

HERITAGE PLACE

NAME OF PLACE: KONGBOOL HOMBSTEAD COMPLEX

ADDRESS/LOCATION OF PLACE: Coleraine-Balmoral Road BALMORAL

STUDY NUMBER: 050

HERITAGE OVERLAY NUMBER:

**OTHER NAME/S
OF PLACE:** CONGBOOL

PRECINCT: outside

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA: Southern Grampians Shire

PARISH: PARISH OF KONGBOOL

ACCESS DESCRIPTION:

CFA 388 A 122 & 13; VicRoads 54 F-6; located approximately 4.0kms south-west of Balmoral on the south bank of Mather's Creek.

SIGNIFICANCE RATING: State



Kongbool, Balmoral, façade of second house

Image Date: 11/01/03

EXTENT OF LISTING:

To the extent of: 1. All the Kongbool Home Station Complex including the original Kongbool homestead and garden area; woolshed (c.1850); brick storeroom (c.1860); stables (1899); shed (c.1930); buggy sheds and workshop (1899); Kongbool Homestead (1896-99); and land as defined by the Heritage Council

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PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

The original timber slab homestead 'Congbool', of double hipped shingle roof, Georgian casement sash fenestration and low encircling timber verandah was erected between 1842 and 1859. The east, north and south sides of the house are of exposed vertical timber slab construction, with vertical beaded cover straps over the joints. The west side of the house is roughly rendered and has two brick chimneys. The entire house has been painted white. Shingles are visible on the underside of the verandah beneath the steel roof. The verandah has simple chamfered timber posts, while the floor on the east side is of strip timber, and the west side is of brick, possibly original. Sections of the verandah on the north and west sides have weatherboard and fibrous cement sheet infills. The west elevation has four small, nine-paned square casement windows with original glazing, and a braced, ledged door with wide vertical timber boards. The east elevation has three twelve-paned double hung sashes with original glazing. This building is now used as a station cottage.

In 1898 a substantial single storey brick and stucco rendered mansion was constructed, with ornate iron verandah, elaborate interior and multi-gabled roof forms. The architect was Percival (Percy) Selwyn Richards of the architectural firm of William Brazenor of Ballarat.

The woolshed, c. 1850, is a large timber framed structure clad entirely in corrugated galvanised steel. The original extent of the woolshed is unknown, but may be confined to the south end of the building which has a steeply pitched corrugated steel roof. The north end of this section appears to have been truncated to accommodate a hipped roof extension. A long, narrow wing extends to the west, and has a gabled corrugated iron roof. Part of the corrugated steel siding on the east side has been painted red.

Later structures on the site include two brick buildings.

The plan of the homestead complex comprising gardens and avenue is typical of such established pastoral properties in the western district region of Victoria.

HISTORY:

The Mather brothers, David and John first took up the Congbool squatting licence on Mather's Creek near Balmoral in 1842, which was formerly part of Englefield. Being licence No. 254 in the Portland Bay District, it comprised 28,000 acres and held 8000 sheep (B&K, 112, 193). A tree he was felling killed John Mather in 1843 and 'he was buried near the hut in an unmarked grave' (Turnbull, 1). David Mather held the licence in his own right from 1844 until 1846. The Mather Brothers probably built the original homestead dwelling because they had no other runs, in which case it is one of the oldest and best surviving homesteads from the 1840s.

The next period of ownership is not certain. Adam G. Turnbull of Rocklands homestead, writing in 1917 or 1918, recalls that David Mather abandoned the run two years after his brother's accident 'and Edward Bell again took possession' (Turnbull, 1). Turnbull may be wrong or confused. Billis and Kenyon give Henrie and William Montgomery Bell as the early owners of Englefield, then Edward Barker, and then Bell & Co. again. In any case, he continues 'Bell handed the property over to [William] Affleck on the express condition he had to move on again when winter was over and he could get feed for his sheep. However, Affleck sold the property against the wish of Bell to Richard Stirling and George Fairbairn for the sum of £50' (Turnbull, 1). William Affleck is noted as the owner of Englefield from 1842-3 (B&K, 12).

In October 1846, Richard Stirling and George Fairbairn took over the licence (B&K, 64 & 193). Little is known about Stirling. George Fairbairn held the licence in his own right from August 1853 until May 1861. Fairbairn was born in 1816 and arrived in South Australia in 1839 but soon moved to the Port Phillip District, making him one of the earliest pioneers of Victoria (Garden, ADB, 4, 147). He married Virginia Charlotte Armytage in 1854 and, in 1855, they had a son, also called George, who was born at Geelong, probably at the original Hermitage, the Armytage family home in Pakington Street, Newtown (VPI, Reg. No. 125 and 4570).

