

# PORTABLE BUILDINGS NEWS

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PORTABLE BUILDINGS WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION TASK FORCE



We recommend to the State of Victoria and the Commonwealth of Australia that a submission be made to UNESCO for the World Heritage listing of the imported Portable Buildings of the Nineteenth Century which survive in Australia.

We also seek the support of the governments of New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia, in all of which examples of these buildings are found.

Our role is to carry the matter forward until it is taken up by the relevant governments. It may also be useful to have a transitional stage in which the Task Force is appointed as an advisory committee by one or more governments.

We are keen to engage and share with supporters and researchers

Contact us here:

<https://portablebuildingsaustralia.org>  
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# *THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PORTABLES*

The prefabricated buildings of the nineteenth century, known at the time as ‘portable buildings’, constitute an international phenomenon of historical, economic and technical significance.

The growth of prefabrication was one of the major outcomes of the Industrial Revolution, and these buildings are also associated with historical episodes of great moment – including exploration, gold rushes (in Australia and the USA), the Crimean War and the development of steam navigation. They are also a reflection of economic conditions, because the trade in buildings required cheaper labour, cheaper materials and/or superior production capacity in the country of origin, as compared with the country of receipt. The trade reacted sensitively to changes in demand or in costs (notably the rise in the price of iron in the mid-1850s).

Prefabrication always stimulates the most advanced building technology, and in this case that technology included:

- the first panelised systems in timber
- various patented systems of cast iron framing components
- carpentry adapting Malay and Chinese traditions to European requirements
- patent system combining timber and iron
- cladding in sheet zinc
- cladding in corrugated galvanised iron
- continuous arched roofing in corrugated iron, using minimal ties
- cast plate iron with lead-run joints
- patent conical roof vents

Fortuitously, most of the world’s surviving examples are in Australia, and especially Victoria. They came mainly but by no means exclusively in response to the gold discoveries of the 1850s, because by the 1850s suppliers were geared up for export, having already sent buildings - in much smaller numbers - to the Californian gold rushes. All of the early Californian examples have since been destroyed, and an interesting side-effect of this is that the Australian buildings best illustrate what was once to be found in San Francisco. Australia not only has more prefabricated buildings of this period than any other country: it has, by a considerable margin, more than the rest of the world combined.

The critical period is approximately 1840 to 1880, because this is when the Australian market was pre-eminent. After this time prefabricated structures are important elsewhere, such as Latin America, although the numbers are far smaller. But if the period 1840 to 1880 were strictly adhered to, it would exclude some extremely significant buildings in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Therefore the list incorporated in this proposal consists of examples imported up to 1900. It does not include buildings prefabricated within Australia itself.

There are 104 known examples (though some are very fragmentary). 63 of these are in Victoria, 16 in New South Wales, 13 in South Australia, 4 in Tasmania, 3 in Queensland, 3 in Western Australia, and 2 in the Northern Territory. A majority are already protected under the relevant heritage controls, and a number are in public ownership or in accessible uses such as guest houses, restaurants and shops. A significant proportion of them, perhaps 20%, are too fragmentary or altered to be understood visually, but they are nevertheless important to the story of prefabrication in Australia.

The national benefits of World Heritage listing in terms of prestige, tourism and national identity are well understood and have been demonstrated by the previous listings of cultural and natural sites, the former being:

- Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens
- Sydney Opera House
- Australian Convict Sites
- Budj Bim Cultural Landscape

# OUR RECENT ACTIVITY

Barry Jones launched our Task Force on April 15. Over a hundred attended, and it was both successful and very enjoyable. We thank Andrew and Chris Muir for hosting, Barry for launching, Tony Knox for allowing access to his home, our volunteers for helping, and ASRC Catering. We received excellent media coverage including Channel 2 and Channel 10 news, front page in The Age, and Geelong Advertiser.



