11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November, 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11. 1 AESTHETIC VALUE*

Roebourne Post Office is an example of the early work of George Temple Poole in designing for climatic conditions in the North-West of Western Australia. (Criterion 1.2)

The use of local stone in this, as in other civic buildings in the town, contributes to the character and townscape of Roebourne. (Criterion 1.4)

11. 2. HISTORIC VALUE

Roebourne Post Office provides physical evidence of the growth and prosperity of Roebourne and its development as a major centre of the pastoral industry in the Pilbara region prior to the establishment of the Pilbara Goldfield. (Criterion 2.1)

The place played a vital role in communications during the goldrushes of the 1880s and 1890s and again, during the 1960s and early 1970s, when iron ore mines and mining towns were being established in the Pilbara. (Criterion 2.2)

Roebourne Post Office is significant for its associations with the development of postal, telecommunications and meteorological services in Roebourne and the Pilbara region. (Criterion 2.2)

Roebourne Post Office has close associations with its designer, George Temple Poole, Superintendent of Public Works, and its builders, Robert and Arthur Bunning, founders of the Western Australian company of Bunnings Ltd. (Criterion 2.3)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

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11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

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* For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P., *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

Roebourne Post Office is valued by the community as a focal point in Roebourne where social interaction and communication take place. (Criterion 4.1)

Roebourne Post Office, a civic structure built on this site in 1887, contributes to the local community's sense of history and place because of its age and function. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

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12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Roebourne Post Office is representative of a functional civic building designed to withstand the extremes of the North-West climate. While the planform is similar to George Temple Poole's standard post office plan, the place displays individual design elements. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

Roebourne Post Office is in a fair to good condition with no obvious works needing attention other than painting. There is termite damage to the front of the building around windows and the verandah.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

The place continues to operate as a Post Office and living quarters as originally designed in 1887. It retains a high degree of integrity.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

The place is intact with very few alterations having taken place to the fabric. The kitchen has been renovated in a style in keeping with the age of the building. *Roebourne Post Office* has a high degree of authenticity.

13.   SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been researched and compiled by Laura Gray, heritage and conservation consultant, with some primary research by Gillian O'Mara, archival researcher. The physical evidence has been compiled by Laura Gray.

13. 1   DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Roebourne Post Office, situated on Lot 11 in Sholl Street, is a single-storey stone and iron civic building constructed in 1887 to a design by George Temple Poole, the Superintendent of Public Works.

The North-West of Western Australia was first settled in 1863 after explorations by Francis T. Gregory publicised the pastoral potential of the region.   John and Emma Withnell, who arrived in the district in 1864, established their station at the foot of Mount Welcome near a permanent pool in the Harding River, a location also deemed suitable for a townsite by Government Resident Robert J. Sholl when he arrived the following year. Roebourne townsite, named after the Surveyor General, J. S. Roe, was gazetted on 17 August 1866.[1]

Initially, Roebourne was the administrative centre of the north and the centre for surrounding pastoral leases comprising over a million hectares.[2]   The town prospered as shops, services and hotels were established .[3] Early public buildings were all timber constructions but many of these were destroyed by a cyclone in 1872 and had to be rebuilt.   A weekly mail service between Roebourne and Cossack was commenced in 1875 by a contractor.[4]

The need for more permanent public buildings in Roebourne coincided with the appointment of George Temple Poole as Superintendent of Public Works in June 1885.   Several Roebourne buildings feature amongst his earlier Western Australian designs.   Amongst his first assignments in Western Australia were *Roebourne Gaol*, built in 1886 and *Roebourne Courthouse*, *Roebourne Post Office* and *Roebourne Hospital*, all built in 1887.   Later, he designed a number of police buildings and gaol additions for Roebourne, as well as the Boys' School in the early 1890s.[5]

Tenders were initially called for the construction of the 'Post and Telegraph Office and Tramway Station, Roebourne' in December 1885.[6] No works had been commenced by mid 1886, as several complaints about the condition of the post office building in Roebourne were received by the Post Master General's Department from the Roebourne Postmaster. The post office at that

1   Withnell Taylor, N.E. *A Saga of the Northwest, Yeera-muk-a-doo; The First Settlement of North-West Australia told through the Withnell and Hancock families 1861-1890* Hesperian Press, Carlisle WA, 1987, pp. 16-22.