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He later became Sir George Fairbairn, pastoralist, company director, politician and agent-general (de Serville, 293). George junior was the first of six sons and one daughter. Another son, James was born in Geelong in 1857 and then the family travelled abroad where the other children were born, returning 1861 (VPI, Reg. No. 2364; Garden, ADB, 4, 147). George Fairbairn senior relinquished the Congbool licence in May 1861. He was a pioneer in the use of wire fences and, later, in the export of frozen meat. George Fairbairn became member for Dundas and Follett in the Legislative Assembly from 1864 and built up a substantial portfolio of properties totalling several million acres by 1870, but not including Congbool, and one million sheep. He is also considered one of the pioneers of the pastoral development of Queensland (B&K, 64).

Billis and Kenyon state that Richard Gibbs, Ronald Bruce Ronald, Byron Lord Ronald and A. C. Cameron held Congbool as a partnership from 1861 (B&K, 193). They appear to be incorrect with at least the second person, who is likely to be Robert Bruce Ronald, a partner in Gibbs, Ronald & Co. and who had a brother called Byron (de Serville, 331). Born in 1831, he married Fanny Fowler in 1854 and they had a son, called Byron who was born at Toorak in 1872 (VPI, Reg. No. 2234 & 20176). Adam Turnbull notes 'in my Father's diaries Ronald is always referred to as Wm. Ronald' (Turnbull, 1). Richard Birkett Gibbs was born in Hertfordshire in 1830 and died in 1873 (VPI, Reg. No. 1307). He had married Suzette Baeyertz in 1862 (VPI, Reg. No. 283). They had a son called Richard Baeyertz Gibbs who was born at Ballarat in 1865 (VPI, Reg. No. 20038). According to Adam Turnbull, A. C. Cameron was Alexander Clayhill[s] Cameron. He married Jessie Robertson in 1859 (VPI, Reg. No. 791). They had at least eight children born in the Balmoral district between 1860 and 1874. Born in Fife, he died in 1874, aged 50 (VPI, Reg. No. 342).

The Congbool licence was cancelled in 1872 and it was taken over by the Messrs Robertson Brothers partnership in January 1873 when it comprised 22,948 sheep, 30 cattle and 24 horses and the pre-emptive section was valued at 8,400 pounds and the whole over 45,600 pounds (B&K, 193; Turnbull, 1; Halmarick, 114). The property has been known as both Congbool and Kongbool since the 1870s although it was consistently called Kongbool after the construction of the new house in 1896 (Halmarick, 139). The Robertsons were one of the largest and most influential pastoral families in Victoria.

Like all the major properties, Kongbool was involved in the tension between squatters and shearers in the later nineteenth century. In preparation for the 1888 shearing season, graziers formed an association to counter the Amalgamated Shearers Union formed in 1887. The leading men in the association included Samuel Winter Cooke, Richard Carty, Peter Learmonth, William Philip, Donald McLellan, John Robertson, and William Skene (Garden, 147). 'As the 1890 shearing season approached, Balmoral wondered who would win in the local sheds. When Congbool started in early September with 15 non union shearers the union organisers moved in the district, however when Mt. Talbot, Fulham and Gringegalgonna started later in September they were all employing union labour. It was reported that Englefield was refusing to employ unionists but it was expected that the union would win because all the district shearers were union members and the shilling per hundred that would be saved by employing non unionists would not pay the cost of bringing shearers from other districts' (Rogers, 32). In 1888, Thomas Robertson and the Robertson Brothers had a full shed at Kongbool with 25,000 sheep, for which they were offering 12 shillings per head to be shorn (Fawcett, 2003).

Rabbits had long been a pest but another pest made its appearance in January, 1892. Two of the first foxes in the Balmoral area were killed on Kongbool (Rogers, 36). Just a few months later, it was reported that gold had been found but the discovery was being kept a guarded secret. 'Any visitors to the areas were followed by an escort on horseback and it was rumoured that a rich field existed on Congbool and extended to Gringegalgonna. Gold allotments had been applied for by Robertson and Seymour and they were at loggerheads over the issue. Later, in October, Mr. Ferguson the geological expert who was making a mineral survey of the Glenelg and its tributaries indicated that he had found nothing of value. By this time all private prospecting for gold had ceased and the large mining companies that had been interested in earlier reports had become disinterested.

James Gordon Robertson was the proprietor of Kongbool in 1903 when he was mentioned in the Cyclopaedia

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of Victoria. He was born at the family's principal property, Mount Mitchell near Ballarat, in 1859. He was educated at Scotch College, Melbourne, matriculated and returned to Mount Mitchell to help manage that property until 1895 when he went to Kongbool. He married Anne Bath Farrar, the daughter of another grazier and they had one child, a boy (Halmarick, 138). James Robertson was a councillor for the Shire of Lexton for nine years and President for two. He was President of the Balmoral Pastoral and Agricultural Society for five years. In 1896, James Gordon Robertson commissioned the architect, Percival (Percy) Selwyn Richards in the office of William Brazenor of Ballarat to design a new house. He later designed substantial extensions to Mount Mitchell. He also designed the new Gazette homestead for Dr and Mrs William Cross, nee Eliza Robertson, in 1899.