Launch at 136 Sackville Street, Collingwood 15 April 2021: Tim Isaacson

AAM Group, a PBWHNTF collaborator, recently carried out a cloud scan of Oberon in St Kilda, capturing amazing detail, and here are a couple of images they have extracted. It's the start of our digitizing program.



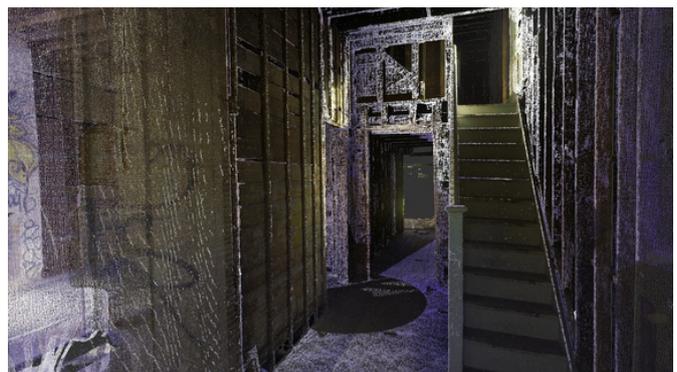
Andrew Muir, Barry Jones and Miles Lewis at Sackville Street, Collingwood: Tim Isaacson

On 29 May our Miles Lewis spoke with Jonathan Green on ABC Radio National's *Blueprint for Living*. From this we received a lot of feedback, adding to that created by the launch. It generated lots of new information and some exciting research by our team and our adviser researchers.

Miles updates us in this newsletter on seven buildings, demonstrating the value and contribution of our adviser and support network in adding to the knowledge of portable buildings in Australia.



Andrew Muir, owner of the Singapore Cottages at 136 Sackville Street, Collingwood, and Tony Isaacson, convenor or PBWHNTF, hosted an inspection of the cottages and a discussion of digitizing capture and presentation of heritage buildings, with Julian Featherston of *Two Feathers*, Ryan Kent and Chris Horner of *AAM Group*, *Stuart King*, *Ursula Chandler* and David Pesavento of Melbourne School of Design, and Tim Isaacson of Tim Isaacson Screen Productions



# COMING SOON

Miles Lewis to present at RHSV  
5th August

[Book now](#)

Miles Lewis is presenting a lecture on Portable Buildings in Australia at the Royal Historical Society of Victoria on Thursday 5th of August 2021 at 5:30 – 7:00 pm. Charles Sowerwine, who is also on the Portable Buildings World Heritage Nomination Task Force and chairs the RHSV Heritage Committee will chair the evening.

Portable buildings, today referred to as prefabricated, were imported in larger numbers to Australia than to any other part of the world during the nineteenth century. They were made not merely of timber and iron, but of oilcloth, slate, zinc, papier mâché, and ‘portable brick’. More also survive in Australia than anywhere else, though not of those more ephemeral materials. They range through iron lighthouses, cottages of ‘teak’ from Singapore, German glazed conservatories, plate iron fronted buildings from Glasgow, and redwood houses from California. Many are of the greatest technical interest, and in few cases do any examples survive in the country of origin. For these reasons we propose that they should be nominated as a group for World Heritage Listing. This presentation will sample the various types of portable buildings, concentrating on those that survive today.

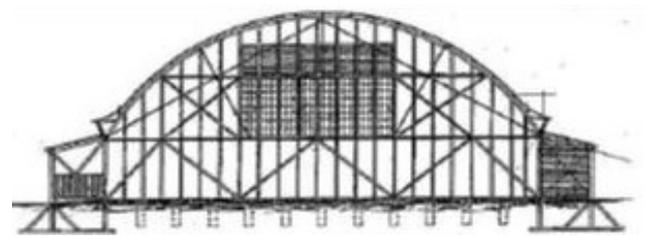


Sydney Seymour House Romsey 25 March 2021: Tony Isaacson



Potential Singapore bungalow in Derby W.A.: Shirley Rowell [cropped]

We had planned a visit to Broome and Derby, W.A. in late July to inspect the Broome Cable Station and a possible Singapore sourced portable in Derby. But problems of access to both cases, and COVID-19 travel restrictions make it necessary to defer the trip. We have an outline of the Broome Cable Station on page 11.