2   ibid., pp. 98-99.

3   ibid, pp. 98-99, 238.

4   ibid., p. 159; Oldham, R. & J., *Western Heritage Part 2. George Temple-Poole Architect of the Golden Years 1885-1897* UWA Press, Nedlands, 1980. p. 9.

5   Oldham, R. & J., op cit, pp. 9-15.

6   *Government Gazette* 10 December 1885, p. 655.

time was situated in one of the timber Government buildings in Roebourne. The Director of Public Works responded in August 1886:

> A new post office will be built as soon as we can arrange for it. In the mean time your Clerk in Charge at Roebourne must do the best he can and not be surprised at a roof leaking slightly after a long hot and dry season when the first rain comes'.[7]

In December 1886, tenders were again invited for a 'Post and Telegraph Station' at Roebourne.[8] The successful tender of £2,698, announced in June 1887, came from Robert and Arthur Bunning, founders of the well-known building and timber company of Bunning Bros. (now Bunnings Ltd).[9] The brothers had arrived in Western Australia in June 1886, and had successfully completed a government contract for additions to the Fremantle Lunatic Asylum.[10]

Work commenced on 21 June 1887 and the foundation stone was laid in July. W. Lambden Owen, engineer for the North-West, supervised the building work. The workers included three stonemasons and numerous Aboriginal prisoners acted as labourers. Stone for the building was locally obtained and carted to the site by bullock dray while the timber utilised was Jarrah shipped up from the South-West. The Bunnings were quick and thorough in their work and the building was completed in three months.[11]

Roebourne Post Office building included two 20,000 gallon water tanks under the rear of the quarters, which are still in place. The corrugated iron roof of the Post Office and residence was white washed.[12]

In 1888, the goldrushes to Pilbara Creek and Mallina gave economic and demographic stimulus to the region, greatly increasing the volume of mail handled at *Roebourne Post Office*. Mail was conveyed from the port at Cossack via a tramway to Roebourne. This tri-weekly service replaced a weekly service which had operated since 1875. By 1890, the service was daily. The police were required to transport mail between the tramway and the Post Office free of charge, except when a trap had to be hired to cope with steam-ship mails.[13]

An 1897 photograph indicates that there were eight adults and two messenger boys on staff at the Post Office at that time. That year, the staff at the Post Office had to endure a temperature of 52.2°C, and for over eight hours the temperature did not drop below 48.8 degrees.[14]

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[7]   Australian Archives, Series K1/1 1530/86. Correspondence; Director of Public Works to PMG, 13 August 1886.

[8]   *Government Gazette* 30 December 1886.

[9]   ibid 6 June 1887.

[10]   Mills, Jenny *The Timber People: A History of Bunnings Limited* Bunnings Ltd, Perth, 1986, pp. 11-12; Fulford, R.E., 'History of Roebourne and District Post Office', Karratha Community Library, n.d; Australian Archives, Series K1209/1 file 1;*Australian Postal Institute Journal* Historical Feature, Roebourne, n.d..

[11]   ibid.

[12]   Australian Archives, Series K1209/1 File 2; Fulford, R. E., op cit.; Australian Archives, Series K1209/1 file 1. Australian Postal Institute Journal, Historical Feature, Roebourne, n.d..

[13]   Oldham, R. & J. op cit., p. 15; Australian Archives, Series K1/1 1130/88, Minute paper 2050/88 dated 17 July 1888.

[14]   Australian Archives, Series K1209/1 file 2.

By 1919, there was a postmaster, postal clerk and five telegraphists on staff at the Post Office. In the 1920s, with the decline of port activities at Cossack, the Postmaster at Roebourne assumed the responsibilities of Customs Officer in addition to his other duties. Nevertheless, by 1932, the number of staff at *Roebourne Post Office* had dwindled to three.

In the early 1930s, a local telephone exchange was available at Roebourne, and only one telegraphist was operating Morse.

