Christison's first house at "Lammermoor", later used as a studio by his wife. His method of construction was primitive but ingenious:

For the walls he laid logs horizontally with the ends fitted in the space between the couples of uprights, and he lashed the uprights above strongly together with fencing wire. (Bennett, 1927)

Another unusual log hut was made of the trunks of Pandanus trees; it was occupied by the Costello family at "Valley of Springs" in 1885 (Costello, 1930).

An early history of Townsville reports that the first "solid structure" in the Cleveland Bay area was a "log Hut" at Comerford's Lagoon (Doherty, 1920), but this may have been a slab structure. The only known example of a log hut still in existence is at "Glenmore" near Rockhampton.

## Pitsawn Timber

Once the initial pioneering stage had passed, and particularly once the settler acquired a wife, it was not uncommon on pastoral holdings to construct a saw-pit to provide timber for a new and larger homestead (Sumner, 1974a). The earlier hut was then occupied by an employee, or used as a store. In the course of time, and with virtually unrestricted room for expansion or new construction, some stations came to consist of an agglomeration of various buildings, each with a different function.

The Fulford family at "Lyndhurst" lived in a slab hut for ten years before moving to a new house of "timber, sawn on the station, and very comfortable" (Black, 1933). Similarly, the old "Mud Hut" at "Mount Cornish" was replaced in the 1870's by a larger house of pit-sawn timber, and an early photograph of "Tambo" in the 1860's clearly shows the transition from bark-roofed slab hut to a large house of pitsawn timber with an iron roof, erected when a wife and child arrived.

In the towns, some pit-sawn timber was also used in the early times; in Springsure and Emerald, for example, such houses may still be seen. The homestead at "Hermit Park", now a suburb of Townsville, is shown in a photograph in 1878 as a modest house of pit-sawn timber; a gun-bearing man in a pith helmet stands in front, presiding over a large "native staff".

The homestead at "Inkerman" is a particularly interesting example of construction in pit-sawn timber, as here the timbers were erected vertically in a board-and-batten style, not in the usual weatherboard style (Sumner, 1975).

Although the digging of a saw-pit and the production of weatherboards was a more laborious undertaking than slab splitting, the great advantage of the sawn timber was its uniform width and thickness, which enabled a house to be constructed which was weatherproof.

## Shingles

The earliest structures most commonly had bark roofs; others used grass or brush, as mentioned above. Shingles were rarely used for roofs in early North Queensland. One reason may have been the scarcity of suitable hardwood, but a more likely explanation is to be found in the time-consuming labour of splitting and fixing a shingled roof, demanding both special skills and special tools.

The de Satge homesteads at "Wolfgang" and "Peak Downs" had shingled roofs, as did a settler's house visited by the naturalist Lumholtz in 1889. An early Daintree photograph of a Burdekin selector's hut also shows a shingled roof. All organic roofs, however, whether of shingles, bark or thatch, had inherent defects and disadvantages: they were not only leaky, but also inflammable, they deteriorated quickly, they were easily blown away in storms, and they harboured vermin. Therefore, galvanised iron roofs were quickly adopted throughout North Queensland as soon as this material became available (Sumner, 1975).

It was occasionally the practice to cover the older, organic roof with a layer of iron, as at "Cressbrook", near Brisbane, or at "Emu Bottom" in Victoria. The old

meathouse at "Gracedale" also had a grass roof topped with iron. The "Peak Downs" homestead, however, is the only known structure of this type still surviving.

### Stone

Stone houses were always rare in Queensland, and those erected in the early days in North Queensland were mainly on remote pastoral properties in the Central West (Sumner, 1974a). A partial explanation for this distribution may be found in the extensive layers of sedimentary rocks west of the divide, whereas the igneous coastal rocks are either too hard or too deeply weathered to provide workable building stone.

Small huts in random or rubble stone construction were erected by the early holders at "Lammermoor", "Tuaburra", and "Mount Cornish", and a unique example made of local granites may be seen at Charters Towers. An intermediate sized dwelling of three rooms of split sandstone was erected at "Cambridge Downs". By the 1880's, however, a different kind of stone dwelling was being erected, in the form of large freestone homesteads in the colonial Georgian style. These houses exhibit very fine workmanship, and much time and labour have obviously gone into their construction. Several examples have been described elsewhere (Sumner, 1974a). One such property was "Darr River Downs", taken up in 1878. This large property was extensively developed and many "commodious stone buildings" were erected. In 1911, these included the homestead, which had nine rooms as well as annexes and a detached kitchen, the bachelor's quarters, which housed ten to twelve men, the cook's and servants' quarters, consisting of seven rooms, and other outbuildings such as the office, store, blacksmith, carpenter's shop, buggysheds, engine shed, motor garage, and stables (Camden, 1911).