1 Hodsworth Street, Freemantle: drawing Rosemary Rosario



Members of the Task Force will visit the Romsey & Lancefield Districts Historical Society at Seymour House at 20 Palmer Street Romsey on Sunday 15 September. Although not strictly prefabricated, the walls of this cottage are Singapore-made doors.

# THE IRON HOUSE AT INVERLEIGH

VICTORIA, NO. 77



Iron house at 'The Weatherboard', Inverleigh, fabricated by John Walker, c 1853-4: Miles Lewis.

A really significant discovery is that the iron house at Inverleigh, the origins of which were mysterious, was built on the present site in about 1853-4. Until now it has seemed most likely that it was held in the government depot at the Richmond Police Paddock until the depot was broken up in 1881, and then bought for use as a farm shed. We now have an advertisement of 1855 offering the Weatherboard run for sale, including the iron house. This means that it must have been built in 1853 by J T Mercer or in 1854 by William Harding, who became insolvent in the following year. The building is essentially a shell, but a very good specimen, including traces of the assembly marks – by far the best surviving example of the work of John Walker.

*"A really significant discovery is that the iron house at Inverleigh ... was built on the present site in about 1853-4.."*

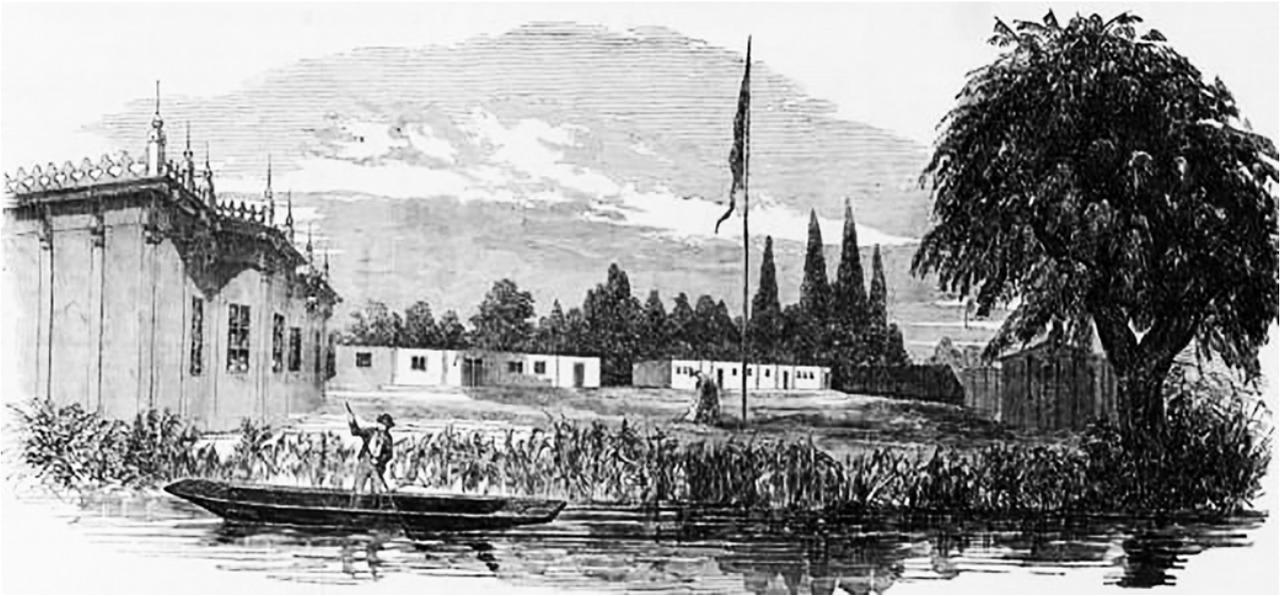


Maker's plate on the house at Inverleigh: Miles Lewis

# *THE PAPIER MÂCHÉ VILLAGE AT PENTRIDGE?*

VICTORIA NO FRAGMENTS

*"This discovery is even more exciting, but less  
significant for our present purposes."*



'Papier-Mache Village for Australia', *Illustrated London News*, 6 August 1853, p 80.