By 1932, Norman Brearley of WA Airways flew a fortnightly air mail service, carrying letters only. This was a three-day service between Perth and Derby, servicing post offices in the North-West. The air service supplemented the continued sea services. In 1934, MacRobertson Millar Airlines (MMA) took over the service, and initiated the current airmail service.[15]

In 1942, the Cossack Post Office closed and the Cossack to Roebourne mail service ceased. The following year, a fortnightly free bag mail service was introduced between Roebourne and Wittenoom where the population of 70 men at the asbestos mine in the gorge was expected to increase to 150 within three months. Eric Geldon of the Australian Blue Asbestos Company was the bag holder for the service which continued until 1972 when it ceased to be viable.[16]

In January 1960, the former PMG staff house adjacent to the Post Office was sold to the State Housing Commission.[17]

In November 1961, the first telephone link between Perth and Roebourne was completed with the completion of the land line through Port Hedland, Meekatharra and Mullewa. Until that time, trunk facilities had been available between Roebourne, Onslow and Port Hedland Post Offices, with the service provided by operators being limited to local calls between 8 am and 8 pm, six days a week.[18]

In 1962, Roebourne was incorporated into the Teleprinter Reperforator Switching System network. For the following six years, Roebourne retained the radio circuit to Wittenoom and Onslow for the reception and sending of messages by Morse.

In 1966, the $2 million 'North West Project' was completed with the connection of Roebourne and Dampier by radio. For the first time, on 27 October, a full-time continuous 24 hour service was introduced at the Roebourne telephone exchange. The same year, cyclone *Shirley* caused some damage at the Post Office, shredding the canvas blinds and destroying the lattice verandah infill.[19] Nowadays, during the cyclone season from November to March, *Roebourne Post Office* issues very important three hourly

15   Fulford, R. E., op cit.
16   Australian Archives, Series K1205/1 M1935/115; Australian Archives, Series K1205/1 M1943/49.
17   Australian Archives, Series K273/44 1951/10.
18   Fulford, R. E., op cit.; Australian Archives, Series K1209/1 file 1; *Australian Postal Institute Journal*, Historical Feature, Roebourne, n.d..
19   Australian Archives, Series K1209/1 file 1 Australian Archives, Series K433/1 XP 1170; *Northern Times* 27 October 1966.

weather reports. The reports advise of the movements of any cyclones and warn of the need to batten down or evacuate.[20]

With the rapid rate of progress in the Pilbara, the open wire lines could not handle the ever increasing demands. In 1966, the broad band coaxial cable was selected to span 1,800 kilometres from Perth to Roebourne.[21]

In 1967, the Stevenson screen was installed at *Roebourne Post Office* for the meteorological recordings. In November the following year, the Postmaster, Mr N. Matson, ended an era when he sent the last Morse message from the Post Office.[22]

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Roebourne experienced a boom when an iron ore plant was constructed at Cape Lambert, and the town of Wickham was built only 13 kilometres from Roebourne. A customs office was soon established at the new townsite to service the increasing number of ships berthing at Cape Lambert, relieving the Postmaster at Roebourne of his Customs Officer duties.[23] Despite this, *Roebourne Post Office* experienced one of the busiest times in its history, employing up to 17 staff during the boom period. All telegraph traffic for the new mining towns springing up in the region was routed through Roebourne keeping the duplex teletype system very busy.

All this activity resulted in some modifications to the Post Office building. In c.1970, air-conditioning was installed in the Post Office and the bathroom and kitchen of the quarters were modernised. A wall was constructed between the public space and the former telegraphists' area, which then became part of the Postmaster's quarters. In October 1971, a transportable building was placed on the Post Office site for use as the mail and telegraph room. At that time, the counter was moved from its original position perpendicular to the entry door, to a position parallel with the entry doors.[24]

In early 1972, with the completion of the coaxial cable, *Roebourne Post Office* was finally connected directly into the telephone system. Dampier and Karratha Post Offices were also connected, and in May that year, following the connection of Wickham and Pannawonica, the telegraph traffic was re-routed around Roebourne, to go through Port Hedland.[25]

In 1972, Roebourne was the only manual exchange of the four in the region (Dampier, Karratha, Wickham) when it finally went automatic on 6 August, displacing nine telegraphists and a monitor.[26]

