

RAAF Base, Darwin

An historic precinct at the RAAF base Darwin is listed in the Register of the National Estate. It contains 16 heritage-listed houses, still used as married quarters, which even today set a standard as functional designs for Tropical Australia. They have survived the many Japanese bombing raids of World War II and Cyclone Tracey in 1974. To appreciate their importance, it is necessary to look back in history to see how they came to be built.

Darwin as a Strategic Settlement

European settlement in the Darwin region is intimately related to the strategic importance of the region. Over time, this factor has stimulated the establishment and expansion of white settlement in and around Darwin, to a greater or lesser degree, according to perceptions of the urgency of these considerations.

The tiny garrison settlements, Fort Dundas, established on Melville Island in 1824, and Fort Wellington in Raffles Bay in 1847, were short lived and seem to have been at the behest of the British strategic and trading interests, rather than those of the Colony of New South Wales. A third settlement at Victoria, Port Essington, in 1838, lasted for 11 years but it too was abandoned.

In the latter half of the 19th century, development was driven by South Australian ambitions following the explorations of A. C. Gregory and John Mc Douall Stuart. A settlement at Escape Cliffs in 1864 failed ignominiously but Goyder's surveying of Port Darwin in 1869 did result in the establishment of a settlement whose permanence owes much to the establishment of the Overland Telegraph and its vital strategic communications link with the world.

The settlement at Port Darwin, being non-military was quite different from previous settlements that had been attempted in the Top End. Its success, at least in part, rests on a philosophy regarding settlement that can be traced back to Wakefield and Light and the carefully planned and structured settlement of Adelaide in 1836.

Growing out of the social tensions caused by increased industrialisation in Britain, the planning of Adelaide was based on a utopian view of organisation and design as answers to the social ferment, characteristic of British cities and indeed of the other Colonies. That the philosophy which was so successful in Adelaide was carried into further settlements in South Australia and ultimately into the Northern Territory of South Australia was largely due to one man - G. W. Goyder, the Survey-General of South Australia from 1861 to 1894.

Goyder himself with a government party of surveyors arrived at Port Darwin in February 1869 and by March the sites of four townships had been determined - Palmerston, Virginia, Southport and Daly. Palmerston, the capital was surveyed on a headland to the north of Fort Hill and divided into 1019 residential blocks each of one half acre. That original

survey included land which was later to become the RAAF Base. It was set out in a simple north-south grid, each agricultural unit of 320 acres related, in theory at least, to the township of Palmerston as its administrative centre.

In the years following World War I, the Australian government was particularly aware of the need to be responsible for its own defence and began planning for the distribution of its military forces. Although initially in concert with the British government, by the late 1930s, Australian defence policy had assumed a degree of independence that recognised Australia's isolation from Europe and its critical role in the Far East and Pacific. The landing of Ross and Keith Smith in Darwin in 1919 focused attention on this northern outpost. Their makeshift landing ground in Fanny Bay was later to serve as Darwin's first airport and regular services were in operation in the 1930s.

