



# 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

*Wagin Post Office* is a fine example of Federation Free Style architecture. The symmetrical composition employs dominant classical elements but achieves a balance through the subtle exploitation of the fabric. (Criterion 1.1)

The creative and artistic excellence exhibited in the masonry detailing is a significant achievement. (Criterion 1.2)

The strong three dimensional form of *Wagin Post Office* establishes a presence appropriate for a civic building and makes an aesthetic contribution to the Wagin streetscape. (Criterion 1.3)

### 11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

*Wagin Post Office* provides physical evidence of the growth and prosperity of Wagin township and surrounding agricultural areas during the period prior to World War One. (Criterion 2.1)

*Wagin Post Office* is directly related to the opening of the Great Southern Railway Line, and the subsequent European occupation of the Great Southern district of Western Australia. (Criterion 2.2)

### 11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

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### 11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

*Wagin Post Office* is a focal point for the Wagin district where social interaction and communication take place. (Criterion 4.1)

Built on the same site as the first Post Office building, *Wagin Post Office* contributes to the town, and surrounding agricultural community's sense of place. (Criterion 4.2)

## **12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE**

### **12. 1. RARITY**

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### **12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS**

*Wagin Post Office* is representative of the Federation Free Style of architecture applied to a civic building by the Public Works Department under the direction of Principal Architect, Hillson Beasley. The building is also representative of a standard design which was adopted for post offices along the Great Southern Railway. (Criterion 6.1)

*Wagin Post Office* is representative of the post offices built along the Great Southern Railway at a time of relative prosperity and growth for the agricultural areas of the State. (Criterion 6.2)

### **12. 3 CONDITION**

Attempts have been made to repair some of the damage caused by weathering to the north-east corner of the building but overall *Wagin Post Office* is in good condition and well maintained.

### **12. 4 INTEGRITY**

*Wagin Post Office* has retained its original function since construction and has high integrity. The expanding commercial role of Australia Post has been accommodated satisfactorily within the building with the new fitout providing greater facilities for retail. The relocation of the Telephone Exchange to separate premises has not detracted from the integrity of the place. Both the air conditioning duct work suspended across the windows of the west elevation and the brick fence which abuts the west corner of the building are visually intrusive, but could be removed.

### **12. 5 AUTHENTICITY**

The two telephone booths in the public area have been removed and there have been alterations to the staff rooms at the back of the building but much of the original fabric remains intact so that overall *Wagin Post Office* has a high degree of authenticity.

### 13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Irene Ham-Sauman, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by Katrina Chisholm, Graduate Architect.

#### 13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

*Wagin Post Office* is a single-storey building originally constructed in Federation Free Style, in 1913, to a design by Western Australian Public Works Department Principal Architect, Hillson Beasley.<sup>1</sup> It was demolished and rebuilt on the same foundations in 1937.

Prior to the 1880s, the south-west of the State was sparsely populated by Europeans. Sandalwood cutters worked the forests, and a few settlers established themselves by selecting 16 - 20 acres of freehold land near permanent water, or taking up grazing leases of 1600 - 2000 acres.

A track developed between Perth and Albany, largely as a result of the sandalwood cutters carting their loads to the coast for export to China. The track became known as the Albany road. In 1841, a mail service was inaugurated along this route. In 1869, the Government took over the mail run, and a police guard accompanied the mail coach.<sup>2</sup> The mail coach made the journey each way twice a month, travelling around 30 miles a day, with seven overnight stops along the way, most of them coinciding with a police station where fresh horses were obtained for the next stage of the journey. Passengers and freight were also carried.<sup>3</sup>

With the desire to attract more settlers to the area, the Western Australian Government decided to establish a rail link between Perth and Albany. The desired route was along the Albany road, but York, linked to Perth by the Eastern Railway in 1881, lobbied to be included on the rail link with Albany. The Government conceded, and extended the Eastern Railway from York to Beverley, while Anthony Hordern's West Australian Land Company Ltd constructed the line from Beverley to Albany. This section of line, opened in 1889, was known as the Great Southern Railway, and was built in exchange for land grants along the route.<sup>4</sup>

The Government suspended its own land offers to allow Hordern's Company to sell its land grants to migrants, but the Company had difficulty attracting prospective settlers, and its freight charges were twice as high as charges on other lines. The Government grew impatient, and made land available with The Homestead Act, 1893, which granted settlers 160 acres and allowed them seven years to make improvements, and The Agricultural Bank Act, 1894, which provided long term loans to pay for the improvements.<sup>5</sup> In 1897, the

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<sup>1</sup> Apperly, R., Irving, R. & Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Style and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1989, pp. 136-139.