After Wickham and other 'new' mining towns in the region were established, the town of Roebourne again went into decline. In the mid-1970s many of the pastoral stations in the Pilbara region were purchased by the Federal Government for various local Aboriginal groups to manage, and the pastoral

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[20]   Fulford, R. E., op cit.; Australian Archives, Series K1209/1 file 1. *Australian Postal Institute Journal* Historical Feature, Roebourne, n.d..
[21]   ibid.
[22]   ibid.
[23]   ibid.
[24]   ibid.
[25]   ibid.
[26]   ibid.

scene in the Pilbara changed, a change reflected in the downturn of population and trade in Roebourne.[27]

In 1993, as part of a state wide rationalisation, Australia Post sold *Roebourne Post Office*. The incumbent Postmaster purchased the property and continued to operate the Post Office and reside in the quarters with his family. Since then, the laundry at the rear of the Post Office has been demolished, and the front counter in the Post Office has been moved to almost its original position. In late 1997, the kitchen was renovated in a style in keeping with the age of the building.[28]

In 1998, the place continues to be used as a Post Office and residence.

13. 2   PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Roebourne Post Office is a single-storey stone building comprising the post office and quarters. Designed by George Temple Poole in the 1880s, it has a more domestic scale than the Gaol, Courthouse, Police Station and other public buildings he designed for Roebourne during the same period. Situated on the western frontage of Lot 11 Sholl Street in Roebourne, it is an inconspicuous building in the sparse streetscape. It does not display any style indicators, and is more an example of vernacular Pilbara public architecture than indicative of Temple Poole or any specific style.

The random mortared and pointed local stone structure has a prominent gable wall at the front, flanked by a rendered pediment entry on the south side, and an enclosed verandah extending six bays along the north end of the frontage. The entry and verandah either side of the gable contrast in scale with the gable wall which is dominant. The verandah has a stone dado wall above which are painted louvred shutters. The verandah roof is hipped at the corner, and separate from the main hipped roof. A skillion verandah roof is in place behind the parapet entry. Centrally located in the gable wall is a vertical format window with capital and mouldings.

The north verandah accesses the original front door of the quarters, but is no longer used as an entry. Above the asbestos dado there is evidence of the verandah having been extended towards the rear, and lattice infill panels are in place.

The water tanks form a 5.48 metre high cellar beneath the north-eastern rear corner of the quarters. In the extreme rear yard, concrete footings show evidence of the old stables and a former garage. A slab remains closer to the house as evidence of the former laundry building. The former timber framed and iron clad battery room is still in place and is now used as a garage. Patio extensions have been constructed out from the rear door of the post office. A rain gauge and meteorological equipment are situated on the southern side of the Post Office.

The original counter is still in the Post Office, just behind the original position. A false ceiling of composite material has been installed, as well as fluorescent lights and ceiling fans. The fabric of the plaster walls, and the design of the place shows no evidence of any substantial change.

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[27]   ibid.
[28]   Letter from the owner, Garry Bailey, dated 26 March 1998.

The quarters are entered from the eastern verandah, at the rear of the Post Office. One front room opens onto the screened verandah along the western street front with a single panelled door with small glass panels, and a fanlight above.

A living space nearest to the Post Office, which was formerly the telegraphists' area, has been extended with the installation of a wall dividing it from the Post Office. The main bedroom (formerly the living room) has a fire place. The kitchen is a large room at the rear, with a 1950s cupboard fitout. The ceilings throughout the quarters are 4.26 metres high, the walls are hard plaster and the floors timber. The kitchen exits onto a verandah and against the kitchen wall is a white painted stone fireplace, and an adjoining storeroom, under which the water tanks are located. The bathroom leads off the back verandah.

The verandahs around the front, northern and eastern sides, are supported by cast iron columns which are still in place. The front and northern verandahs are connected and extensive. The verandah floors are concrete. There has been some termite damage to the front of the building around windows and the verandah.[29]

13. 3 REFERENCES

Fulford, R. E., 'History of Roebourne and District Post Office', Karratha Community Library, n.d.

Australian Archives, Series K1209/1 file 1. Australian Postal Institute Journal, Historical Feature: Roebourne, n.d.

13.4 FURTHER RESEARCH

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[29]   Letter from the owner, Garry Bailey, dated 26 March 1998.