

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF BUILDINGS IN THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

The Falkland Islands have what might be considered a fragile culture in terms of its relative youth and the small size of the population which has rarely exceeded two thousand people. There was no indigenous population and the pioneers who permanently settled the Islands in the nineteenth century were for the most part a long way from their birthplaces and cultural roots, being mainly from Northern Europe.

However, over the years a characteristic Falkland Island style has evolved, shaped by climate, landscape, isolation and the backgrounds of the settlers. This has found expression in many ways; agricultural traditions, music, cookery and language. But one of the most distinctive manifestations is to be found in the buildings.

The earliest structures in the islands were probably stone and turf huts erected in the second half of the eighteenth century by itinerant sealers, primitive shelters made from the materials to hand. Very few traces remain today. At about the same time the first attempts at permanent settlement by the French, British and Spanish produced somewhat more substantial buildings mainly from the same materials. In Captain Macbride's 1766 report on the French settlement at Port Louis he writes "*They have built seventeen houses including the Governor's, which is of stone; the rest are of turf and thatched with Sedge*".¹ Again little remains today apart from a few foundations and stone walls.

Virtually all the buildings now in existence date from after the resumption of British administration in 1833. At Port Louis, the capital of the Islands at the time, stone, clay and turf were the main materials of construction. Roofing appears to have been usually the local tussac grass, the 'sedge' referred to by McBride. It was not until the new capital of Stanley was founded in 1843 that the wood and metal which are now most characteristic of Falkland Island buildings commonly came into use.

Visitors to the Islands often express surprise that a landscape bare of trees and with an abundance of stone should be populated mainly by buildings constructed from timber and iron. This reliance on imported materials arose from several factors. There was a lack of skilled masons among the early settlers. The local stone, mainly quartzite, proved difficult to work. It was extremely hard, split unevenly and blunted tools. Dom Pernety, chronicler of the French settlement at Port Louis in 1764 wrote "*I attempted in vain to carve a name upon one of these stones.....it was so hard that neither my knife nor a punch could make any impression upon it.*"²

The problem was compounded another accident of geography. There was found to be almost no natural lime in the islands, and because lime becomes hazardous in contact with water it was difficult to find ships that would transport it. A Government stores order of 1845 illustrates the problem. "*40 tons of Dorking lime unslacked in watertight casks*"³ is requested. However, the despatch continues "*If this be considered too dangerous a cargo 40 tons of the very best stone lime should be sent,*

*but the former would make 3 times the quantity of mortar. The Dorking unslacked lime should be kept in a dry part of the ship and may be carried without danger if the ship proceed straight to the Falkland Islands”*⁴ Although the authorities persevered with the use of stone for important public buildings such as Government House and the church, in most cases people began to look elsewhere for housing materials. Turf houses, though, were actually outlawed in the town, by an ordinance of 1853 which stated that *“Any person shall be liable to a fine....who shall erect.....any building for human habitation constructed wholly or in part of turf”*.⁵ Presumably this measure was designed to protect the dignity of the new capital.

However, the infant British settlement of the 1840s was not a wealthy one. The only income generated in the early years came from the sale of beef to passing ships and the export of a few hides, seal skins, and barrels of oil. The government in England was unwilling to invest money for an uncertain return. The extent of the economy that had to be practiced by the local administration is well illustrated by a letter of 1844 from the Chief Clerk to the Government Surveyor, forwarding a spade for his use: *“I am directed to notice to you that it has been with the greatest inconvenience to other important services that this spade has been spared”*⁶

Governor Moody had to plead constantly for funding from Britain. In 1843 he wrote to London *“Of the necessity of constructing dwellings there can be no doubt and the expense in doing so is much greater than in England. It is necessary to import lime, wood and shingles and bricks.”*⁷ In an effort to produce building materials closer to home Moody sent a box of clay to Britain in 1844 asking if it could be tested for suitability for making into tiles and bricks. However, nothing came of this. It was not until sixty years later that brick-making was tried locally, and then with only limited success. Moody continued his despatch *“There are no roads nor means of conveyance so that much work usually performed by animals has to be done by hands at present”*.⁸ So the materials chosen for import were of necessity modest; relatively cheap, light and easy to transport.