<sup>2</sup> Pederick, M. J. *The Emu's Watering Place: A Brief History of the Wagin District Churchlands* College, Perth, for Shire of Wagin, 1979, p.7-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Yearbook of Western Australia* 1889. p.97.

<sup>4</sup> *Western Australian Government Gazette* 25 September 1884, p.491.

<sup>5</sup> *Statutes of Western Australia* Perth, Gov. Printer, The Homesteads Act, 1893, No. 18 of 1893; The Agricultural Bank Act, 1894., No. 21 of 1894.

Government purchased the Great Southern Railway, and all land grants, from the West Australian Land Company Ltd for £1,100,000, and the Great Southern district began to flourish.<sup>6</sup>

Wagin developed as a railway station on the Great Southern line, with a surveyed town plan that sited the post office near the station, a normal situation for towns established along a railway line.

In 1890, Piesse's general store moved to Wagin from nearby Arthur River, on the Albany road, and Wagin's first (unofficial) post office was set up in a room attached to a residence. Miss Hall was the first postmistress.<sup>7</sup>

Wagin's first official post office was completed in February 1893.<sup>8</sup> It was constructed by J. Mackie (who also built the 1892 Narrogin post office) to a George Temple Poole design.<sup>9</sup> Like many of Poole's post office designs, this building had only one room for postal services with the rest of the building as living quarters for the Postmaster.

Between 1900 and 1914, there was great demand for land along the Great Southern Railway route. Disillusioned miners joined other migrants to take up farming land. The population of Wagin grew rapidly during this period.

In 1905, the town was granted its own Roads Board, and Wagin was declared a municipality the following year. In that year there were 190 children enrolled at the local school.<sup>10</sup> Weekly mail runs from Wagin, using horse drawn vehicles, serviced the surrounding districts. In 1907, a railway branch line was built from Wagin to Dumbleyung and, in 1912, this was extended to Kukerin, a distance of some 80 kms. Mail for this area was then carried on the branch line.

With the rapid growth of Wagin township, and the surrounding farm district that it served, the Post Office became too small for the needs of the community. In 1912, tenders were called for a new post office. This pattern of first post office located near the railway station, soon too small to cope with increased population and expanding communications networks and in need of replacement within twenty years, was repeated in many Western Australian country towns along the railway lines.

*Wagin Post Office* was built by T. P. Menzies at a cost of £2596/12/03.<sup>11</sup> The new building was sited on the corner of Tudhoe and Traverse streets, to the right of the original post office which occupied a more central position on the site.<sup>12</sup> The old post office building was converted solely to living quarters.

Hillson Beasley, the designer of *Wagin Post Office*, was the most eclectic of the four principal architects employed by the Western Australian Public Works

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<sup>6</sup> *Yearbook of Western Australia* 1897, p.69.

<sup>7</sup> Pederick, M. J., op. cit., p.10.

<sup>8</sup> Letter, PMG Files, Australian Archives K1209/1 Box 25/2078/96.

<sup>9</sup> Pope, B., Bush, F., Bloomfield, W. & Kelsall, D. *Historical and Architectural Assessment of Post Offices in Western Australia* National Trust of Australia (WA) for the National Heritage Commission, 1993, pp. 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> Pederick, M. J., op. cit., pp. 19-28.

<sup>11</sup> *Western Australian Government Gazette* 24 May 1912, p. 1921; PWD WA. Drawing No. 15850, 1912, PMG File, Australian Archives K1201/1 WA 15850.

