

Housekeeping

**Today housekeeping looks easy...
...when compared to 100 years ago!**

Life in large houses like 'Currajong' was probably very pleasant for the owners. Indoors there was usually a cook and a number of maidservants. Outdoors a gardener/handyman mowed the lawns with a push mower, trimmed the shrubs and did the weeding, and maybe tended a vegetable garden. He also chopped wood into lengths that fitted into the burner of a wood stove and the laundry boiler, and looked after the livestock, which usually included horses both for riding and for pulling buggies, fowls for eggs and eating, and cows for milk, butter and cream.

Poorer families did not have this help; the whole family — mother, father and children — did the work of cook, maid, gardener and handyman.

Shopping

Meat, vegetables and fruit could be obtained from small local stores in most suburbs, which often sold groceries. Big grocery orders had to come from shops in town, such as

Hollimans, which offered delivery services. In the larger houses, the mistress gave the cook the menus for the week, and the cook then ordered groceries.

Delivery of household items was much more common in the past. If the family did not keep their own cows,

then milk, butter and cream were delivered daily by a milkman with a horse and cart. Bakers delivered bread daily, but in some households the cook or mother preferred to make bread with its distinctive smell and delicious flavour. Meat was sometimes delivered, if the butcher operated a

delivery cart. A Chinese gardener might deliver vegetables and fruit with a horse and cart, but often he carried his produce in two baskets suspended from a pole he carried across his shoulders.



NATIONAL TRUST
OF QUEENSLAND
Townsville/NQ Branch

Heritage Centre
5 Castling St, West End
Townsville Q4810
Ph (07) 4771 5873

Text:
Dr Dorothy M. Gibson-Wilde

Layout:
Bruce C. Gibson-Wilde



Storage

Ice for cooling ice chests was obtained from local ice-works, but it melted rapidly in hot weather. If ice was not available, food was kept cool in large hanging safes with mesh sides over which wet bags were placed. Special butter coolers were used to try to stop butter from turning to oil in hot weather.

But these methods were ineffective compared to modern refrigeration. This meant that shopping for perishable food was usually a daily task.

Cooking

A wood stove was the only means of cooking; gas stoves were not available until the late 1890s in Townsville. The kitchen was very hot in summer, because wood stoves generated a lot of heat — but it could be delightfully warm on a cold winter morning.

Kitchen stoves were a fire hazard. Often the kitchen was built as a separate wing at the rear of the house. Simple homes, like the Worker's Dwelling, may not have been fitted with stoves at all. Cooking was done over open fires in the yard, with cooking utensils suspended from metal tripods, or with a Dutch oven buried in the coals.

There was no household electricity supply in Townsville until the 1920s, so all food preparation was done by hand. Cakes were mixed

using a hand beater. Mincing meat, chopping vegetables and fruit was all done manually.

If a larger house had servants, several meals were prepared every day. Servants' meals were also provided, though the servants usually ate in the kitchen rather than in the dining room where the family gathered. There might also have been a scullery maid or a chambermaid who did the household cleaning and helped the cook, cutting up vegetables and doing the washing up.

The day would start with early morning tea often accompanied by bread and butter or biscuits. Breakfast was usually eggs and toast, sometimes with bacon or salt beef. Toast was made with a long fork, called a toasting fork, to hold a piece of bread close to the flames in the burner of the oven. The only cereal was porridge. If father started work early, he breakfasted long before the rest of the family, so two breakfast sittings were needed. Morning tea might be a simple cup of tea and a sandwich or piece of cake, but if the mistress had guests it could be a much grander affair.

Then there was lunch, afternoon tea — which might also be elaborate if the mistress was entertaining — nursery tea (for the children), and dinner at night. So the cooking was a job that could take all day!

In the evening, children ate their meals early and were put to bed before their parents dined or entertained guests. In some households a nursery

Wood stove, about 1900





Oil lamp

maid took care of the children's needs.

The preparation of meals was simpler in poorer households. Mum, or sometimes Dad or an older brother or sister, cooked the meals.

Water supply

In most houses cold water was piped either from the town water supply or from a well or large tank that collected rainwater. Hot water was not laid on to the kitchen or bathroom; when needed for cooking or washing up, it had to be heated in a kettle on the stove.

Cleaning

Floors were swept with brooms. Carpets were usually loose fitting; to remove dust they were taken outside and beaten, either with a special carpet beater or a large stick. When floors were scrubbed, it was done on hands and knees, with a large bucket of soapy water and a scrubbing brush. Soapsuds were removed with a mop wrung out in clean water.

The application of floor polish was also done on hands and knees, the final polish being done with another mop — time consuming and hard work. Sometimes a parlour maid was employed. She might do the dusting of furniture, wait on table, and help with other household chores such as cleaning and filling the lamps.

