



Building a home

and a place in history

If the walls of the Millstream homestead could talk, they'd whisper tales amassed over 100 years. The stories would be of when the homestead served as a beloved family home, a tavern and now as a visitor centre, which welcomes people from around the world who travel there to experience the beauty of Millstream Chichester National Park.

by Judymae Napier



One hundred years ago, a homestead was built in the remote and spectacular part of the Pilbara Region, known today as Millstream Chichester National Park. The homestead was constructed alongside the picturesque Millstream wetlands, which have spiritual significance to the Yindjibarndi people, who also call this place home. The first family to live in the homestead – Claude and Ella Irvine and their children, who came to the station from Minderoo Station, which they managed for David Forrest – considered it the best house in the State’s north-west (see ‘Return to Millstream’, *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2015). And the property’s proximity to abundant fresh water from a large limestone aquifer and the large pools of the Fortescue River, made the station, which was established in 1865 when Alexander McRae took up 100,000 acres of land, one of the north-west’s most desirable.

BUILT TO LAST

Built in 1919, Millstream homestead’s hip roof, shady verandas and concrete floor are characteristic of many other station homes. However, the building’s walls are unique, having been made from hair and lime mortar with a ‘coating of concrete’ on the outside. When it was being built, station manager Claude Irvine had his concerns about this construction technique, but the builder assured him that “... it will be strong enough to withstand anything...”. So far, it has.

At the time it was constructed, the homestead was surrounded by other buildings, including the previous house, a men’s hut, a carpenter and blacksmith shop, a store, shearers’ quarters, wool shed and five out camp huts. All of these out buildings are long gone, but the homestead, surrounded by lawn and shady poinciana trees planted a few years after the house was built, remain.

HOME, SWEET HOME

The Millstream homestead was home to three generations of the Irvine/Gordon family before it was sold to the Kennedy



Previous page

Main Millstream homestead stands proud 100 years after it was built.

Photo – Jackie Baxter/DBCA

Inset bottom Jirndawurrunha Pool is one of Millstream Chichester National Park’s freshwater pools.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Inset centre right The Irvine family at the homestead in 1919.

Photo – Courtesy of the Gordon family

Above The kitchen building is still standing.

Photo – Cliff Winfield

Right Poinciana trees that were planted a few years after the homestead was built provide shade for visitors today.

Photo – Jackie Baxter/DBCA

family in 1964. The Kennedys converted the homestead to a tavern in 1975, but it closed in the 1980s and it became the national park ranger’s office and a park visitor centre, which is still open today.

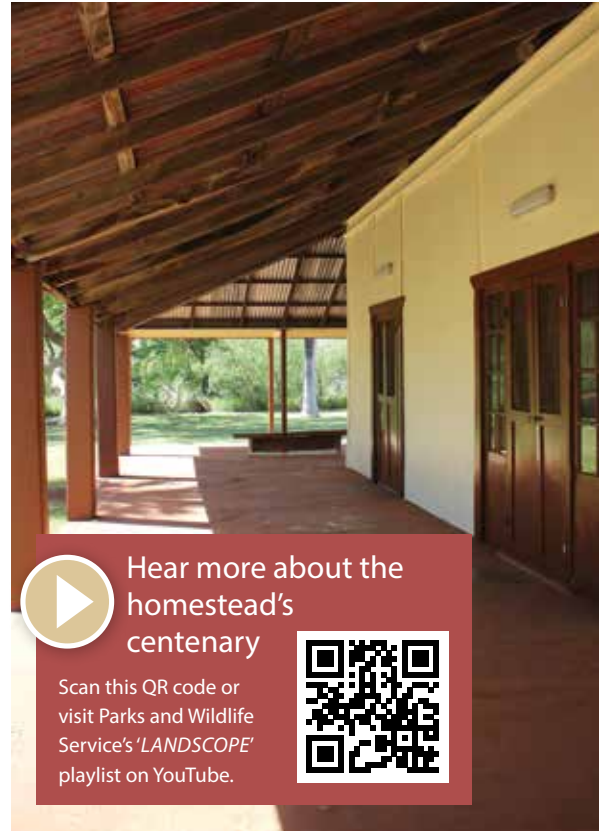
It was the third house built on this site. The first homestead had a thatched roof and walls made using an ancient building technique called wattle and daub. Walls were constructed from a woven lattice of wooden strips called wattle, which were then daubed with a sticky material that consisted of a combination of materials, including soil, clay, animal dung and straw, depending on what was available.

This building was destroyed by fire in October 1897 when a spark from the chimney ignited the thatching.



Mrs Turnbull, who managed the station with her husband from about 1879 to 1898, was woken by a crackling noise and then smelt smoke. She roused her husband and the pair discovered the roof was ablaze. They had enough time to get out, but were not able to get water on the building so it burnt to the ground within an hour, destroying everything inside, including family treasures, clothes and £30 in notes and important business papers; a loss of £150 pounds. The building and furniture were valued at £250.