<sup>12</sup> Plan, PMG Files, Australian Archives K1209/1 Box 25/2078/96, 1953-1962.

Department between 1885 and 1925, when that department was responsible for the design and construction of the State's post offices. In 1926, responsibility for this work passed to the Commonwealth Postmaster General's Department.<sup>13</sup>

In 1937, the old Post Office was demolished and rebuilt on the existing foundations using much of the original material, including the two bay windows.<sup>14</sup> It is not known why this work was carried out, but it is possible the building may have been suffering from rising damp, as this problem resulted in the eventual demolition of Katanning Post Office which was of similar design and constructed in the same year. Whatever the reason, the main alteration to the building appears to have been to the rooms on the right, with one bay window being repositioned at right angles to the other. At the same time, additions to the back of *Wagin Post Office* were also carried out.<sup>15</sup>

In 1950, the first of a new type of small automatic exchange was put into service at South Wedgecarrup, and the *Wagin* exchange, housed in *Wagin Post Office*, became the control centre for trunk line calls.<sup>16</sup> In 1959, the exchange area was extended, affecting only the internal layout of the building, and other repairs and renovations carried out to a cost of £1,471. Work to the value of £2,333 was also carried out on the old Post Office building.<sup>17</sup>

Minor repairs and renovations have been carried out to *Wagin Post Office* at various times over the intervening years as service needs have changed. Since the separation of Telecom (Telstra) and Australia Post on 1 July 1975, telephone exchanges have been removed from post office buildings, resulting in one less function to fulfil. The downgrading of services on the Great Southern Railway in the 1970s and 1980s, created a population drift from the district, further lessening the postal services required.

The interior of the building received the current standard Australia Post fitout in 1994-95.

The old post office has been sold and is currently in use as a privately owned residence.

## 13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

*Wagin Post Office* is a single-storey masonry building constructed in the Federation Free Style located at the north-west corner of Tudhoe and Traverse streets in the main commercial street of *Wagin*.<sup>18</sup> The former post office, constructed in 1893, is adjacent to the west and is now a private residence. A single-storey, brick telecommunications building is located behind *Wagin Post Office*, separated by a single lane driveway.

*Wagin Post Office* is similar in design to other post offices constructed along the Great Southern Railway at Narrogin and Katanning in the same period.

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<sup>13</sup> Pope, B. et al., op. cit., p.17.

<sup>14</sup> Drawing No 1710, 'Plan for the demolition of & rebuilding on existing foundations *Wagin* Post Office quarters *Wagin* 25 June 1937', PMG Files, Australian Archives K1201/1 WA 1710.

<sup>15</sup> Drawing No. 1710, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Documents, PMG Files, Australian Archives K1209/1, Box 25/2018/96.

<sup>17</sup> Documents, PMG Files, Australian Archives 57/248.

<sup>18</sup> Apperly, R. Irving, R., Reynolds, P. op. cit., pp. 136-139.

The orthogonal form is lent a solid and substantial appearance with the use of masonry walls formed by a random laid stone plinth and English bond brickwork. The contrast in texture between the two masonry materials is further enhanced by the modelling of the brickwork and the selective application of cement render. The hipped terracotta tiled roof is crowned with a prominent ventilator and weather vane making an interesting skyline feature.

The symmetrical elevation to Tudhoe Street is dominated by the central Diocletian window motif. Brick voussoirs of alternating depth form the semi-circular arch surrounding the window which is highlighted with a rendered keystone. A triangular pediment supported on timber brackets has been inserted, rather incongruously, into the central panel above the sash window. The wide brick panels flanking the feature window have a central slot window with rendered sills and a keystone of exaggerated height. Bricks in alternate course have a chamfered edge creating an interesting shadow line and emphasising the quoins.<sup>19</sup> This detail is repeated in the brick piers of the east and west side elevations and columns of the external lobbies. The hipped roof over the front section of the south elevation is supported on closely spaced timber brackets above a rendered frieze which is continuous around the building. The boxed eaves are lined with timber boards.

