

## Roadmaster's House



The Roadmaster's House is associated with the construction of the North Australian Railway in the inter-war period and provision of accommodation for railway personnel. This house was originally constructed as a residence for railway staff and is one of only three pre-war houses remaining which would have been enclosed by a slatted or latticed verandah, the typical design at that time, and now extremely rare.

# History

The construction date for the Roadmaster's House is uncertain, although it is clear that it was built prior to World War Two, almost certainly by the Commonwealth Railways<sup>1</sup>. It therefore has strong associations with the North Australia Railway (NAR).

The NAR was constructed in the 1880s to serve the hinterland south of Darwin, although there had always been a vision that it would extend all the way to Adelaide. The line reached Pine Creek in 1889. It was extended to a point<sup>2</sup> just north of Katherine in 1917, and then to Birdum in 1929. The NAR played an important role during World War II when the line was busy with as many as seven trains a day, transporting military personnel and supplies to and from Darwin.

Pearce (1983) puts the construction date of the house at 1937, although later research by the National Trust points out that a 1936 map of the Darwin central area (based on aerial photographs) shows two similar sized buildings sitting side by side parallel to the Esplanade, close to where the existing building now stands. These two buildings were part of a larger group of buildings marked on the map as 'Commonwealth Railways'. The National Trust has surmised that the existing building on site today is one of these two buildings, with the other having been removed in the early 1940s. This would put the date of construction at 1936 or earlier. This is far from certain, but there is some intriguing evidence that suggests that not only was the house built prior to 1936, but a good many years earlier.

A photograph dated 1936 entitled 'an old railway house on the way to the wharf' shows the elevation of a house which bears a remarkable resemblance to the existing house as it appears in photographs taken in 1939 and later. If this is the same house, it would appear that it originally featured shutters and timber slats on the verandah, which were later replaced by louvres. In 1936, the existing building on the site would indeed have been 'on the way to the wharf' via 'traveller's walk', which was a popular walking route from the end of Cavenagh Street down to the wharf. The fact that it was referred to as 'old' in 1936 suggests the possibility that it might have been built in the 1920s or even the 1910s.

Aerial photos of the area in question from the 1930s are ambiguous and do not help to establish a date of construction. A 1943 aerial photograph is the first to clearly show the existing building.

The earliest known photo of the building was taken in 1939. The photo was taken from Traveller's walk and shows the oil tanks on Stokes Hill in the background. This photo provides some support for the argument that it is the same building shown in the photo dated 1936. The shutters are clearly visible and one can see that the configuration of the stairs is the same (that is, they run straight down in front of the building, not at right angles to this as they do now).

The building was used by the railways until the 1970s. Kevin Markham (now of Port Augusta) lived in the house from 1960 to 1962 and provided the names of the post-war occupants:

unsure—July 1948	Bill Stephens
July 1948—Feb 1950	WV (Bill) Virgo
Easter 1950—1956	NW (Noel) Robuckle (?)

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<sup>1</sup> Welke A and Wilson H, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Study*, Darwin, 1993, p 278.

<sup>2</sup> Emungulan

1956–1959	ME (Maurice) Signey
1960–1962	KP (Kevin) Markham
1963	GV (Graham) Willis
Xmas 1963–1974	RJ (Bob) Robinson

Former resident Ian Robinson's family lived there from early 1964 until 1974. They were in the house when cyclone Tracy struck. Ian's father, Robert James (Bob) Robinson was Senior Clerk with the Commonwealth Railways. The house was damaged quite badly in Cyclone Tracy, and the family had to move to a house in Parap. Ian remembers that the louvres on the house were s-shaped fibre-cement louvres. His father replaced most of the shutters on the house with more louvres sometime between 1964 and 1971.

In 1976, the North Australia Railway was finally closed, and most buildings associated with it were sold and removed. Little evidence remains of the bustling rail yards which once occupied the flat land just below the Roadmaster's House, and only a few remnants of the line and its associated infrastructure still exist in the Darwin area.

During the late 1970s the Australian National Railways Commission handed the site over to the Darwin City Council to negotiate a lease for the Roman Catholic Stella Maris organisation. The building was leased to the Stella Maris organisation in 1979, for use as a licensed club<sup>3</sup>. It would appear to be at this time that lot 5260, on which the building sits, was excised from the larger adjacent lot.

