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STRUAN historic plan 1867

source: out of hundreds books 1867 page 11, dept of lands

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of Struan House and Estate, part of which now forms the Department of Agriculture's South Eastern Regional Head-quarters and Research Centre, began early in the 1840s. The original settlers were two brothers, John and William Robertson who had arrived in Sydney, from Oban Scotland, in November 1838 aboard the Saint George. After spending a short time working in New South Wales they moved to Victoria. John took up Struan station on the Wannan River, where he stayed a year or two, and William settled nearby. After a fairly brief period there they decided to move westward to South Australia.¹ Unfortunately, although occupational licenses had been introduced in January 1843,² at this time the settlement of the South East was fragmented and often not well documented so it is difficult to be precise about their movements in this early period. Certainly, on 17 January 1844 occupational licenses, in the names of John and William Robertson were applied for, for three runs in the Rivoli Bay District near the Mosquito Creek (this was variously spelt Muskitto, Musquitoe and Moscheto, and was later called Robertson's Plain). License No 64, on 60 square miles, was granted.³ The land stretched from two to three miles west of the Victorian border to Bool Lagoon, with the Mosquitoe Creek running through the centre of it. William arrived some time late in 1844 with cattle and horses.⁴ Over the next few years almost all the good pastoral land in this area was occupied, much of it by fellow scotsmen. In 1848/49 the Robertson Brothers asked to have the area around their Head station surveyed. This was done by October 1849 by E. Bellairs, when two 80 acre blocks, Sections 9 and 10 were surveyed and plotted, but there were no buildings indicated at this time.⁵ However, it has been suggested they originally lived in a slab hut near the creek.⁶ These two blocks were subsequently purchased by the Brothers, section 9 on 16 March 1850 for 72 pounds⁷ and section 10 on 2 April 1851 for 80 pounds.⁸ In 1851 occupational

The Robertson Brothers obtained lease No. 169 for their run and this covered 89,827 acres or 140 square miles. The lease was for 14 years, and they paid 15/- per square mile, the rate for second class land. In 1859 this acreage was reduced to 59 square miles and then raised to 68 square miles in 1865.⁹ There appeared to be a house situated near the Musquitoe Creek, in a pass in the main range. This was probably that which is called the first Mosquito Plains homestead, and consisted of a small cottage, built of timber, with a shingled roof (House No 1 - see page 5). It is said to have been used for many years as a wash-house before it was finally pulled down.¹⁰ There were at least six shepherd huts dotted about the property, including one near the now famous Naracoorte Caves, to the north of the property.

In 1864, prior to the termination of the 14 year lease, the property was surveyed by Mr Cooper. This indicated that while section 10 was used as a large cultivated paddock there were a considerable number of buildings on section 9. These consisted of a house, surrounded by a large garden and nearby extensive stables, woolshed and stockyard as shown on p. 7. The house (House 2) was a simple farmhouse of Colonial Georgian proportions. The front door had an arched window above and multi-paned double hung sash windows on each side of it. The basement rooms had an external entry.¹¹ During this time however, the Robertsons appeared to spend considerable time in Portland, Victoria,¹² where John married Susan Frazer. It was also during this period that William took up permanent residence at Wando Vale in Victoria, where he died on 25 September 1864. He left his half share of sections 9 and 10 to John McPherson of Lyne Station, who eventually sold it to John Robertson in 1867.¹³

John continued to lease the land, but on an annual basis.¹⁴ With the Proclamation of Hundreds and the resumption of land¹⁵ (Comaun Hundred on 29 August 1861, Joanna 12 June 1862, Robertson and Naracoorte 24 October 1867

ought to judiciously buy up sections until he owned most of the old property.

He continued to acquire property until at one stage he occupied 125 square miles. This included Warrattanbullie, Elderslie (on the Victorian side of the border), Woodford on the Glenelg River and property around Portland.¹⁶ Over this period most of the wool clip was sent to Portland to be shipped overseas, and the settlers had a closer relationship with this town than they did with Adelaide.¹⁷ John Robertson also had over 70,000 sheep, 1500 cattle and 500 thoroughbreds.¹⁸

Although he had had problems with his sheep in the early days, as did most pioneer pastoralists in this area, he continued to improve the quality of his flocks until he was considered one of the best flockmasters of the area. He also had a very high reputation as a breeder of thoroughbreds, and took many prizes both on the turf and at the local shows. He did not take an active part in public affairs, although he was a founding member (1858) of the Presbyterian Church in Naracoorte (several times paying off its debts) and to some extent took part in the affairs of Naracoorte and the Pastoral and Agricultural Society.¹⁹

As well as being a very well known personality in the South East, Robertson was renowned for his hospitality and was reputed to kill four bullocks a week, as well as a number of sheep, to provide for employees and travellers. His 'doors (were) always open to traveller and there (were) few who ha(d) visited the South East who ha(d) not lodged there', and these included Governors, Judges, the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Kent in 1881.²⁰ For those who did not quite measure up, in 1869 he built the substantial stone hotel known as the 'Gate Hotel', and later as the 'Gatehouse Hotel', the 'Gate Mail Stables' and finally as 'Wirringulla' (unlicensed), at the entry to his property.²¹ It has since been demolished.

