



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES- ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

A major building complex, the *Coolgardie Post Office and Assoc. Buildings* plays an important role in defining the Coolgardie townscape. As van Bremen states:

The particular device of stretching the offices [Public Buildings] along the street, and articulating each office in the massing and roof-line, achieved a scale consistent with their regional towns, as well as picturesque variety. The use of local materials, and attention to the townscape potential of each site, gave each of these offices - even those of a standard plan - a unique regional flavour, and contributed to that town's sense of place. It was town-making at its most refined, an architectural skill at its peak in the Public Works Department during the gold boom.¹

Many government buildings were of a standard design, and capable of being constructed in any town across the state. Together with the Cue and Marble Bar buildings, the Coolgardie Post Office demonstrates Temple-Poole's clever use of the picturesque nature of the Arts and Craft style to accommodate the incremental expansion of the building, its services and personnel, while maintaining its civic stature. (Criterion 1.2)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Coolgardie was founded on the discovery of gold, and subsequently the town played an important part in the establishment of a long term gold mining industry in Western Australia. The construction and later expansion of the *Post Office and Assoc. Buildings* is closely associated with the growth of the mining industry in the eastern goldfields. (Criterion 2.1)

The sequential development of the Post Office building has historic significance as a demonstration of the rapid growth in demand for government services associated with the goldrush population in the Coolgardie district. (Criterion 2.2)

¹ van Bremen, I. 'The New Architecture of the Gold Boom in Western Australian Government Buildings under the Direction of George Temple-Poole 1885-1897', (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of W.A., 1990), p. 211.

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

In a town which has lost a large number of its goldrush buildings, the Coolgardie Post Office has a high degree of social value. The building is an important reminder of the former prosperity and stature of Coolgardie. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

A well preserved example, the *Coolgardie Post Office and Assoc. Buildings* is representative of the public buildings constructed by the state government in gold mining towns in response to a rapid growth in population and the consequent need for communications and other government services. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

The condition of the building is generally sound, although there is some evidence of rising damp that requires attention.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Part of the building continues to be used as a post office and other public agencies, therefore maintaining its high degree of integrity.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Although there have been alterations and changes in functional requirements over nearly a century of use, the fabric of the building is largely intact. The building has a considerable degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13. 1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The rapid population growth associated with towns on the newly established goldfields of Western Australia usually meant that public buildings of all types were required at once. In many cases, the rapid rate of growth meant that public buildings needed extensive additions to accommodate increased personnel and services.

In colonial Western Australia, one building often housed all the Government Offices. In other cases, the offices were housed in one long

bungalow, since the operation was on a small scale. Ingrid van Bremen points out that, 'During the gold boom the scale increased dramatically and architectural principles changed also. Expression of different functions on the exterior was a fundamental principle pursued for its 'truthfulness' as well as its Picturesque potential.'² Government Offices in the goldfields provide good examples of this principle.

Like the public buildings on the Yilgarn field, centred at Southern Cross, the Pilbarra field centred at Marble Bar and the Murchison Goldfield centred at Cue, the *Coolgardie Post Office and Assoc. Buildings* were built to accommodate the expanding needs of the prosperous eastern goldfields settlement. The first post office was a tent, the postal service was operated by the local butcher, and letters were left for addressees to collect themselves. When Warden J.M. Finnerty took up his post in Coolgardie his office (tent) was used as the post office, and a part-time post master appointed. With an increase in postal business Mr F. Inkpen, a postal assistant, was appointed to Coolgardie. The workload in the post office was such that mail was unable to be sorted and was just bagged and forwarded to Southern Cross for onward dispatch.³

In the Public Works Department *Annual Report*, (1894), the following appeared:

Coolgardie Post and Telegraph Office. The tender accepted December 7, 1893, for £464 for a temporary Post Office, pending the erection of permanent buildings, has been completed Plans for permanent Public Buildings at Coolgardie have been prepared which include Post and Telegraph Offices, Warden's Court and Quarters, Registrar's Mining and Surveyor's Office.⁴

On 3 October 1894, a contract was let to J.C. Braidwood for £7,060 for the erection of the first section of Coolgardie's Public Buildings.⁵ This first section was completed on 3 May 1895. (see Plan A) This original section of the Public Buildings was designed under the supervision of Government architect George Temple-Poole. Although the building improved the working conditions of the postal officers, its Arts and Crafts inspired design was met with an unfavourable reception from some sections of the public.

An outspoken view on government expenditure was in evidence in a report in the *Coolgardie Miner* dated 31 March 1896:

We have with amused interest watched the erection of the ghastly structure, and frequently speculated as to the purpose for which it was erected. Externally and internally it is conceivably ugly, atrociously so, and reminds us of a very bad cross between a second-rate stable and an ancient West Australian gaol. It does not possess one solitary redeeming feature, and if it went off to Woolgongie through the exertions of a willy-willy, or suddenly disappeared into the earth, there would be tumultuous rejoicing⁶

² *ibid.* p. 223.

³ Department of Works, *Coolgardie Post Office: Architectural Report*, July 1969

⁴ *Votes & Proceedings*, 1895. Annual Report of Public Works Department 1894

⁵ *Government Gazette*, 1894, p. 979.

⁶ *Coolgardie Miner*, 31 March 1896, p. 2.