For such large stone houses and other buildings the lack of suitable timber cannot be accepted as the major determinant of the choice of material, although this was sometimes cited as the reason. For, by the 1880's, dressed timber could have been obtained from the coastal mills more easily and more cheaply than the local quarried stone. So the preference may best be explained not in terms of restrictions in the natural environment but in terms of human attitudes.

Many of the pastoralists, as they became more settled and financially assured, inclined towards permanent and even ostentatious dwellings in stone. Some of them were members of landed families in Britain, and their new stone house was a reminder of the tradition of the country manor-house at home. Many others, however, came from a poorer background, often farm labourers or crofters; and for them, the familiar solidity and permanence of a stone hut was a reassurance of traditional culture in a foreign environment. A large stone homestead represented a symbol of wealth and associated implications of a desirable eminence, conferring the air of social respectability. As one historian has written:

Whatever their origins, the bark or slab  
or mud hut, and the weatherboard cottage

which succeeded it, were, if they established themselves, mere stepping stones to the solid rural mansions...which they were building during the latter half of the century.

(Crawford, 1960)

The "Mount Cornish" homestead demonstrates the importance of economic conditions in the erection of such stone homesteads. Its grandiose stone section was juxtaposed with the older pit-sawn dwelling (Sumner, 1975).

### Pisé and Mud-brick

Mud or clay structures were uncommon in early North Queensland, and reports of early "mud huts" can lead to confusion, as they often refer to stone structures held together with mud. In their constitution of clay and sand the soils of Western Queensland are in the main well suited to pisé construction, and the technique of "cob" construction also, without formwork, as opposed to true pisé, was well known in parts of rural England. Instructions on pisé construction were also available, and such knowledge was general in earlier times (Rayment, 1970). Pisé was used for several large buildings in the early days of settlement in New Zealand, where its use is attributed to the familiarity of French workmen with the technique; but, after an earthquake in 1848 damaged the "clay houses" of Wellington, pisé was abandoned in favour of timber (Stakpoole and Beaven, 1972).

Mud or pisé houses were most widely erected in southwest Queensland where timber was scarce, distances and costs too great for imported materials, and the climate semi-arid, so that deterioration was not a major concern. The pisé houses were constructed in the colonial Georgian style, as with the other materials mentioned above; there seemed to be no knowledge of Eastern building practice with this material, such as the use of flat roofs or inner courtyards. Pisé was not recorded in the Queensland Census, however, until 1911.

Mud-brick, or adobe, construction seems also to have been unknown, although sandy, sundried bricks, similar to conventional baked bricks, were occasionally used. Prerequisites were a suitable local supply of sand, clay and lime, and the necessary skills in manufacture and laying. The store at "Mount Cornish" is a good example of such a building (Sumner, 1975), and Gilmour (1959) recalled that handmade bricks were produced on the spot for the first Springsure hospital in 1868. An interesting hut combining hand-made brick with a thick layer of mud stands near the bank of the Flinders River at Hughenden, and there are occasional examples of other buildings being erected in handmade bricks as recently as the 1940's.

### Minor Materials

It has already been mentioned that the Census of 1911 introduced a broader range of materials into its classifications than had previously been recorded. Two of these groups were "Lath and Plaster" and "Wattle and Dab", although the numbers of such dwellings in North Queensland was, by that time, almost negligible. Houses of this

sort had been constructed in the early days of settlement in New South Wales, but it seems that they were never popular in North Queensland. This may have been in part because they demanded a certain amount of time in their constructions, but even more because their defects had already been proven by the southern experience.

When the classes were re-combined in the 1921 Census, the group "Wattle and Dab, Bark, Bushes, etc" amounted to only 1.2% of all North Queensland dwellings.

### Coral

One unusual local building material in coastal areas was coral, and it is reported that when the Butler family built the first house on Magnetic Island in 1877, rather than ship materials across from Townsville in their small yacht, they used coral, sand and limestone (sic) for the erection of their dwelling (*The Magnetic Island Story*, n.d.).

The Rev. Gribble occupied a primitive slab house at the Yarrabah settlement in the 1890's, but when he built St Matthew's Church on nearby Fitzroy Island, he used coral and lime for its construction (Gribble, 1930).

### Climatic Considerations

For settlers of British origin, high temperatures were a source of major discomfort in the new tropical environment of North Queensland. One of the chief means of reducing indoor temperatures is ventilation, and slab dwellings often drew comment in this regard. The Government Statistician wrote in 1876:

It is contended, however, by many residents in the Australian "bush" that the "open house" style, with an inch or two between the rough slabs forming the wall, and with window panes innocent of glass, are the most healthy of all habitations of this country....