The second homestead was made of iron and weatherboard and was surrounded by verandas. The veranda



▶ Hear more about the homestead's centenary

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.

Above The second homestead was built in 1898.

Above right (left to right) Ella, Cecil, Nellie and Claude Irvine with Kath Salt and Ken Irvine in the sitting room of the second homestead.
Photos – Courtesy of the Gordon family

Far right Each room of the homestead opens out to the veranda
Photo – Jackie Baxter/DBCA

posts are believed to have been trunks from the local paperbark tree (*Melaleuca argentea*). Unfortunately, the house lost its roof and suffered major damage in a violent storm on 6 February 1916.

Wind blew sections of the roof off, rain destroyed what was left of the ceiling and several walls and the entire back veranda and part of the front was blown away. The building was uninhabitable so Claude and Ella Irvine moved their family into the shearers quarters until the building could be repaired at a cost of £150.

The building continued to decline, and by 1918 it was in such poor condition, Claude didn't think it would survive

another cyclone. When then owner Harold Cookson visited the station from England that year, he and Claude collaborated on a new design, which was to include hollow concrete blocks and an oval roof. The budget was set at £2000.

BUILDING A LEGACY

Claude visited Perth and met with architect join JC Smith, who advised against the blocks, saying they wouldn't be substantial enough to withstand a cyclone. Instead, he proposed a hip roof and reinforced concrete walls. A tender was placed in *The West Australian* for a builder and the successful applicant was Mr C Turner, whose price came in just under budget at £1997, although didn't include the architect's fees or freight.

Back at Millstream, Claude was tasked with collecting sand samples from the Fortescue River to send to the builder to determine if the local materials would be suitable for construction. They also required rubble from off the clay tablelands. After sending sand samples to Perth, Claude and the station hands got to work carting the sand. This was challenging, as the area they were carting

from was close to the river, so was often very boggy, and they had to wait for the river to drop and the area to dry out.

A LONG, HARD ROAD

The logistics involved in arranging transport of 86 tons of building material from Fremantle to Cossack and then south to Millstream were challenging. Communication at Millstream relied on word of mouth or letters, and a letter could take up to seven weeks to be delivered. Telegrams could be sent from Roebourne, but if the roads were too wet, they couldn't take the motorcar (T Ford), so had to take the horse and buggy, which could take two days.

At this time, steamships operated by the State Shipping Service of Western Australia were the only means of transport for people, stock, wool clip and freight to and from the north-west. Ship timetables were coordinated with tides and weather conditions, so they weren't caught in cyclones. During summer months, cyclones were always (and still are) a hazard for shipping. A trip by sea from Fremantle to Point Samson could take three to four days. The Point Samson



Top left Camels were sometimes used to transport material throughout the north-west.

Above Millstream homestead in the 1920s.

Left Doug, Geoff, Les and Stuart Gordon in the 1930s.

Photos – Courtesy of the Gordon family

Far left The original fireplace can still be seen in the homestead dining room.

Photo – Jackie Baxter/DBCA

jetty was built to replace the Cossack jetty that was unable to receive bulk cargo due to the 18-foot rise and fall of tides. Cargo was then transported by rail to Roebourne.

Then, transport was required to transfer the cargo the 135 kilometres inland to Millstream. The Millstream station horse team was capable of carrying only four ton per trip, and each trip took 10 days each way. In 1919 the north-west was experiencing a severe drought and there was no food or water for the horses along the way. In order to make the journey, they would have had to carry water for the horses and purchase chaff and oats from Perth, which would have been very expensive.

Claude hired three teams of horses, but they got stranded more than 160 kilometres up the road and seven of the horses died. He travelled to

Roebourne to secure another team, but found they were in the same situation; their horses were in poor health due to lack of good feed. He finally managed to secure a teamster, but he pulled out at the last minute to take on another job. Things weren't looking good; the building materials and some shearing supplies were being stored in Roebourne with no way of transporting them.

Claude's luck changed when he met a man in Roebourne who had a camel team. Claude purchased the team of 22 camels, which were able to cart two loads at a time until they reached The Big Hill at the base of the Chichester Range escarpment (close to Python Pool in Millstream Chichester National Park). Here they would double up the camels to get the loads to the top, then split them again and carry on. This way they could carry 13 to 14 tons per trip. By May

there was enough building material at Millstream to begin construction. Things progressed until September, when they ran out of material and had to wait for more to be delivered.

ON WITH THE JOB

While the house was being built, station life continued. Times were harsh and the drought caused considerable stock losses, including lambs that were unable to feed from their mothers that had no grass to graze on. Windmills needed constant maintenance and Claude spent a lot of time fixing them. Out camps were closed, and horses and stock brought back to the main homestead. Water was plentiful, but food for the animals was not. Sheep couldn't be sold as they were not strong enough to travel.