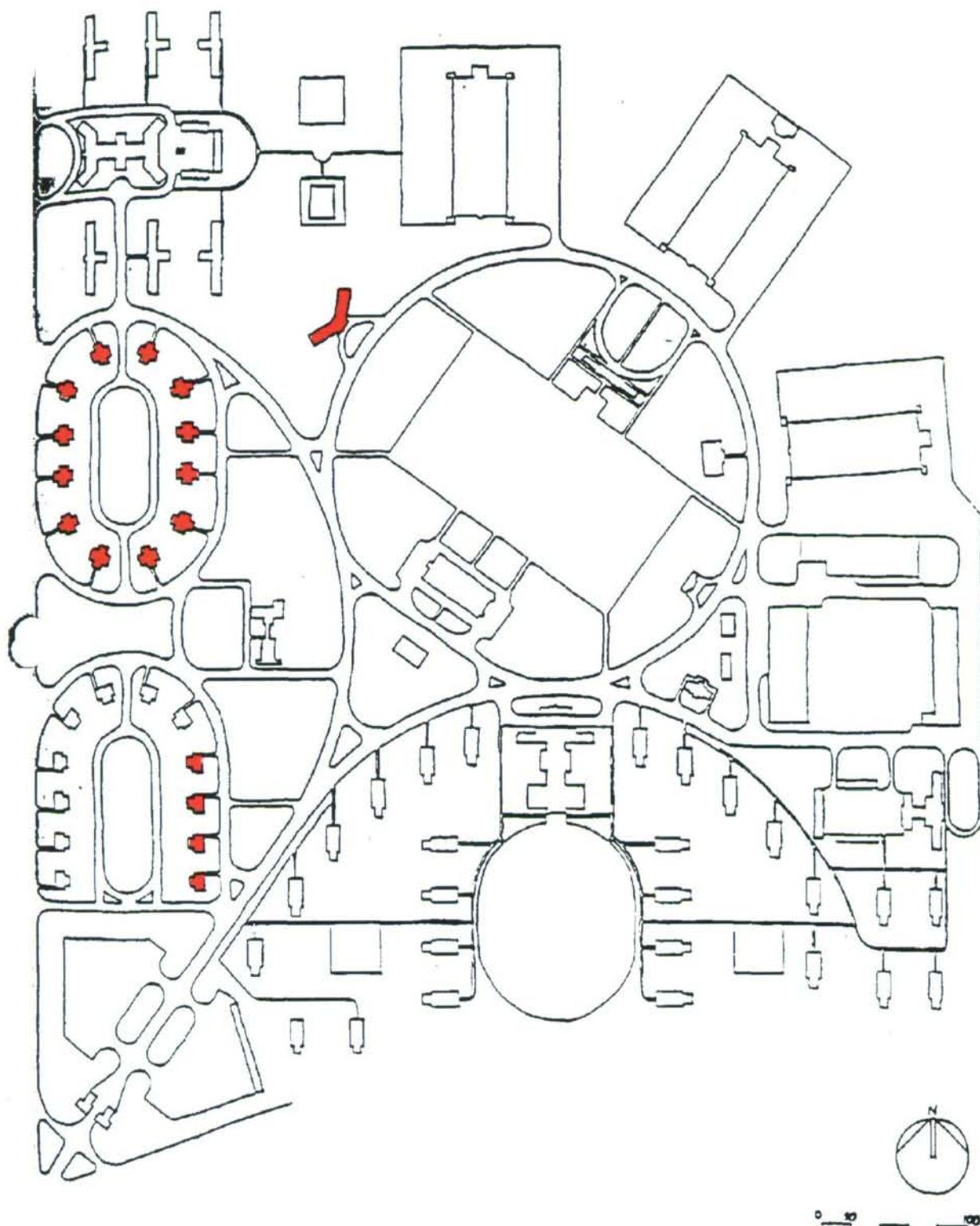
A RAAF Base for Darwin

International events led inexorably to the decision, made in 1937, to establish a major military presence in Darwin. The development of the RAAF base was part of that initiative. Plans were prepared and construction began in 1939. Within a short period, the former bushland was transformed into a major airport, administrative headquarters and defence base. The RAAF moved in during August 1940.

The plans and layout of the base were of a very high quality. It is apparent that the design of the buildings drew heavily upon the work of well-known architect B.C.G. Burnett, if indeed they were not designed by him personally. It has been said that the buildings exemplify the high standard of tropical architecture current in Australia at the time and represent a high point of tropical design in Australia.

The original layout of the base is still clearly evident today, and most of the original buildings have survived the trials of the years, including Japanese air attacks in World War II, and Cyclone Tracy in 1974. Much of the base is listed by the Australian Heritage Commission and by the National Trust as being of strong cultural significance.

This significance derives from its association with the increased military presence in Darwin in the years immediately preceding World War II. Significant also are the plan of the base itself, incorporating in a military establishment, the principles of town planning current at that time, especially those of the 'garden city' movement; the aesthetic quality on the ground of its precise geometric plan; and the architectural quality of the buildings, especially those designed for the climatic conditions.