This discovery is even more exciting, but less significant for our present purposes because it is unlikely to produce a surviving building for our list. In 1853 C F Bielefeld, the well-known English manufacturer of papier mâché ornament, filed a provisional patent specification for 'improvements in constructing portable houses and buildings'. The *Illustrated London News* reported in August 1853 that Bielefeld had constructed, a village of buildings commissioned by a Mr Seymour, who was emigrating to Australia. There were other reports in the British press, including Charles Dickens's *Household Words*. But although we know of some papier mâché buildings which were put up in Melbourne and Geelong, there has been no trace until now of Seymour's famous village. We have now found an advertisement of 1855 for a sheriff's sale of Seymour's property at Pentridge, including two papier mâché houses that had been erected and seven that had not. The Coburg Historical Society is looking into this.

# *THE WRIGLEY HOUSES*

SOUTH AUSTRALIA NO. 36

*Another Wrigley house made in California, from the  
Torrens Island Quarantine Station*



Wrigley cottage the Waldorf School, Mount Barker, South Australia: [Trish Cameron, Richard Woods, et al] *Torrens Island CMP* (2 vols, Habitable Places, [Adelaide] 2014), 2, p 136.

Already on our list was a house by W H Wrigley of California, at the Torrens Island Quarantine Station, South Australia. There were originally thirty of these houses which had been imported privately, but which the government opportunistically bought up when establishing the quarantine station. Richard Woods has given us detailed historical information on the site, including the fact that one house was moved to the Waldorf School, Mount Barker, and has been restored. This house has now been added to the list

# *THE PALM HOUSE*

SOUTH AUSTRALIA NO. 35



*The German architect of the Palm House in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens was Gustave Runge, and he modelled it on his previous palm house at Bremen-Oberneuland of c 1870-4*



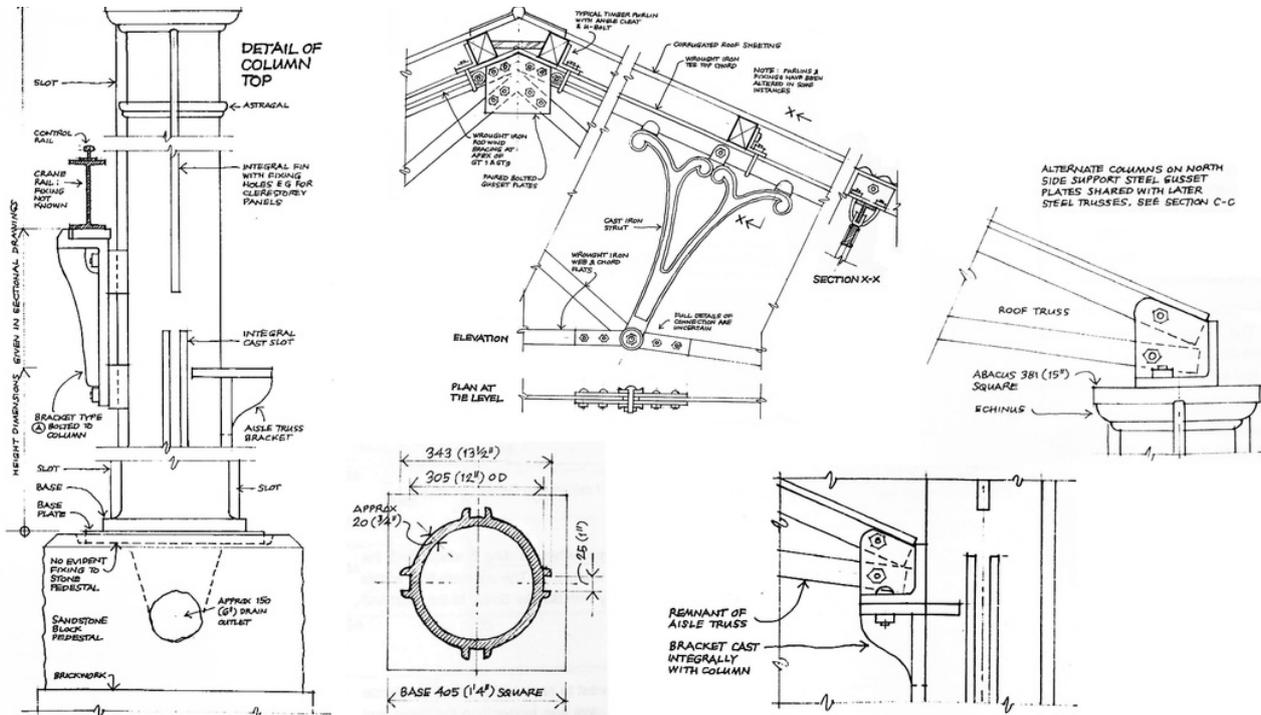
The Palm House (Tropical House) at the Botanic Gardens in Adelaide, designed by Gustave Runge and fabricated by Hoefer of Bremen, 1874-6, restored and renovated 1955 and 1992: Miles Lewis.