This is how a timber and iron became the media in which the vernacular language of Falkland Islands building developed. Some bricks were necessary for building chimneys, occasionally slate was used for roofing as a precaution against fire. In 1855 the government forge and powder magazine were both roofed in slate. But the structure which has come to typify Falkland Island tradition consists of a timber frame with a corrugated iron roof and wall cladding of weatherboards or corrugated or flat iron.

Attempts had been made from the very first settlements to establish a local source of timber, and voyages to fetch wood from Patagonia were also used as opportunities to start plantations in the Falklands. The nearest sources of wood had already been established by explorers as being the Magellan Straits and Staten Island. In 1765 Bougainville collected and planted at Port Louis 10,000 tree seedlings from the Magellan Straits, and in 1766 one of his lieutenants, Guyot, returned to Port Famine to fetch more. In 1766 Captain Wallis of HMS Dolphin wrote from Port Famine that he *“caused some thousands of young trees to be carefully taken up by their roots...and...put them...on board the store-ship with order to deliver them to.....Port Egmont.”*⁹ Captain McBride reported later from Port Egmont that though he *“had*

sowed large quantities of Fir Seed, many of which came up, they withered away".¹⁰ Louis Vernet wrote of his settlement at Port Louis that "trees brought from Staten Island and Buenos Ayres were also planted during the last two years: they grew but poorly, but time was not allowed for a fair trial"¹¹ He gave his opinion that if trees were ever to succeed they would need to be "artificially sheltered from the strong winds which blow with too much constancy"¹²

In 1842 Lt. Moody, the first British governor of the Islands, had young trees brought by Captain James Clark Ross from "St. Martin's Cove, near Cape Horn.....chiefly winter barks, beeches, and holly-leaved berberries, all in excellent order.....the trees were immediately planted and....I trust will succeed".¹³ But a year later Moody wrote that "some goats have lately created great havoc with the young trees now beginning to shoot forth and to do well in the graveyard".¹⁴ Probably due to this factor among others, Moody's plantation also failed. In addition to the trees, Ross had brought cut timber "400 or 500 pieces.....of different sizes".¹⁵ Reliance on this commodity was to continue far into the future.

The chief sources of commercially sawn timber then were Britain, Brazil and Montevideo, but with an eye on the budget Moody looked to the United States. "If the materials could be obtained from America directly the expense of them (chiefly wood and shingle[s]) would be considerably less. At present they have to be sought for at Rio de Janeiro at uncertain prices".¹⁶ He later wrote that "from [the USA]....must come lumber unless any enterprising individuals establish saw mills in the woody region of the Straits of Magellan for which there is every facility".¹⁷

It was not until some fifty years later, when the city of Punta Arenas had become established and regular shipping links with the Falklands set up, that Moody's conjecture became reality. Since the turn of the century what is known in the Falklands as 'Sandy Point' timber (lenga) has become one of the most commonly used woods for construction, particularly of fencing. European redwoods are also imported extensively for building work. It seems possible that before the Punta Arenas link was established, some wood had been obtained from further north in Chile. One of the oldest buildings in Stanley has the exterior walls shingled with 'manio'. If the shingles are contemporary with the construction, they would date from the 1840s, which suggests that they might have been obtained from Valdivia or Valparaiso, but no record has yet been found to confirm this. 'Manio' is little used in the Falklands Islands today because of the high price in comparison with European pine.

