

Northam Safari



John and Jane McMillen Cottage, Northam 2009

Jeanette Lee

It was a beautiful autumn day in late May 2009 that Beth Smith, Jean McDonald and I set off on a long anticipated visit to view the pensioner allotments at Northam. Our enthusiasm had been piqued by Beth having been told there was a pensioner guard cottage still habitable in Colebatch Street.

Beth's family have had a long association with Northam, her grandfather Hubert Violet Cox was at one time the Mayor and her grandmother, Isabella, was called on to cut the celebratory ribbon on many occasions. As an interesting aside Isabella was the daughter of EPG Richard Henderson.

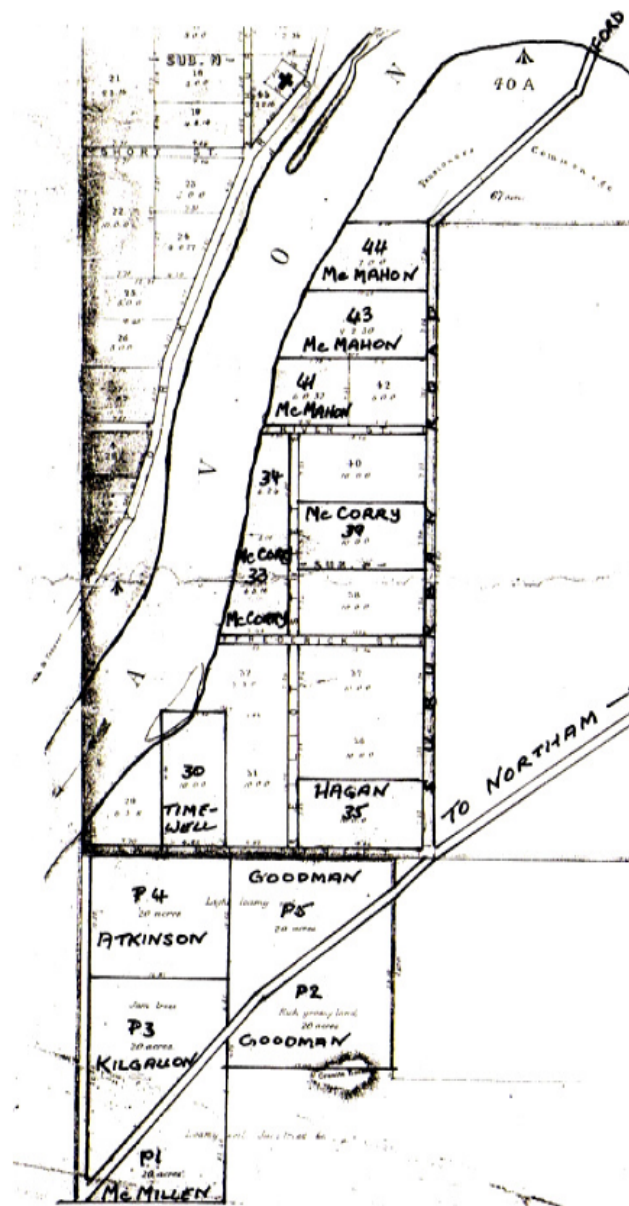
Armed with a map of the allotments, circa 1870, we confidently fronted up to the Shire office where the staff looked at us in a helpful but perplexed manner, we later found Colebatch Street had been renamed McMillen Street, pensioner guards and their allotments were not on the shire radar. After purchasing their entire stock (4 copies) of Donald S. Garden's book 'Northam, An Avon Valley History' at what was a bargain price we

fortified ourselves at a very nice café before setting out confidently to locate our quarry, the pensioner cottage.

We located Colebatch Street on a road directory but unfortunately we did not realise just how radically the area had changed since 1870, not only had it been bisected by a railway line but a major bypass road had truncated the existing roads. We located Suburban Road onto which lots 35 – 44 fronted without too much difficulty although it came to a dead end half way along with a water and sewerage department gate. Frederick and River Streets have disappeared along the way and there was no sign of any pensioner cottage ruins or otherwise. Still looking for Colebatch Street we decided to go on to the other side of the railway and attack from the rear. The area designated on our map 'Pensioners' Commonage' and the lots fronting the river are now home to a trotting track, hockey field, and a pony club. This road also ended with a gate and the now becoming familiar 'NO ENTRY' sewerage department notice. We stopped at a house at the end of the street and were told to go back over the way we had come and inquire at a local business which we drove past so turned around in a side street and lo & behold there was

our cottage on the left hand side of the street.

