

#### 4.05 The Transformation of the Tent

- a tents
- b the framed tent
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##### a. 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> The same occurred in Australia, and the phenomenon is discussed in relation to the V-hut, below. However it was perhaps more common to put a canvas roof over a conventional slab building, such as the 'splendid dwelling' advertised for sale at Ballarat in 1853 with '5 feet slab sides, new canvass roof, 22 x 18'.<sup>2</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>3</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>4</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

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

<sup>2</sup> *Argus*, 26 August 1853, p 7.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Hunt, *Spinifex and Hessian* (Nedlands [WA] 1986), p 41, quoting Colonial Secretary's Office, 1866, vol 581, no 100.

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

permanent buildings. One brought from England by E G Bucknall in 1843 was:<sup>5</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.

### ***b. the framed tent***

A tent framed in crude timber poles, South Australia 1852: Edward Snell [ed Tom Griffiths], *The Life and Adventures of Edward Snell* (Angus & Robertson, North Ryde [New South Wales] 1988), p 305.

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. Some were run up with local materials, such as timber poles, but others were the work of specialist makers. In 1842 the *Port Phillip Herald* carried an advertisement:

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) ...<sup>6</sup>

In 1853 a wooden building to accommodate eighty men in hammocks, which had been intended for Albany, Western Australia, was instead delivered to Freshwater Bay in the Fremantle Road, and was 'covered in painted canvas, as taking a shorter time to prepare'. Four small wooden houses covered in the same way were also sent, as well as three to North Fremantle.<sup>7</sup>

In Victoria 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 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,

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<sup>5</sup> E G Bucknall to Stephen Bucknall, 19 April 1843, in Graeme Bucknall & Lorna McDonald [eds], *Letters of an Australian Family, 1827-1880* (Carisbook [Victoria] 1983), p 56.

<sup>6</sup> *Port Phillip Herald*, 1 February 1842, quoted in J M McMillan, *The View from Docker's Hill* (Melbourne 1993), p 14.

<sup>7</sup> R M Campbell, 'Building the Fremantle Convict Establishment' (PhD submission. University of Western Australia, 2010), p 8.9.

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. In 1854 Harrison's Outfitting Store in Melbourne was selling 'double width canvass and calico, all widths, suitable for lining houses.'<sup>8</sup>

### ***c. 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>9</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 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>10</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

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<sup>8</sup> *Argus*, 21 April 1854, p 3.

<sup>9</sup> J M McMillan, *The Two Lives of Joseph Docker* (Melbourne 1994), p 251.

<sup>10</sup> Miles Lewis, *The Essential Maldon* (Richmond [Victoria] 1983), pp 31-2.

also retains fragments of canvas, indicating that this was the cladding before it was weatherboarded.<sup>11</sup>

Former framed tent at 43 Aitken St, Williamstown: view in 2010, and detail of the wall construction showing the palm matting lining and the studs or battens aligned in the direction of the wall plane. Miles Lewis.

A cottage at 43 Aitken Street, Williamstown, now demolished, was built originally in 1843, and I have little doubt that the first portion was a framed tent.<sup>12</sup> The remaining fabric was heterogeneous. The outer walls were largely built of light studs, more like battens, widely spaced, and with their broader dimension in the line of the wall, a most unlikely placement if they originally had boards nailed to them, but understandable if they carried a canvas cladding. The subsequent weatherboard cladding differed from one face to the next, suggesting that it was added from time to time in an *ad hoc* manner. Even within one face there was a vertical discontinuity suggesting that the cladding was first applied to the width of one room, and the balance clad at a later date. Some proportion of the interior had been lined with palm matting with split bamboo fixing strips, but later boarded over. There were indications of restumping, and of the cutting away of the structure to insert the brick fireplace and chimney. The fireplace contained a colonial oven, something not available at the time of construction. My hypothesis has since been confirmed by the archaeological research of Gary Vines, which has revealed an original packed earth floor, and, so far as it goes, by the identification of the timbers by Dr Jugo Ilic. This has shown a mixture of types (and probably dates), including redgum stumps, messmate and mountain ash plates, joists, studs and rafters, kauri weatherboards at the east end, and kauri chamferboards for part of the lining.<sup>13</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

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<sup>11</sup> Tony Dingle, 'Our House' (typescript 1997), p 1.

<sup>12</sup> I was first told of the building in 2009 by David Wixted, who surmised that the vertical continuity referred to below indicated two separate structures which had been joined but closer investigation showed that the frame had been all built at once. Subsequent investigation was done by Willys Keeble, with contributions Chris How and Andrew Muir. When the cottage was demolished the materials were acquired by Simon Raynor with a view to re-erecting it elsewhere.

<sup>13</sup> Information from Willys Keeble, July 2010.

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>14</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 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>15</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.

Woolingubrah Inn near Cathcart, New South Wales, 1860, detail of the lathing rail below the eave line: Miles Lewis.