Our joint South Australian adviser, Andrew Winkler, has been assiduous in drumming up connections and taking photographs. Best of all, he has discovered the German Architect of the Palm House in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens. This was Gustave Runge, and he modelled it on his previous palm house at Bremen-Oberneuland of c 1870-4.

# THE GRISSELL BUILDING

NEW SOUTH WALES NO. 14

*The largest and most interesting iron prefab in Australia*



The Grissell building at Waterloo, structural details by Bob Irving, 1990 [reformatted]

The largest and most interesting iron prefab in Australia has to be the building which was discovered in the ACI glassworks complex at Waterloo, bearing the brand of H & M D Grissells' Regents Canal Ironworks, London. It was demolished in 1992, since when it has spent some time in storage and then been rebuilt as a frame by International Conservation Services, with missing parts replicated, on a neighbouring site. But its original identity, date and location have been a mystery for thirty years. Now our volunteer researcher Hayley Edmonds, has done some brilliant research to establish beyond reasonable doubt that it was imported in 1855 for Tooth's brewery in Kent Street. Malcom Tucker, English engineering archaeologist, has provided us with information about the Grissell foundry. Hayley is still working to find out more about the English background of the building and he date of its removal from Kent Street to Waterloo.



The Grissell building, restored trusses; the re-erected nave: International Conservation Services.

# *THE DALGETY HOUSE*

NEW SOUTH WALES NEW

*A possible new portable in Snowy-Monaro*



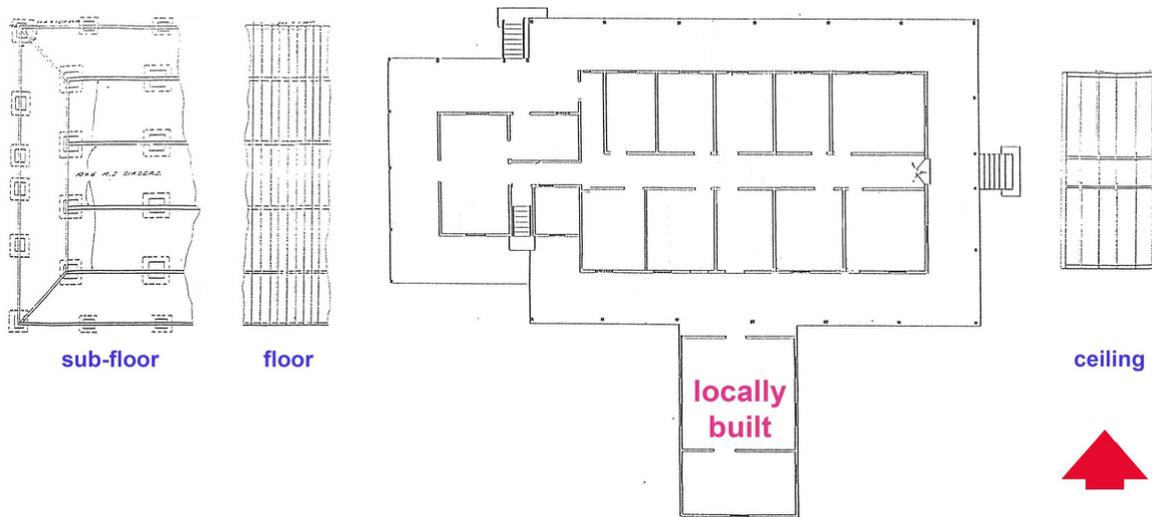
Cottage in Barnes St, Dalgety: Astrid Brinley [cropped].