Galvanized iron sheeting, inexpensive, durable and easy to use, was introduced as early as the 1840s as an alternative cladding to wooden shingles or weatherboarding. It became more common after 1898 when the government, fearful of an increasing fire risk as the town became crowded with wooden buildings, passed an ordinance making it illegal "to build any house, tenement, shed or warehouse having a roof of wood or of any material other than iron or slate".¹⁸ There were occasional examples of slate roofs, but slate was too heavy and fragile to make it a popular import and from that time until the present day galvanised corrugated iron has covered the majority of roofs in the Islands.

Metal cladding has also long been used on walls. In the early years of this century it became fashionable to manufacture it in imitation of more expensive materials. There are still examples in the Falkland Islands of a type imported during the 1930s which was corrugated to look like weatherboarding, and from a distance gives a convincing impression. In 1913 a Stanley merchant wrote to his agent in the United Kingdom *"Please let me know whether there is such a thing as galvanised iron, or zinc, or strong tin moulded into the shape of bricks. People out this way cover their houses with iron to keep out the wind and the rain, and to make them look like brick houses a client of mine has asked me to write and make enquiries. If you know of such a thing please send me samples at once for I am sure a good business can be done, both here and in Sandy Point where the weather is still more severe"*¹⁹ No examples survive in the Falkland Islands if it was ever imported, but at least one instance is known in Punta Arenas.

Buildings of all shapes and sizes, from churches to garden sheds, have been constructed in the Falklands using wood and metal as the principal components. Some were put together from standard patterns, some designed to suit individual needs. The norm would be a timber frame, but industrial buildings such as shearing sheds often have steel frames. Stone foundations are common for both and timber-framed buildings often have timber piles. Domestic dwellings have tended to conform to a basic English 'cottage' style; that is a single-story symmetrical façade with a window (often a bay window) either side of the front door, encompassing two or four downstairs rooms and a staircase leading to two upstairs rooms with windows at the gable ends.

To this simple pattern have often been added a front porch, as shelter for a few flowers from the wind, dormer windows to bring more light to attic bedrooms, and an extension (a 'lean to' in Falklands parlance) at the back to accommodate a bathroom and kitchen as more domestic conveniences became available. These houses commonly have either a single central brick chimney, or a chimney at either end. The few stone cottages also tended to conform to this pattern.

Larger dwelling houses which present a two-storied façade frequently have what is known in the Falklands as a 'sou'wester' roof line; that is, an upper story in front sloping down to a single story at the rear, named after the British fisherman's hat because of the shape. This allows light in to the bedrooms at the front (almost without exception Falkland Island houses face north towards the sunshine) while still economising on materials. These houses became more common after the 1920s and are frequently found in camp settlements. The largest houses, which would include managers houses on camp stations, were usually substantial two storied buildings, often with hipped roofs

The older the building, the steeper the pitch of the roof tends to be. In earlier 19th century structures a pitch of 55 or 60° is common. Cottage dwellings constructed since the turn of the century usually have a roof pitched at 45° and more modern houses a shallower pitch of perhaps 30°. Industrial and farm buildings of whatever age normally had roofs of shallower pitch than domestic buildings and this is especially true of pre-fabricated structures such as shearing sheds and warehouses.

The prefabricated 'kit' building came in to use at an early date and has remained a major component of Falklands tradition; The first recorded example in the Islands was the wooden fortified tower (the 'blockhouse') brought from England and erected at Port Egmont by the British garrison in 1766. This was burnt down in 1780. Several companies in Victorian Britain specialised in providing kit buildings and they were a great asset in the Falklands of the 1840s, not only because they could be erected rapidly to provide shelter on the bare site of the new town, but also because they overcame the problem of the lack of specialist tradesmen in the Islands.