In November, when the building was near completion, Claude wrote to the architect.

"Now that the building is advanced it looks very nice and am sure will be



Above far left Jennifer and Roger Gordon being home-schooled on the homestead veranda in the 1960s.

Above left Mildred Gordon with her children Sue, Colin and Donald.
Photos – Courtesy of the Gordon family

Above The camp kitchen at Millstream campground was inspired by the homestead kitchen.

Left The homestead kitchen offers a glimpse into yesteryear.
Photos – Jackie Baxter/DBCA

very comfortable. Excepting the floors (badly cracked) and colouring of the walls (a dirty white colour) the work is a credit to the architect and builder."

Claude Irvine and his family moved in to the homestead on 17 December 1919. The following week a thunderstorm hit the area and the roof leaked badly. Finally the drought had broken.

"We are now living in the new house and find it most comfortable it is beautifully cool. The general opinion is that it is the best house in the North West."

GRAND DESIGN

The building contains five rooms. The central room was used as a dining room and the others were mostly used as bedrooms. As was the norm, rooms were added under the extensive veranda, including a bathroom and a storeroom that was later used as the governess's bedroom. Off the right back corner of the homestead was another room that

was used by the bookkeeper and then became the school room in the late 1950s.

The bathroom had a shower and a bath that was added later. There was a gas power plant out the back of the homestead that provided gas for the lights in the building and fresh water was channelled from the Millstream creek to service the homestead.

Claude and Ella Irvine lived in the homestead until they retired to Perth in 1924. Their daughter Nell and her husband Les Gordon moved from Broken Hill with their three children Geoffrey (a daughter who was named after Nell's brother Geoff who was killed at Gallipoli), Doug and Stuart. Geoffrey left the north-west to train in Royal Perth Hospital as

a nurse but she became seriously ill and passed away on her nineteenth birthday. She was buried in the same grave as her grandfather Claude Irvine.

Les and Nell continued to manage Millstream station with their sons Doug, Stuart and their families until Les's sudden death in 1954. The pastoral lease then passed to Doug and Stuart. Doug, his wife Mildred and their children lived at the cattle camp 'Kangiangi', and Stuart, his wife Pixie and their children lived at Millstream. The children are reported to have enjoyed an idyllic childhood at Millstream.

In 1964 the Gordon family left the north-west and the station was sold to the Kennedy family. The Kennedys lived in the homestead until a downturn in the

"We are now living in the new house and find it most comfortable it is beautifully cool. The general opinion is that it is the best house in the North West."



cattle industry in 1975 had them convert it to a tavern to supplement the station's income. A bar was installed in the front room with a door leading to beer fridges in the room behind. The dining room catered for counter meals and the other two bedrooms were used for storage. The tavern also offered accommodation.

During this time, the Kennedy family moved into a transportable building and catered to as many as 2000 tourists a year.

The Kennedys sold the station and in the 1980s the homestead was used by park rangers as an office. When new offices were built, the homestead was transformed into a visitor centre. In the early 1990s the building and roof were painted, terracotta tiles laid throughout

and interpretive displays installed. These were in place for 28 years.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ON

This year, to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the building's erection, the homestead has been fitted with a new gyrock ceiling (to replace the suspended ceiling installed in 1975), given a fresh coat of paint, and some repairs have been carried out and old displays have been removed.

While Millstream homestead has had a few cosmetic updates along the way, the memories of yesteryear seem to echo through the building. Visitors are encouraged to imagine what it was like living there 100 years ago and, while most

Above left Park rangers, including Noel Nannup (pictured with then regional manager Hugh Chevis and Madeleine Clews) used the homestead as a ranger station.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above Walk trails guide visitors around the national park.
Photo – Jackie Baxter/DBCA

Below Millstream homestead.
Illustration – Gooitzen van der Meer

of us won't be around to see Millstream homestead celebrate another 100 years, it's comforting to know that the building, and the spectacular national park it sits in, are protected for future generations to enjoy.

Judymae Napier is DBCA's Pilbara Region education and interpretation officer. She can be contacted on (08) 9182 2024 or by email (judymae.napier@dbca.wa.gov.au).

Judymae would like to thank the Gordon family for their contribution to this article as well as their valuable support in recording the history of the station and the homestead and providing wonderful photos from their personal collections.

Claude Irvine's letter books (1914–1924) now kept in the Batty Library in Perth, provided a lot of the detail for this article.

Doug Gordon provided valuable information to the department when the first lot of displays were installed in 1991. His book The West Pilbara Sail and teams to Bulk Carriers and Bitumen provided an excellent resource for the goings on over the last 100 years. Doug sadly passed away last year at age 96.