Lucy Gray's slab house had

Between the top of the walls and the roof about 2 feet open, which has the advantage of letting in plenty of air and the disadvantage of making it impossible to shut out cats, etc.

In addition, "a person at one end has the benefit of conversation going on at the other" (Gray, 1965).

In contrast to these airy dwellings, some slab houses had the gaps "filled in with mud to keep the draughts out" (Fysh, 1970). A rare example of attempted insulation was the house at "Marathon". This had double walls, presumably of slab, filled with soil (Gray, 1913). It would therefore be closer in style to those houses with massive walls of stone or pisé, whose thermal properties are quite different from those of the thin skin of wood. Such massive walls are able to absorb large amounts of thermal energy during the day, so that the interior is protected from extreme maximum temperatures. At night, however, this heat stored in the walls is released again, so that the interior is then much warmer than the ambient air.

One early resident recalled that

the station house was a large one made of pisé, very solid and very enduring but frightfully hot as the thick mud walls seemed to absorb and hold the heat, and, too, there were not enough windows and doors. (Scott-Cowan)

Winter-Irving (1971) also recalls meeting a couple on the Diamantina who preferred to live in an "iron shanty" rather than the stone house, since they claimed that whereas the iron cooled in an hour the stone house took a week.

Apart from ventilation, the other major means of reducing internal temperature was by shading the walls from direct sunlight. This was only realised with increased strength of residence in North Queensland. Sketches of the early huts show very small eaves, and, at best, a narrow front porch or "verandah". Successive stages of development led to wide eaves, or to surrounding verandahs of the bungalow style. In inland areas today, shading devices are extremely large, sometimes reaching close to ground level.

Another means of reducing temperatures is by insulation of the roof, although the house "Thornburgh" is the only example where this was a conscious consideration (Sumner, in press). This result was occasionally achieved fortuitously, however, as in the "Gracedale" meathouse with its double roof separated by an air space of 30 cm. This was reputed to be particularly cool. The "Peak Downs" house, mentioned above, was another example.

With regard to roofs, some builders demonstrated a lack of appreciation of the thermal environment by letting a skylight into the roof, to provide illumination for the central living room, as at "Mount Cornish" or "Elderslie". While this was a desirable feature in an English climate, it could only lead to excessive heating, in a kind of "greenhouse effect", in the Queensland tropics.

Orientation of the house along an east-west axis can also serve to prevent solar heating. Such a consideration seems not to have been made with regard to the siting of early North Queensland houses, however. Instead they faced the waterhole or track in the country, the mine at the diggings, or the street in the town (Sumner, in press). If the house was a bungalow, however, orientation was not an important concern, since all sides were shaded. Trees, too, were often planted on the western side of many early houses, to protect that verandah from the afternoon sunlight.

#### Local Materials but Imported Traditions

An examination of the early North Queensland dwellings thus reveals that in plan and design the major determinant was imported English traditions of housing and of life-style, merely transported and reestablished in a new environment. Local materials were only a minor restriction. The external "Georgian" simplicity of the huts reflected the cottages of rural England. They all had chimneys and "wide hearths" (Gray, 1965). These were both climatically unnecessary and even dangerous, since they were mostly constructed of wood. The huts were surrounded by fences, and

gardens with English flowers and shrubs were cultivated. It was often remarked with approval that the clusters of huts on a station looked like an English village (Bennett, 1927).

Inside the houses the Englishness prevailed as well. The fireplace and hearth dominated the living room; if possible, the house also contained a sitting room or a "parlour". Tea was served on English china and linen, and the gentlemen wore coats for dinner. The favoured sports of the homeland were also imported. The gentlemen played cricket, and both sexes played tennis. Many early property-holders also tried to introduce the hunt, even though the native animals were not suited to the sport.

The type of houses that were constructed in this society and at this period were to a large degree the result of the settlers' background. This combined with the limitations of local materials, shortage of tradesmen, and sometimes meagre finances, to produce the origins of North Queensland's domestic architecture. In their new environment, and with these unfamiliar materials, the early settlers strove to establish familiar surroundings and a pattern of accustomed behaviour, a historical development which is still influential in contemporary North Queensland housing, and in our way of life.

The modern viewer of the early huts and structures built in the last century responds to such architecture with nostalgia, and the need for a tradition in a new land. But there is no doubt at the same time that the honest expression of native materials in a natural setting has an essentially aesthetic appeal. Even the Statistician, in 1881, who wrote that many early dwellings had "no pretensions to beauty", admitted that they were "generally strong, cool and healthy", and could be made to look "home-like or even pretty".

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