One source indicates that for a time in the 1980s, after the East Arm Leprosarium closed, the building served as a hostel that was run by the nuns from the leprosarium<sup>4</sup>. Information from the owners indicates that from 1980 the building was used as a Seafarers' Centre. The building was used as the major facility up until 1996<sup>5</sup>, when a new building was completed and the older building became an annexe. Originally the older building provided for office, bar, meals and recreation needs. From 1991 it provided an office, chapel, reading/writing room, TV room, and some accommodation<sup>6</sup>. Also in 1996, the Seafarers' Trust was granted a lease in perpetuity over the land.<sup>7</sup>

In 1995 the Heritage Advisory Council recommended that the Stella Maris Hostel be registered as a heritage place. Then Minister Mike Reed refused the recommendation, saying that:

...the old railway house has been modified over the years for use as a hostel and social club. It is not in good condition and extensive maintenance work would be needed to retain the building. Above all, this site has been identified for some time for redevelopment and I cannot justify retention of existing building on this prime site<sup>8</sup>.

In 2003, the Seafarers' Trust, for a variety of reasons, decided to hand the lease back to the Northern Territory Government. At that time the centre was closed and ceased to operate as Stella Maris. The lease was surrendered in September 2007 and the Seafarers' Trust was compensated for improvements it had made.

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<sup>3</sup> Welke and Wilson, op cit

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Stella Maris Inquiry Report, p 25.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Stella Maris Seafarers' Centre to the Heritage Unit, 18 October 1994

<sup>7</sup> Stella Maris Inquiry Report, p 25.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Mike Reed as Minister for Lands Planning and Environment, to Chairman of the Heritage Advisory Council, Feb1996

The Roadmaster's House within the Stella Maris<sup>9</sup> site was heritage-listed in December 2005 after Heritage Minister Burns directed the Heritage Advisory Council to re-assess its heritage value in 2003.

In August 2012, shortly before a General Election, the Northern Territory Government granted a lease over the Stella Maris site to Unions NT. This was criticised as failing to have gone through a process of calling for expressions of interest in the site<sup>10</sup>. In December 2013, the new Northern Territory Government commissioned an inquiry into the circumstances of the lease. Commissioner John Lawler, who headed the inquiry, recommended that:

...Unions NT...relinquish any interest it may claim in the proposed Crown lease...commonly known as the Stella Maris site...and [the government] invite Unions NT to join a future expression of interest process.<sup>11</sup>

In late 2015, the National Trust was granted a 10-year lease over the Roadmaster's House to establish a museum documenting the work of engineers and surveyors in the Northern Territory.<sup>12</sup>

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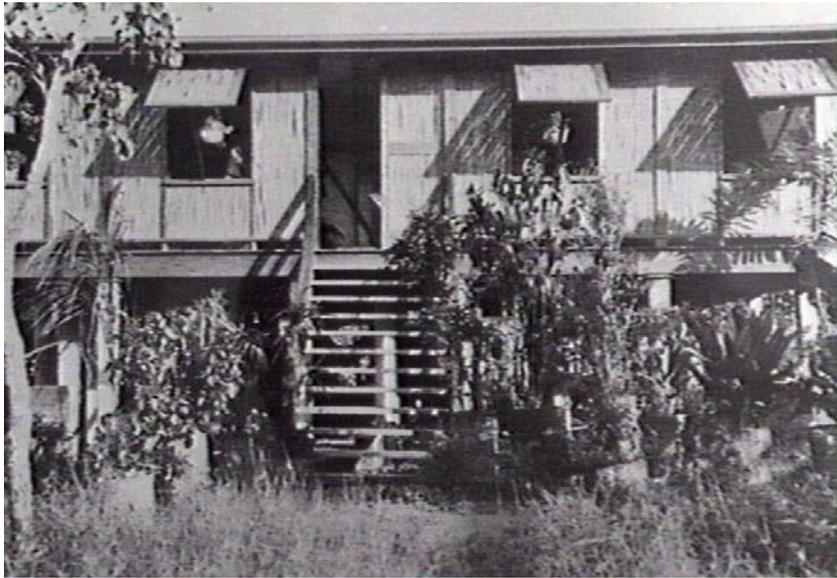
9 Its then name.

10 *Stella Maris Inquiry Report*, 2014, p 6.