Little town planning of similar quality or style existed elsewhere in Australia at the time. Prepared in Canberra, it shows the influence of Walter Burley Griffin on its designers. The plan for the RAAF Base has certain similarities with that prepared concurrently for the Army Base at Larrakeyah. Both show the underlying geometry of axial planning, nodes and architectural foci, precisely centred on the base parade ground. The 16 heritage listed houses are shown in red in this plan provided by courtesy of Allan Lovell Marquis-Kyle, Architects.

The Historic RAAF Housing Precinct

Some 16 houses built on the RAAF base in 1940 and 1941 are of a high degree of significance both individually and as groups. They include the residence constructed for the commanding officer, twelve almost identical houses which are grouped together towards the southern end of the base and intended as

residences for married non-commissioned officers, and three identical houses for married officers to the north of these houses, grouped in a similar fashion around a park.

Aside from the house constructed for the commanding

officer, there are thus two basic plan types represented amongst the 16 pre-war heritage houses. All of the houses retain their original overall form, and much of the original fabric is intact and in good condition. Changes which are known to have been made over the years include replacement of the asbestos fibre-cement wall sheeting and roofing.

Burnett made a major contribution to building design in Darwin, adapting his designs to the exigencies of the tropical climate. These adaptations in this building include its being elevated on concrete columns, the use of louvres, casement windows, wide eaves and a pitched roof. The house is L-shaped and originally included a concrete walled and floored aboriginal servants quarters as well as a maid's room.

In 1951, alterations were made which mainly involved conversion and extension of various rooms. More recently there were further refurbishment works but the overall form and design principles of the house remain. The house's site is located mathematically from the centre of the parade ground in Gandarra Circle. It therefore has a significant visual relationship with the base as a whole.

'The Tropical Type 2 Residences'

These three houses are part of a planned 12 which were to be built as quarters for officers. Of the four that were constructed in 1940-41, only three remain. The houses, built to a style known as Tropical Type 2, were constructed to plans signed by E.Henderson of the Department of Interior in 1939; Burnett may also have been involved in their design. Two of the houses vary in their roof plans, and the third varies in its

floor plan. The residences have timber frames and are clad with fibrous cement. The roofs are now clad with corrugated galvanised iron. Concrete piers, wide eaves, louvered walls, and internal walls which do not run the full height of rooms, all are adaptations to Darwin's tropical climate. There has been some refurbishment, but the essential elements of the houses are intact.

An important feature of these houses is their relationship with the symmetrical layout of the base. The officers' and non-commissioned officers' quarters are arranged around a crescent and park and positioned around the long axis which exists along the length of the western boundary as an accommodation area. As well as reflecting endeavours to cope with a difficult climate in the days before air conditioning, the houses are important for illustrating pre-1945 defence housing in the tropical north.

'The Tropical Type 3 Residences'

The plans for this group of twelve non-commissioned officers' quarters were also signed by Henderson. Known as Tropical Type 3 design, the residences are elevated on concrete piers and are timber framed. Originally they had fibrous cement roofs and louvres, though the louvres are now glass and steel. The internal partition walls were not originally the full height of the rooms in order to aid cross-ventilation, however they have since been extended to the detriment of the earlier air flow arrangement. There are vents to the gabled roofs, and wide eaves.

While some of the adaptations to the tropics have been





'Banksian House'

The Commanding Officer's Residence, or 'Banksian House' as it is known, was designed by Burnett. Drawings were done in September 1940 and the building was completed by April 1941.



Along with the other married quarters on the base, the Commanding Officer's residence suffered extensive damage during the Japanese bombing raids. Banksian House was severely damaged and the scars of the strafing runs by Japanese aircraft are still visible on the floor beams under the house.





'Anglesea Barracks', Hobart, Tasmania, is Australia's oldest military establishment. This former gaol at the Barracks now houses a military museum.