Lighting

Gas was introduced to Townsville in 1883 for lighting and to power industrial engines. Even then, some houses were never connected to the

gas supply. Many continued to use oil or kerosene lamps, or candles that usually stood in special holders.

In wealthier households, oil lamps were suspended from the ceiling, as you can see in the parlour of 'Currajong'. Otherwise lamps were freestanding or hung on hooks on the walls, as in the Worker's Dwelling.

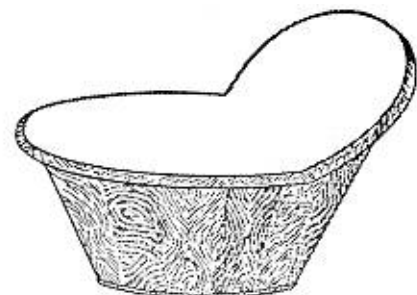
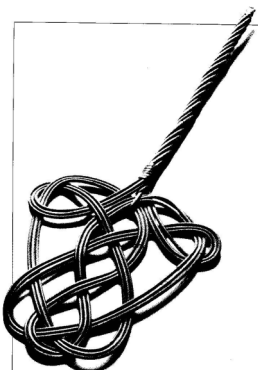
Usually these lamps had glass covers over the flame, known as chimneys. The glass soon became cloudy from the smoke, and they required cleaning every day. The oil or kerosene also required replenishing daily, so taking care of the lamps was an important household chore.

Bathing

In some houses there was no bathroom. A toilet set — basin, water jug, and soap dish and toothbrush holder — was kept in the bedrooms. If a maid was employed, it was her job to leave water in the jug for washing hands and faces, or for sponging the whole body.

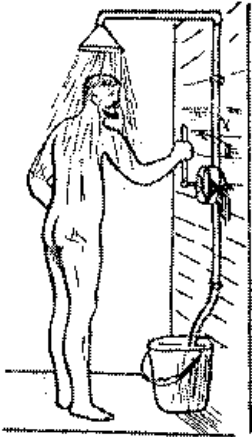
Baths were taken in a 'sitz' bath or large tub, sometimes called a hipbath. The sitz bath was an oval tin tub with a raised back at one end. Towels were of coarse cotton material called huckaback.

Carpet beater



HIP BATH.

Best Quality, Oak Enamelled—No. 1, 42/-; No. 2, 47/6; No. 3, 52/6.



Patent Shower Bath Apparatus.
Can be set up anywhere, even
where there is no bath room.

The men of the family shaved with a cutthroat razor that was sharpened on a razor strop. The strop frequently found another use — on the bottoms of naughty children for chastisement.

'Currajong' had a bathroom. The fittings comprised a small porcelain hand basin in one corner and a big claw-footed bath along one wall. Cold water was supplied.

In some households hot water was provided by a rather strange contraption called a chip heater — a small water tank heated by 'chips' (short pieces of scrap wood). They were not commonly available until the 20th century. We do not know if one was installed at 'Currajong'.

Bathrooms were rare in smaller homes. Bathing was usually in large tin tubs in the kitchen or bedroom.

Toilets

Sewerage was unknown 100 years ago. The toilet was in a small building, often called the 'dunny', at the rear of the allotment. Inside the dunny was a timber box with a round hole in the top, and below it a large steel can that was emptied weekly by a sanitary service.

Most families took great care to keep their toilet clean and hygienic, using disinfectant products like sheep dip or phenyl. However, no matter how hard people tried, the outhouse was usually very smelly, particularly in the heat of summer.

If you were ill or needed to get up at night, there was a china or enamel chamber pot

under the bed, or a commode chair containing a similar pot. The pots had to be emptied every morning, and carefully cleaned — not a pleasant task, but a necessary one.

Introduction of the water closet or WC (forerunner of the modern toilet) was a great improvement in hygiene. It allowed toilets to come inside the house.

* * *

It was a very different life indeed. Housekeeping today is so much simpler —and much more pleasant!

Some beauty hints from the past

Any lotion liable to soften the skin is not to be advocated in a warm climate, as it makes the skin susceptible to sunburn and roughness by contact with wind or sun.

It is therefore better for Australian or Indian ladies to encourage the use of aromatic vinegars for the toilet*, therefore hardening and cleaning the skin at the same time.

* The term 'toilet' as used here means dressing and cleaning oneself.

Sage is good for the teeth and can be used to rub them instead of a tooth brush...a little myrrh* in water to rinse the mouth should be used at least once a day, it will prevent the teeth from decaying and also sweeten the breath.

* Myrrh is a plant resin used in perfume and medicine.

A quart of vinegar in an ordinary sized bath is very refreshing. This can be aromatised by soaking in the vinegar previously a few drahms* of rosemary, camphor, sage, mint or lavender.

* A drachm (or dram) was 1/16 ounce or about 1.8 gram.

Cut-throat razor