Astrid and Richard Brinsley, who heard Miles Lewis speaking on the radio, got in touch to say that they had talked to the owner of a corrugated iron clad building in Dalgety (Snowy-Monaro), who told them that it was imported from Britain in the 1870s. This is now being checked out by the local conservation architect Suzannah Plowman. It was Suzannah who originally brought to light two other buildings in the area, the Woolingubra Inn and the Ryrie building at Maffra. She has now agreed to be our adviser for Snowy-Monaro.

# THE BROOME CABLE STATION

WESTERN AUSTRALIA NO. 110

*Rosemary Rosario seems to have been working full time for us on topics including the Broome Cable Station, the Singapore bungalow at Derby, the German building at Kalgoorlie, the drill halls at Fremantle and Perth, and the cottages at Leschenault.*

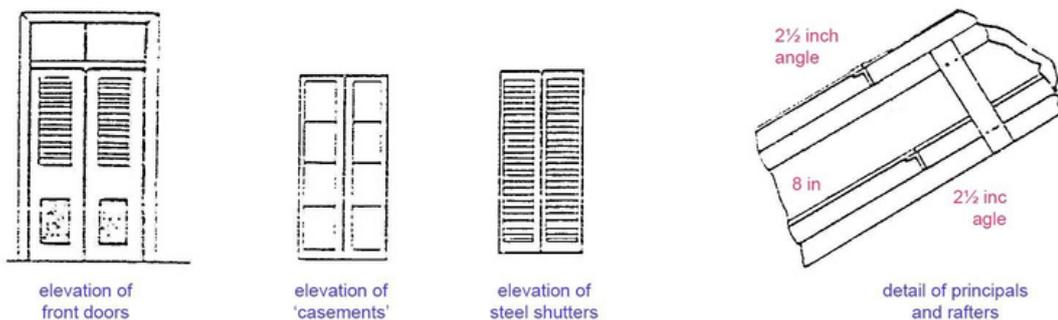


Cable Repeater Station, Broome, reconstruction plan: Miles Lewis, based principally upon 'Plan showing conversion of the Cable Station 1922' (Department of the North West WA drg. no 108, PWD WA drg no 21441).

Four members of the Task Force hope to inspect this building at the end of July, but we await permission from the Department of Justice to get full access. The reconstructed plan here assumes that the billiard room on the south side was not part of the prefabricated package, though it was built at the same time. This is one of the issues that needs to be considered on site. The other point of importance is the roof structure, which is believed to have two layers of corrugated iron with a space between. The precise nature of this is unclear but, given that the whole building is lined with teak, including even the underside of the verandah roof, it will probably be difficult to check.



Cable Repeater Station, Broome, east elevation and transverse section: 'Plan showing conversion of the Cable Station 1922' (Department of the North West WA drg no 108, PWD WA drg no 21441 [reformatted details]).



Cable Repeater Station, Broome, doors and roof structure: 'Plan showing conversion of the Cable Station 1922' (Department of the North West WA drg no 108, PWD WA drg no 21441 [reformatted details]).