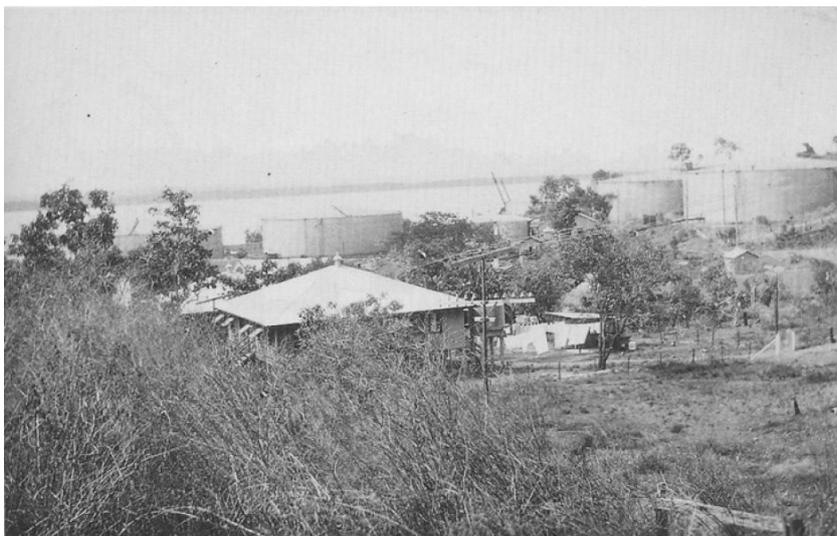
11 *Stella Maris Inquiry Report*, 2014, p 16.

12 *National Trust Northern Territory Annual Report 2015*, p 3.

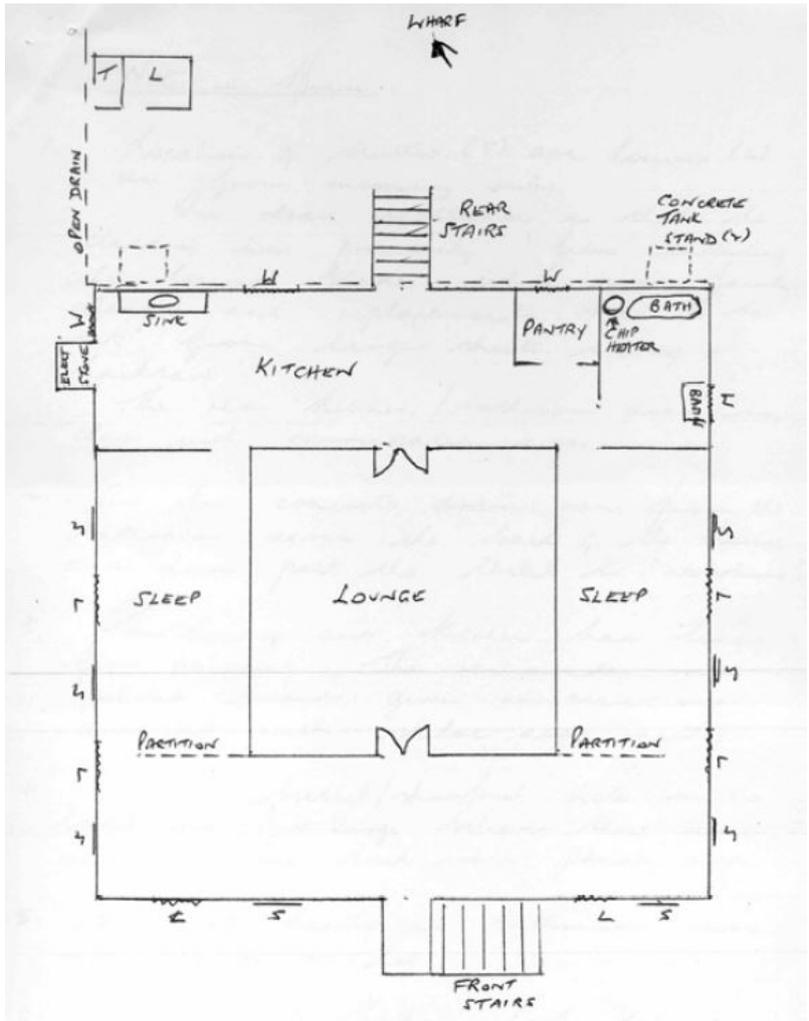
## Additional Photographs



1936 – railway house on the way to the wharf. Image: NT Library Collection.



1939 – possibly the earliest photograph of the Roadmaster's House (later Stella Maris). Image: Rayner Collection.



1960s layout – sketch by Kevin Markham



1960s. Image: Ian Robinson Collection.



2012 – Roadmaster's House. Image: Heritage Branch.

## Further reading

Bridgman, David, *acclimatisation (architecture at the top end of Australia)*, 2003

Hardwick, Carol, *Register of Significant European Cultural Sites in the Northern Territory*, Report for the National Trust of Australia (NT), Darwin, 1984, vol. 1 Platt Consultants,

McDougall & Vines, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Master Plan* 1995

Powell, Alan, *Far Country*, Melbourne University Press, 1988

Welke A & Wilson H, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Study*, a report for the Conservation Commission of the NT, Darwin, 1993