Where a conventional building was given a tarpaulin roof it was often provided with timber rails near the tops of the walls, onto which the tarpaulin could be lashed, in much the same way as was done with canvas street awnings. A rail of this sort has been found in a bluestone cottage, probably of the 1850s, at 860-2 Swanston Street, Carlton, Melbourne. Even more clearly, the Woolingubrah Inn near Cathcart, New South Wales, a wooden building believed to have been imported from Boston in 1860, has such rails on both long sides.

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<sup>14</sup> George Sear, 'The Sear Family: Gippsland Miners', *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, 9 (December 1990), p 4.

<sup>15</sup> Janet Hogan, *Building Queensland's Heritage* (Brisbane 1978), p 119.

#### **d. fever tents, sleepouts, classrooms**

The lazaret barrack at the Charity Hospital, Berlin: E-O Lami, *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique et Biographique de l'Industrie et des Arts Industriels* (Paris 1881-1891), I, p 503.

At a more public level the 'fever tent' became a common feature of hospitals and asylums. A pioneering example of the type had been the 'lazaret barrack' Developed by Dt Esse of the Charity hospital, Berlin.<sup>16</sup> In the early twentieth century there a craze for fresh air, which was believed to have curative powers in relation to specific diseases, including some of those epidemic at the time. 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.

An outdoor sleeping pavilion: Geo. Hudson & Son Ltd, *Cottage Homes* (8th ed. Hudson, Redfern [NSW] 1915).

The mania for fresh air was at its height in about 1900-1920, mainly in response to tuberculosis, and led by the United States.<sup>17</sup> The Melbourne architect A W Purnell owned a copy of the American book *Fresh Air and How to Use It*,<sup>18</sup> which showed beds cantilevered out of the windows of skyscraper blocks to benefit from air which was probably not improved by the heavily trafficked streets below. It also illustrated roof bungalows, summer houses, tent houses and a variety of other structures. Some of these types are found in Australia, one of the more widely promulgated being that sold by George Hudson of Sydney, a ten foot [3 m] square pavilion with a pyramidal hipped roof, a door to one side, boarding to sill height, and above this top-hung awning panels which could be raised and propped close to horizontal.

The use of such buildings as schoolrooms is attributable to the influence of the Charlottenburg forest school in Germany, of 1904, and later of that of the reformer and lecturer Dr Truby King. The pavilion-type or open-air classroom was introduced in Victoria in 1912, when the first two were built at Sandringham at a cost of £130 each; each accommodated fifty children. They were described thus:

Three of the walls in each building are boarded to a height of 3 feet, and above that height, right to the roof-line, are fitted with stout canvas navy blinds, which are adjustable, and can be opened to any height in bays. The back wall in each building is boarded from floor to ceiling [it had a

<sup>16</sup> E-O Lami, *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique et Biographique de l'Industrie et des Arts Industriels* (Paris 1881-1891), I, pp 503-4

<sup>17</sup> E C Cromley, 'A History of American Beds and Bedrooms' in Thomas Carter & B L Herman [eds], *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, IV* (U Missouri Press, Columbia [Missouri] 1991), pp 177-186, passim.

<sup>18</sup> T S Carrington, *Fresh Air and how to Use It* (National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis, New York 1912).

hyloplate board] ... the rooms are built on sleeper plates and not fixed to the ground by stumps or other means, and can, therefore be easily removed .. without being dismantled ...<sup>19</sup>

A number of others followed, including an open-air school for under-nourished children which opened in Blackburn in 1915,<sup>20</sup> apparently inspired by the minister of education's visit to an open air school for undernourished and convalescent children in Bradford, UK.<sup>21</sup>

The acceptance of such structures doubtless made it easier to contemplate regular housing of a similar character, which might otherwise seem rather surprising. An urgent need for the accommodation of industrial workers at Port Kembla prompted the New South Wales government in 1938 to construct a 'workmen's temporary settlement' for six hundred people. It was colloquially known as 'Spoonerville' in ironic reference to the minister responsible, and consisted of twenty huts divided into cubicles for single men, and sixty-five dwellings for married couples. These had walls clad half way up in timber, and the balance in canvas, with blinds instead of glazed windows.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> L J Blake, 'The Primary Division', in L J Blake [ed, *Vision and Realisation: a Centenary History of State Education in Victoria* (3 vols, Education Department of Victoria, Melbourne 1973), I, p 330, quoting *Report of the Minister of Education, 1911-12*.

<sup>20</sup> F H Morley & C J White, 'Special Services', in L J Blake [ed, *Vision and Realisation: a Centenary History of State Education in Victoria* (3 vols, Education Department of Victoria, Melbourne 1973), I, p 1012.

<sup>21</sup> O S Green & C J White, 'A Complex of Organisations', in L J Blake [ed, *Vision and Realisation: a Centenary History of State Education in Victoria* (3 vols, Education Department of Victoria, Melbourne 1973), I, p 1227.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Irving, *Twentieth Century Architecture in Wollongong* (Wollongong Coity Council, Wollongong [New South Wales] 2001), p 63