External lobbies are located at each side of the front elevation set back slightly from the main building line. Semi-circular brick arches on two sides of the lobbies provide public access to the post office from both street frontages. The voussoirs and quoins of the arches exhibit similar brick detailing to the central features already outlined. A rendered panel has been placed over the keystone of the arches breaking the line of the parapet cornice which is at a lower level to the main roof. Both external lobbies have brick paving and timber boarded ceilings and private post boxes located in the back walls.

Above the stone plinth of the side elevations, the wall is divided by brick piers into four bays each with a brick arch surround to the Diocletian window motif comprising a central sash window, fixed sidelights and glazing bars in the upper fanlights. A fireplace is located in one of the bays of the west elevation. The brick chimney with rendered capping is evident above the roof at this point. Horizontal stucco bands have been applied to the brickwork between the piers at the springing point of the arch and level with the top of the keystone, in a restrained use of the 'blood and bandages' style. Air conditioning equipment is situated adjacent to the west elevation. Associated metal duct work is bracketed to the wall, obscuring the upper fanlights along the west elevation. A brick lean-to with a corrugated iron, skillion roof extends from the rear facade of the building. The brick and bond are the same as for the rest of the building but without the decorative detailing. The remainder of the rear elevation is constructed in metal and weatherboard cladding and a brick section which extends past the west elevation.

The current standard Australia Post fitout divides the interior space of *Wagin Post Office* into a public foyer and retail section at the front of the building and a general work area behind. Whilst similar, the partitioning layout is not

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<sup>19</sup> This is a significant difference to the post offices at Narrogin and Katanning where the modelling is formed by rusticated brickwork.

identical to the post offices at Narrogin and Katanning. A heavy metal door in the east corner of the north wall leads to the strong room, constructed in reinforced brick walls. In the opposite corner, the full height, timber and glazed partitioning for the telephone exchange, which was enlarged in 1959, still exists, although the room no longer fulfils that function. Timber framed doors with fanlights in the rear wall give access to the staff amenities room and female toilet, and service areas. The brick extension housing staff toilets was probably constructed circa 1962. The fairfaced, red brick lean-to is utilitarian with a corrugated iron roof. A strip of glass louvres is located in the west wall with a triangular panel of weatherboarding over, beneath the skillion. The external door to the female toilet has been removed and bricked over, with access now provided through the amenities room.

The new fitout to the post office is approximately three years old. It is likely that many of the internal finishes, currently in good condition and well maintained, were upgraded at that time. Walls are plastered and the timber floor has carpet and vinyl coverings. The evaporative air conditioning duct work and fans suspended from the ceiling are intrusive and detract from the atmosphere of the original construction provided by the high, painted, timber boarded ceiling and existing joinery evident in the partitioning, window and door detailing and moulded skirtings. Internal, vertical venetian blinds are suspended across the windows of the front and side elevations.

Since the construction of *Wagin Post Office*, alterations to the fabric have occurred mainly at the rear of the building. In 1937, the battery room, now the amenities room, was extended and a toilet block was added in about 1962. The original drawings show two phone booths located in the front corners of the public space, accessible from both the lobby and the office interior. No evidence of these remain and the lobby openings have been bricked over. The fireplace in the west wall has been covered and the original post office counter was taken away in 1991.<sup>20</sup>

The adjacent, former post office, which became the quarters, was reconstructed in 1937 with a significant alteration in the orientation of one of the front bay windows. A sleep-out was added to the east elevation of the building. The sleep-out has been reclad and, with the exception of a new Colorbond roof, the external building fabric appears unchanged.<sup>21</sup> A light coloured brick wall surrounds the building on the Tudhoe Street and Leake Way frontages, adjoining *Wagin Post Office* at the west lobby.

*Wagin Post Office* is in good condition and well maintained. There is evidence of some weather damage and repair work to the bricks and mortar of the north-east corner. An early photograph shows finials located at the apexes of the roof. This detailing was omitted when the roof was replaced.

### 13.3 REFERENCES

Broomfield, W., Bush, F., Kelsall, D., National Trust Assessment , July 1993.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Postmaster by Katrina Chisholm in December 1996.

<sup>21</sup> The building is now in private ownership, not associated with the Post Office and was not inspected.