First Mosquito Plains Homestead

When John Robertson first took up the Mosquito Plains Run, he was one of the earliest to make claim to the area about today's Naracoorte—perhaps the earliest, though the records are not clear. His holding allowed him the advantages of the dry dunes running back to the Caves Range, the pleasant Mosquito Creek, one of the very few watercourses to flow through the region and the green, swampy treeless Mosquito Plains themselves. He chose a site for his first home near the creek, with the rising land behind him. It was a small, simple cottage, built of timber with a shingle roof and soon outgrew its usefulness. Perhaps out of sentiment, or maybe sensible frugality, it stood for many years, serving as a wash house, it is said, before it was finally pulled down.

Second Mosquito Plains Homestead

With marriage came a family and the hut was no longer enough. A fine house was built on the slope above the creek, with a magnificent outlook across the plains. Built of stone, still simple and unpretentious in character, it yet took on some of the refinements of a changing society. It is truly colonial Australia, with its surrounding verandah under a subtly pitched roof and its arched doorways with their graceful fan lights. The house was not large, but pleasant and comfortable and must have seemed luxury indeed after the restrictions of the hut. Here was a house for growing children, for neighbours and friends like Dugald McCalman, the Presbyterian minister from Robertson's own Highlands, or Park Laurie, his effervescent, impulsive friend with whom he shared many a card game—and they say, exchanged near as many blows in consequence, for they were both hot-headed over truffles, though the arguments were quickly forgotten.

Life was easier now. The town could supply many of the needs of life, or the services and labour the prospering station required. Stores were still transported by bullock dray from the coast and the records of the property show that many a man, employed to plough or dig or build, took home a large part of his wages in tea and flour and tobacco.

John and Susan Robertson lived most of their married life in this house. In later years it must have become crowded and plans and schemes for the new house must have overshadowed it as their wealth and family both grew.
Second Mosquito Plains Homestead
Preparations for building the new house began some years before the grand opening. By now John had become entirely independent of his brother William, with whom he had shared his first business ventures and had bought or leased a number of properties both in South Australia and in adjoining parts of Victoria. Times were good and his careful husbandry had built up on Mosquito Plains fine breeds of sheep and cattle. Always interested in horses and dogs, he took justifiable pride in their quality. No longer recognizable as that “Poorman Robertson” of the Victorian days, he set about building a house which would express his pride of achievement, his nostalgia for Scotland, of the clans and which could provide the hospitality that he delighted in giving to friend and stranger alike.

He had it built by the local builder, Henry Smith, in the fashionable style of the day, inspired by the Italians. He brought marble from Italy too, and craftsmen to shape it.

It was a house of spacious rooms and elaborate decoration and if the servants’ wing seems cramped in contrast, it was comfortable by the standards of the time. Beautiful ceiling mouldings drew inspiration from his deep-rooted Scots loyalties and the Robertson badge, a frond of bраcken, recurs in their design. The coat of arms adorned the drawing room and the crest appeared in the entrance hall. The loveliest feature of all and one of the best known, is the beautiful fireplace in the drawing room, with its mixture of old world and new, at times stylised, at others delightfully natural and perceptive.

The greatest social occasion of all was the opening ball — the housewarming on January 27th, 1876. The house was crowded with folk from the properties of the district and from the town itself, not to mention the folk who had come from Scotland with the Robertsons and worked with and for them for thirty years and more.

John was a godly man and it was his minister and old friend, Dugad McCalman, who christened the mansion “Struan House” to recall distant Scottish Struan, seat of the Robertson clan chief, giving the erstwhile Mosquito Plains property its new name “Struan House” (not, as we call it today, “Struan”).

The place saw many notable guests — two governors stayed there, as did judges, ministers, travellers of all kinds. Its most notable guests came in the year after John’s death. The Royal Princes, George and Albert, on their Australian visit as midshipmen, were driven there by none other than Tom Cawker. George begged a turn at the reins on the journey out from Naracoorte, but when he failed to obey Cawker's instructions, was firmly deprived of this privilege. Arriving at Struan, high spirits took over and legend has it that Albert raced George about in a wheelbarrow before tipping him out unceremoniously on a pile of rubbish!
John Robertson was born in Invernesshire in Scotland in 1809. A Highlander and, despite the scattering of the clans after the Jacobite rebellion only 50 years earlier, of a family where clan loyalties were strong, he carried these loyalties with him when he sailed in the Saint George for Sydney in 1838.

He took up land in Victoria—firstly Struan Station on the Wannon, then further leases with his brother William.

He earned his nickname “Poorman Robertson” in a confrontation with the Hentys of Portland. Both were interested in acquiring the same property, but its disposal was in the hands of the Land Board at Portland. News of the hearing came at short notice and found John and William at work with the stock. There was no time to return home, so John was dispatched in his work clothes to Portland, arriving just as Henty drew up at the Land Board Office, every inch a prosperous gentleman in his horse-drawn carriage. The contrast must have been extreme, for the Magistrate handed down his judgement for Robertson, saying to Henty, “We have decided to let the poor man have it.” And so the name stuck, perhaps because of its very inappropriateness, for in years ahead, John was to be the owner of very large holdings, a wealthy man, yet one who dispensed his hospitality generously to all travellers, and to the little town of Naracoorte growing up not far away.

He died at the age of 71 and is buried with others of his family and his household, in the cemetery overlooking the creek and his home beyond it.
Susan Frazer was also of Invernesshire. She was considerably younger than John Robertson and socially outranked him, being the daughter of the factor, (or administrator) to Lord Lovat. The two met in Portland, and attracted, so it is said, by her common sense and spirit, John courted Susan, and proposed to her. Provoked by his assurance of success, she refused. But next morning, like many a girl before and after, she changed her mind when she saw him ready to go, and so the story goes, leaned from her window and called, “John, I’ll have you.”

They had a large family and lived to create a small pastoral empire and a home that was known as widely for its kindly welcome as its grandeur. She died 26 years after John’s death, in 1906.
As Struan grew up, the railway to Mount Gambier grew out and fiery were some of the clashes with railway employees who left gates open and cut fences. In his verse commemorating the completion of the railway line, “The Last Rake”, William Neilson describes a night journey past “Struan’s Towers”.

Times were changing. In 1880, only four years after the famous house warming, John died. The railway spelt the eventual end to coach travel. Money was not so easy — the depression and financial crash of the nineties was already in the air.

The big properties were being bought or resumed by the Government for closer settlement. The so-called “squatting age” was passing.

Struan House stands still as a symbol of that age. The various properties John bought were handed on to the children, Struan House being inherited by his son Alexander, who lived there until his death in 1936. He continued his father’s traditional support for the community in which he lived and particularly his passion for dogs and horses. In his later years, he was accompanied almost everywhere by his dogs, even filling his car with them on his visits to the town and when he died, the Naracoorte Herald published an affectionate cartoon recording the passing of the last of the Robertsons at Struan.

By this time, “Closer settlement” had become widespread and Struan, like others in the district, had sold land for subdivision. The remainder was sold to the Government a few years after Alex Robertson’s death. The homestead property of 1,159 acres was retained by the Government and used first as a corrective farm school for boys and the rest used for agricultural research. To begin with, it was an outstation for Kybybolite Research Centre, then it became an independent research establishment concerned with beef cattle. When the Farm School was closed in 1970, the homestead and the remaining land was handed over to the Department of Agriculture. The homestead became a regional headquarters for the department and as a result, has been placed in a state of good repair against a period of neglect. Once more it has a life and purpose of its own.