James Gordon Robertson decided to sell Kongbool in 1923, possibly because of low yields of wool. He and his wife had retired to Coonac in Toorak in 1919. He died in 1923 and his widow, Anne moved into the newly extended homestead at Skene. The Closer Settlement Board was buying large properties but 'Kongbool was purchased by Australian Farms Pty Ltd, a rather precarious company which had been set up by some Victorian pastoralists in 1913, with the purpose of settling Indian Army Officers on the land' (Halmarick, 139) Twenty-five Indian Army Officers were settled on blocks averaging 1,000 acres each. The system failed with only a quarter of the officers remaining on their blocks into the 1930s. 'The Kongbool Company went into liquidation at about the same time as Australian Farms Pty Ltd' and the five homestead lots were purchased by General Sir Neville Smyth, VC, DSO and Lady Evelyn Smyth from England (Halmarick, 141). They renovated the house and remained there until 1949 when they retired to Portland.

THEMATIC CONTEXT:

3. Developing local, regional and national economies

3.5 Developing primary production

3.5.1 Grazing stock

3.5.3 Developing agricultural industries

5 Working

5.8 Working on the land

CONDITION:

The first homestead, presently disused, is generally in fair condition. The roof and guttering appear to be recent and are in good condition. Some window panes are cracked. Exterior paint condition is worn and dirty.

The woolshed is in poor condition, with steel siding being uneven and poorly fixed in some areas. The roofing is rusted, and paint is peeling and fading from the east wall.

INTEGRITY:

excellent degree of integrity

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

What is significant?

The 'Congbool' pastoral homestead on the Mathers Creek near Balmoral was first taken up by the Mather brothers in 1842. The original timber slab homestead of double hipped shingle roof, Georgian casement sash fenestration and low encircling timber verandah was erected between 1842 and 1859 and possibly before George Fairbairn acquired the run in 1846. 'Congbool' old homestead is now used as a station cottage having been replaced in 1898 with a substantial single storey brick and stucco rendered mansion with ornate iron verandah, elaborate interior and multi-gabled roof forms. This was an important early building designed by the Ballarat architect P. S. Richards who from 1895 to 1940 was responsible for innovative Edwardian and Art Deco style buildings in the district. The owner at the time was James Gordon Robertson, a member of the large and influential pastoral family. The property has been known as Kongbool since the 1870s. An early owner

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George Fairbairn (1816-1895) was one of the largest landowners of the western district, a parliamentary representative for the area and a pioneer of the frozen meat trade. In the 1920s the property was associated with the ill-fated attempt by Australian Farms Pty Ltd to settle Indian Army officers on the land. From 1934 to 1949 Kongbool was owned by Sir Neville and Lady Evelyn Smyth. The complex also includes the nineteenth century woolshed, much extended, and two brick buildings in poor condition. The plan of the homestead complex comprising gardens and avenue is typical of such established pastoral properties in the western district region of Victoria. The two homestead buildings are in good condition and retain a high degree of integrity.

How is it significant?

The Kongbool Homestead complex is of historical and architectural significance to the southern Grampians Shire and to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

Kongbool is of historical significance as an important Western District pastoral homestead complex, especially the two homesteads and the woolshed, which expresses the lifestyle and work of a major pastoral property and for its associations with the important pioneer pastoralist and parliamentarian, George Fairbairn and with James Gordon Robertson. It is of further significance for its association with the settlement of Indian Army officers and Sir Neville and Lady Evelyn Smyth. Kongbool is of architectural significance for its first homestead, a rare example of timber slab vernacular construction representative of the first era of homestead architecture in western Victoria and, by contrast, for its second homestead, an important work of the architect Percival Richards.

COMPARISON:

060 Gazette Homestead Complex, Macarthur-Penshurst Road, Penshurst
048 Skene Homestead Complex, Skene Homestead Road, Strathkellar

ASSESSED BY: tfh, mgt, aen

ASSESSMENT DATE:

11-Jan-02

EXISTING LISTINGS:

HERITAGE STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Include in VHR Include in RNE Include in Local Planning Scheme

No Recommendations for Inclusions

REFERENCES:

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Peter Leake	Homesteads of Australia Felix	1973	97-9
R V Billis and A S Kenyon	Pastoral Pioneers of Port Phillip	1974	var.