

Farmhouses in Townsville

Townsville's fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy products once came from local farms

Early farms

It is difficult to imagine now, but until the 1890s, and in some places much later, the western suburbs of Townsville were sparsely settled.

The Thuringowa Divisional Board, which later became the Shire (and now City) of Thuringowa, was not formed until 1879. It originally included all of Townsville's suburbs, except North Ward, West End and Belgian Gardens.

These suburbs, together with South Townsville, were the first suburban settlements in Townsville. Dairy farms and vegetable gardens surrounded the houses that were scattered through these areas.

McCarey established the first dairy farm in 1865, probably in Belgian Gardens or West End. Other early dairy farms were established at North Ward by Molloy and Commerford, and at Belgian Gardens by Lynam. Findlater had a dairy, which was probably at Railway Estate, but soon moved to what we know as Ooonooba.

The first vegetable gardens were established by Chinese in 1866, near lagoons at Belgian Gardens.

Settlement spreads

From the late 1870s settlement spread along the road to Ravenswood and Charters Towers, which then ran along Ross River. Small pockets of more dense settlement



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A farmhouse, about 1890

John Oxley Library



Lynam farmhouse, Belgian Gardens, built about 1900 (photo taken 1979)

developed in a few areas like Rising Sun, centred mainly on a hotel and small shops.

But the whole area was mainly given over to large estates with villa residences like 'Currajong', and to farms, for the population was much more dependent on local produce than it is today.

Dairies, piggeries, plant nurseries, orchards and vegetable farms — even a sugar cane farm — were scattered throughout what are now the suburbs of Hermit Park, Hyde Park, Mundingburra, Aitkenvale, Heatley, Cranbrook, Kirwan, Condon and Rasmussen, almost up to the site of Ross River dam. Also there were farms in North Ward, West End, Garbutt, Belgian Gardens, Railway Estate and Oonoonba.

Farmhouse, Home Hill, about 1920



Early experimental farming

Some of the early farmers experimented with plants that might grow in the tropics. James Gordon of Cluden Park had a large plantation of mangoes and other crops, and the Gulliver Brothers at Hermit Park and Aitkenvale developed local varieties of mangoes. Ben Gulliver was responsible for introducing many plants to Townsville gardens.

Chinese vegetable gardens

Chinese gardeners ran many of the vegetable farms. Reminiscences of early Townsville residents describe such gardens beside the lagoon in North Ward, in Ross Island, in Hermit Park, along Fulham Road in Mysterton, and in several areas of Mundingburra.

The Chinese introduced unique methods of watering their gardens. They established reservoir ponds from which they drew water in tin buckets. To irrigate the beds of vegetable plants, they used two buckets, suspended at each end of a pole carried across their shoulders.

Early farmhouses

Though some of the early farmhouses may have been on low blocks, most were set on high blocks (stumps) of bush timber.

Some had only a single room on the upper floor, surrounded by open verandahs or with verandahs at the front and rear. The living rooms and kitchen were downstairs where they shared the space with storage rooms holding farm implements or feed for the animals. The upstairs section was usually clad in timber, while downstairs was sheathed with corrugated iron, and later with ripple iron (a type of corrugated iron with smaller corrugations). There was no internal staircase; whenever you needed to go upstairs, you had to go outside and use the unsheltered stairs, even in the heaviest rain!



The Farmhouse at the National Trust Heritage Centre

The Farmhouse at the Heritage Centre

The Farmhouse at Castling Street is typical of the former style, though the main single room upstairs was later divided into two rooms, and the back verandah enclosed with windows.

It stood originally facing Fulham Road on a large block of land. The land is now covered with houses and part of Anderson Park. Built in 1921 for a dairyman, William Storey, it continued in use as part of a dairy until about 1960.

Another design of farmhouse used all of the space underneath for farm storage and had both living and sleeping accommodation upstairs. The kitchen was placed in one corner of the back verandah.

Water was always a scarce commodity in Townsville. Farms usually relied on windmills or rainwater tanks for both their household needs and for their animals and crops. Often the bathroom was a space enclosed with hessian or corrugated iron under the stand of the windmill.

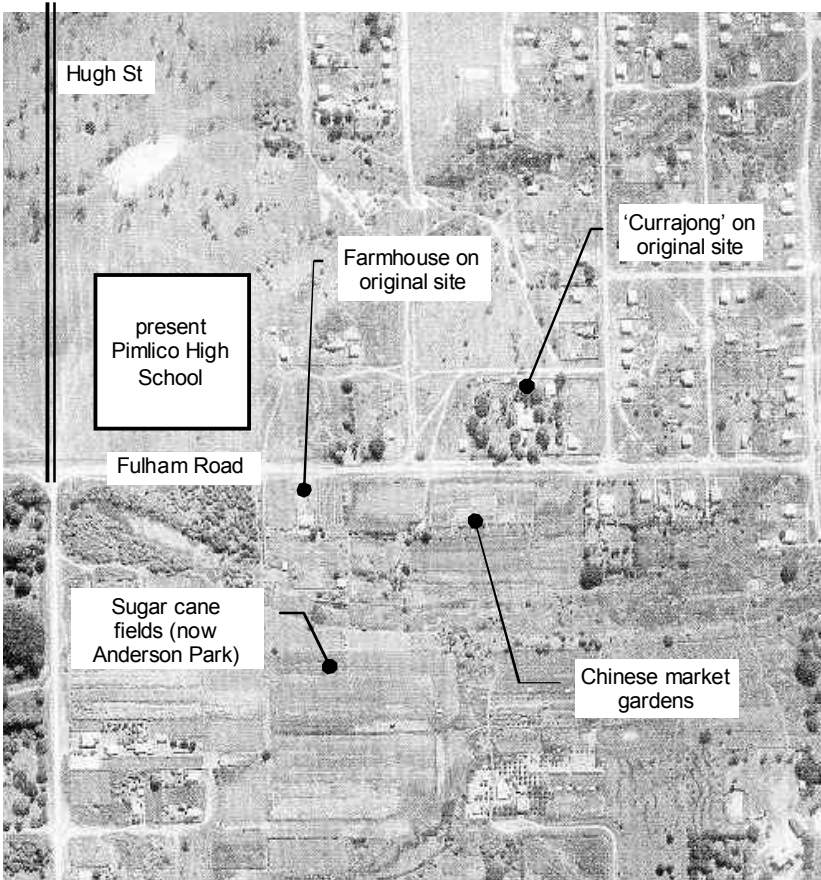
The construction method used in the farmhouse is different from that of the 19th century cottage and of the villa residence at the Heritage Centre. The boards used for internal sheeting are vertical rather than horizontal; they are also narrower. The exposed framing is different. Whereas the upright studs in the older buildings are quite close together, those of the farmhouse are further apart. Belting boards running horizontally between the studs act as a brace to strengthen the frame.

The back verandah was enclosed about 1947. The construction technique used on this section is more modern. The walls are sheeted externally, and the windows are casements rather than sash.

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So the Farmhouse reminds us of Townsville's farming history, and shows us how farmers in Townsville lived in the past. Also it illustrates developments in building techniques of timber houses in the early 20th century.

Aerial photograph, taken about 1941, showing 'Currajong' and the Farmhouse on their original sites.



Hessian: a coarse strong fabric made from jute or hemp and used to make bags and in upholstery.