We piled out of the car and were fortunate enough to find a young man, Damien Hall, who not only confirmed that it was indeed the Pensioner's cottage but his mother had a file on its provenance.



He rang his mother, Glenda Hammond, the present owner, who came home from work to tell us all about it and gave us permission not only to photograph the exterior of the house but to copy and photograph the pertinent parts of the file. (Damien must have been a bit set back, if not terrified, by the sight of three elderly, [sorry Beth], determined women bearing down on him).

The file established it was the home built by Pensioner John McMillen on lot P 1. John arrived in the Colony as part of the

guard on the Convict ship *Racehorse* in 1868. He and his wife Jane lived in the cottage until Jane's death on August 27, 1882, a month later he sold the cottage to his neighbour, John Farmer. John Farmer named his farm Mount Happy. After the sale John McMillen moved back to Perth and was later drowned on May 2, 1891 in a clay pool on the corner of Howick⁶ and Plain Street, East Perth. (Now the site of the Department of Housing & Works).⁷

In the intervening years the Cottage changed hands many times until Derek George and Mary Isobel Wheeler purchased it on March 26, 1975. Somewhere along the way it acquired additions, however, they were restricted to the rear portion and did not affect the integrity of the original two rooms and front veranda. The front veranda was built with a return which I have not seen on any other pensioner cottage. The Wheelers were responsible for compiling the file on the cottage and on September 15, 1989 the National Trust informed them it had been Classified in the Trust's Register of important buildings saying: ... "those places being components of the natural environment of Australia or the cultural environment of Australia, that have aesthetic, historical, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community."

Thanks to the National Trust's assessment we have the following description of the cottage:

Construction details:	All timber hand sawn, all nails handmade, bricks handmade wood fired.
Foundations:	Local rock, mud mortar.
Walls:	Wood fired, hand-made bricks (from the banks of the Avon River), English bond, mud mortar. External render, sand and lime. Internal

⁶ Now Hay Street

⁷ SROWA Cons 527, 1268/58.

	render, sand and lime and thin layer of plaster.
Ceilings:	Timber, hand sawn – T&G pine timber – fibro
Roof:	Timber frame, corrugated, galvanised iron roof.
Floors:	Timber, hand sawn planks – concrete – open fire solid fuel. ⁸

McMillen, Richard McCorry and John McMahon.⁹

Needless to say it was three very happy women who made their way homeward our mission completed.

The National Trust also noted (The cottage) “Also has own supply of good potable water from bore on property making an average of approximately 2,000 litres per day which is pumped to a holding tank on the highest point of the property from where reticulates to piggery, house and garden taps”. The present owner said that after the bypass road was constructed the ‘well’ dried up and they are now dependant on scheme water. The Trust does not appear to have done an assessment on the age and condition of the well.

After the blocks had been surveyed and allotted in 1868 Corporal Goodman wrote to Surveyor general Roe declaring some of the local farmers had advised them that the land would be under water in the winter and was not worth clearing and some of the allotments were up to a mile and a half away from a source of water. Michael Kilgallen wished to move from Lot 40 to Lot 3, John McMillen from Lot 38 to Lot 1, and William Atkinson from lot 31 to lot 4. The changes were implemented as they were the lots for which they received title. Mary Ann Timewell, although the wife of a convict, was granted title of Lot 30 as her father was pensioner Kennedy O'Brien. The strength of the guard at Northam never exceeded one corporal and five rank and file at any given time. They were Corporals John Goodman and Kennedy O'Brien and privates William Atkinson, Denis Hagan, Michael Kilgallen, John

⁸ National Trust of Australia (Western Australia) Valuation Report

⁹ Kilgallen/Killgallen, McMillen/McMillan/McMullin, McCorry/McCorry