Coolgardie grew so rapidly that extensive additions were made to the building during construction. Additions to the Registrar's Office were carried out by the contractor for £425 and additions to the Post Office for £570, contracts for both being entered into on 26 October 1894.⁷ During the initial construction period, a short tower was added to the Post Office, on the corner of Hunt Street.⁸

The Public Works Department *Annual Report* for the year 1895-96 makes mention of the Coolgardie Public Buildings, and the additions that were required:

These buildings are of stone and brick. During erection it was found necessary, owing to the increased requirements of the Postal Department, to make considerable additions, which were carried out during the currency of the contract. ... The block provides accommodation for the following departments - Post Office, Mining Registrar and Surveyors, Wardens Court, Police Station and quarters.⁹

In late 1896, the Mines Department and Law Courts moved from their offices at the western end of the building to a new stone building built further west along Bayley Street. Renovations were carried out to enable the Post and Telegraph Office to use space vacated by those Departments. The alterations consisted of a new first floor to provide an additional telegraph operator's room and bedrooms. The lower floor was converted into a Telegraph Office and Telephone Exchange. The telephone service commenced in early 1897.¹⁰

On 12 July 1897, a contract was let to J. Pringle for £4,932 for the erection of a two-storey portion at the east end of the Post Office building. (see Plan B) The work was completed on 12 January 1898. A description of the work appeared in the Public Works Department *Annual Report* for 1898:

Coolgardie Post Office Additions - Two-storied principally, large additions to mail room, new money order, savings bank, and stamp offices, Postmaster's office, record room and two clerks' rooms on the ground floor. On the first floor, quarters of six rooms, kitchen, scullery, store rooms, bathroom and asphalted courtyard. Public clock on brackets. Stable of two stalls harness rooms, battery, cleaning room, fencing. Concrete foundations, stone and brick walls, iron roofs. ... The new buildings partly replace the original tower which was inconvenient and not adapted to carry a second storey.¹¹

Unfortunately, these additions meant that the prominent clock tower was removed.

In its heyday, Coolgardie had a postal staff of about 90 workers, the majority being telephonists and telegraph staff, including 24 messengers. In 1901 the Eastern Goldfields, including Coolgardie, Boulder and Kalgoorlie, had a population of over 15,000.¹²

⁷ *Government Gazette*, 1894, p. 1097.

⁸ Oldham, Ray & John, *George Temple-Poole: Architect of the Golden Years, 1885-1897*, (UWA Press, Nedlands, 1980), p. 65.

⁹ *Votes & Proceedings*, 1896. Annual Report of Public Works Department for the Year 1895-96.

¹⁰ Department of Works, *Coolgardie Post Office: Architectural Report*, July 1969.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Stannage, C.T. (ed), *A New History of Western Australia*, (UWA Press, Nedlands, 1981), p. 222.

In March 1901, the postal service was officially taken over by the new Commonwealth Government. In 1907 the Post Office was reorganised. (see Plan C) The asphalt area on the first floor was roofed over and in 1908 the original staircase was replaced with a new balcony and stairs.¹³ In subsequent years, with the decline of the town, the postal needs lessened and there was a rearrangement of the functions of the buildings. (see Plans D & E)

The need for successive additions was not unusual for buildings on the gold fields, as they were often unable to cope with the rapid expansion of the towns. George Temple-Poole designed similar government offices in Cue and Marble Bar; all the offices built around the same time. In Cue the buildings are designed to contain the offices of a number of government departments, and living quarters for some officials. Like Coolgardie building, the Post Office in Cue is located at the corner, and features a two-storey clock tower. Substantial additions were made to the Cue building in 1896 and 1897. In Marble Bar, the Government buildings are of a similar design, although unlike those in Coolgardie and Cue the whole complex was built at the same time, rather than constructed in separate parts, over a period of years. The complex consists of four single-storey and four double-storey blocks and also features a clock tower.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

An article in the *Coolgardie Miner* makes scathing remarks about the quality of the materials used in the construction:

Before the buildings are complete - no one can prophesy when that event will happen - one portion of them is already crumbling away. The recent rains have tested the "stone" which has been used for the foundations and the walls, and it has been found wanting lamentably. The "stone" is in reality a soft conglomerate with here and there thin veins of quartz running through it. It is possible to run the blade of a knife into it right up to the hilt, or to thrust a walking-stick into the sand and clay compound which some idiot has dubbed stone.¹⁴

But these caustic comments were possibly more representative of a swipe at government expenditure, than a considered evaluation of the buildings nor the quality of their construction.

The buildings are built of stone with brick quoins and window surrounds, and the roof is corrugated iron sheeting. The different sections of the complex vary from one to two storey, with verandahs linking the two storey facades. The roofing material was corrugated iron. There were ornate chimneys throughout the structure, but many have been removed and those remaining have had their tops removed and been painted white. The original window glazing was hand poured glass and many of these glass panes still exist. The exterior woodwork, outer doors and window frames are oak and the interior woodwork is cedar. The floor boards are adze hewn timber; the marks of the adze can still be seen on the boards.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Coolgardie Miner*, 31 March 1896, p. 2.

Temple-Poole's design, in the Federation Arts and Craft style, was capable of accommodating several additions and alterations over a number of years. The resulting building is 'well proportioned with a good relationship of the different parts.'¹⁵

13.3 REFERENCES

Department of Works, *Coolgardie Post Office: Architectural Report*, (July 1969).

National Trust Assessment Exposition.

Australian Heritage Commission Data Sheet.

¹⁵ Oldham, p. 65.