Finally, in 1873, John Robertson decided to build a house that matched his status in the district. No doubt he would have been proud of the description given it by the Naracoorte Herald when writing his obituary in 1880, that 'from its size and the beauty of its building (it) is more like a nobleman's seat than the residence of a squatter'. The new mansion was on the south-west side of the main road, 11 miles from Naracoorte and 21 miles from Penola. It was built on the side of a hill, facing north-west and adjoining the old house.

All²² the enrichments in the room were 'hatched up in gold and silver, and finished off in enamelled tints'. The upstairs drawing room faced the south-west. It had an ornamental ceiling and centre-piece, the ceiling and cornice was 'hatched up in gold and silver'. The walls were painted in lavender and grey and were embellished with 12 ornamental panels. At every corner the panels were ornamented with scotch thistle (representing the owner's native land) and the southern cross (representing his adopted land). The woodwork was painted in satin. It also had a white marble mantle-piece. The lower rooms were all 16 feet high and the upper ones were 14 feet high. The bedrooms and the passages had plain cornices. Every bedroom had a fireplace in it. The bath-rooms, up and down stairs, had a constant supply of cold water, while one had a supply of both hot and cold water. There was a tank on the roof which supplied the house with water. In case of failure it could be replenished from an underground tank capable of holding 26,000 gallons.

John Robertson died on 31 March 1880 and was buried near the house. His standing in the district was demonstrated by the closing of all businesses in Naracoorte on the day of his funeral, and a poem about him, entitled 'In Memoriam' was published in the local paper.²³ His property was to be divided amongst his four sons, John, Alexander, William and James when James reached his majority on 25 May 1887. In the meantime it was administered

by his executors. Early in 1887 a small piece of section 10 was acquired by the Government to build the South Eastern railway. Later that year the executors assigned the property, excluding section 9 & 10, to the four brothers. William mortgaged his share to the other three brothers, John ran Elderslie, James ran Warratanbullie and Alexander ran Struan.

By 1890 there was quite an extensive number of buildings on the Struan Estate. Apart from the main house and servants' quarters, there was a stone butcher's shop, a gum slab store room, a two roomed weatherboard laundry, a stone blacksmith's shop, 'very superior' stone stable and loose boxes for 15 horses, stone carriage house, harness room and forage room, a wooden chaff house, a gum slab implement shed, and a galvanised eight stall cow stable and forage room. There were two large underground tanks, an 'Halladay' windmill on a 50' well with force pump and storage tanks, a 22' well with a 'Stover' windmill, also with force pump and storage tanks, seven acres of shrubbery, flowers, fruit and vegetable garden fenced by sawn palings, and about 4,000 feet of 1½" - 2" piping used for irrigation. Nearby was a two roomed weatherboard cottage, a small gum slab sheep shed and 18' well with a hand pump and iron troughs on section 298. Stockyards and drafting yards were on section 174. The estate had about 30 miles of sheep proof gum post and rail and wire fencing. This was subdivided into about 30 paddocks. The station employed a full time manager, 20 men and 5 domestics, with other staff employed in the busy season.

On 20 November 1904 William died. In the following few years sections 9 and 10 were conveyed to the three living brothers and William's executor (Robert Vincent of Binnum Station) and then to John of Elderslie and Alexander of Struan.

In 1911 approximately 22,450 acres of Struan Estate in the Hundreds of Jessie, Joanna and Naracoorte were purchased by the Government. This was

subdivided and the new sections were offered for allotment as Closer Settlement Blocks with the option to purchase 9 sections 434-445 and 460 Hundred of Jessie, sections 446-459 Hundred of Joanna and section 709 Hundred of Naracoorte).

On 18 May 1916 John sold the property to Alexander, who became the sole owner.²⁹ He continued to build on the reputation he had already obtained as a flockmaster and began establishing a shorthorn stud.³⁰ In 1921 he sold a small portion of section 9 to the family descendants to be used as a private cemetery.³¹

In 1938 Alexander Robertson died and his estate passed to his trustees Robert Vincent (later replaced by Geoffrey Clarke) and John Clive Robertson. In 1946 the Government purchased a further 7,550 acres from the estate. Of this 4,100 was used for war service land settlement, (300 acres was to be added to this later), 1,130, including the 'Homestead' block, was to be used to establish a Boy's Home by the Children's Welfare and Public Relief Department, 820 acres were to be sold and 1,200 acres were to be used by the Department of Agriculture.³²

The Department of Agriculture established a small research centre where pasture and animal production problems, as they affected the black soils of the plains area were examined. This research was carried out in close conjunction with the nearby 'Struan' Boys Farm School run by the Welfare Department. In 1951 the property was managed in association with the Kybybolite Experimental Station and eventually became known as the Struan Outstation. This was changed to the Struan Research Centre in the mid 1960s, while animal husbandry, particularly beef, continued to be the main area of research.³³

The 'homestead' block was used by the Department of Children's Welfare to give institutional boys rural training. Its use dates from January 1947,

when six boys took up residence with the first superintendant, Mr. J. Davies. It was worked as a mixed farm involved in such activities as beef cattle, sheep, fat lambs, dairy cattle, stud guernseys, cereal grains, vegetable and fruit gardens, poultry, pigs, irrigation, general maintenance and attempted to give the boys training in both practical and theoretical matters. In 1970 the school was closed and the land was transferred to the Department of Agricultural. In 1974 it became the Department's first Regional Headquarters for the South East.³⁴