On 29th December 1843 one of his workforce reported to Governor Moody from the site of the new town "*I have commenced unpacking the 'Surveyor's House' it takes a good deal of time to unpack, but I cannot say how long it may take to fit together.....I thought it better to unpack it at once as it may require a little looking at as there is no plan sent with it*".²⁰ Accommodation was certainly needed quickly. Six months earlier Moody reported to London that "*two civilians in the employment of Government had no other home during the present winter than under an old boat*".²¹ In April of 1845 William Moore, the newly arrived Magistrate, pleads for government assistance in erecting the house he had brought from England as "*it would not look respectable that I, who am the second officer in the Colony.....should be compelled by actual necessity to take up my abode in one of the peat huts of the common fishermen and sailors*"²²

Pre-fabricated buildings were also of great assistance to pioneer farmers setting up sheep stations in isolated areas and many of the shearing sheds and other large buildings in camp were imported into the islands from Britain. They are typically of steel framing covered in galvanised iron and most were erected in the later years of the 19th and early years of the 20th centuries Two churches in Stanley were constructed from 'kits' towards the end of the 19th century. The Baptist Tabernacle is a building typical of the genre described in a catalogue of the time: "*The above building is constructed of timber framing, tenoned and mortised, excepting the roof which has iron principals. It is covered externally with galvanized corrugated iron and lined throughout inside with tongued and grooved boarding.....a layer of Felt is in addition provided...between the boards and iron which adds materially to the comfort in equalising temperature and deadening sound.*"²³

An item in the Falkland Islands Magazine of 1898 illustrates the demand for kit buildings: "*Several residents in the camps have asked for information regarding the cost of a Cottage framed at home [Britain was traditionally, and is still occasionally, referred to as 'home' by Falkland Islanders] For a cottage with two rooms on the ground floor.....two rooms upstairs.....three rooms in the lean-to at the back.....a porch in front..... the roof, sides and ends to be covered with Galvanised Corrugated Iron Sheeting.....strong timber framing.....the interior to be lined throughout with tongued, grooved and beaded.....boarding.....Price of foregoing all ...delivered... for the sum of £129.10s.*"²⁴

Another device introduced at the time which has remained in use ever since was the moveable building. In January 1845 the Government Secretary wrote to the Government Surveyor that "*the portable House sent from England for your Department has been shifted to the spot you desire*".²⁵ In a country so thinly

populated, accommodation has often been needed for men working away from home for extended periods of time. Tents could only be a short term solution, especially in view of the high winds in the Islands. The problem was solved by putting small timber-framed huts on wooden 'sleighs' so that they could be moved across country to wherever they might be needed. Known locally as 'caravans' or 'shanties' these are still used occasionally for fencing or sheep work in remote camps, although the construction of roads over the last ten years has made them less important.

As building materials continued to be expensive and difficult to acquire, Falkland Islanders learnt to improvise. Sheeps wool, newspapers, timber shavings, hessian sacking, tussac grass, all came into use as insulation. Walls were lined with boards from packing cases. But the richest source of material was the sea.

The wealth of Stanley was initially founded on ship repair and salvage, lucrative sources of profit in the nineteenth century when Cape Horn was still one of the world's major trading routes. For many years the harbour was littered with the hulks of vessels which had been condemned and converted to serve as floating warehouses. The sturdy timbers of wrecked ships served the islanders in numerous construction projects. Masts and yards provided floor piles and roof beams. Old sails were frequently used for weatherproofing and insulation in roofs and walls. Deckhouses sheltered chickens. Skylights were used as cold frames by gardeners. In 1856 the Government Schoolmaster wrote a pleading letter to Governor Moore "*The renewal of the pilot-boat sky-light affords me an opportunity of making an application to His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor under auspicious circumstances. A want which has always been much felt by Mrs Durose is that of a Wash house. Dirty....clothes have hitherto.....been washed in the pantry; the fumes and steam from the washing have consequently enveloped the meat, bread and other food. I beg respectfully to enquire if His Excellency will.....allow me....the sky-light for the roof of a wash house to be built in the yard at the back of the school-master's quarters*"²⁶

Another source of building material in the present century has been the British army. During the Second World War two thousand British troops were stationed in the Islands. They brought their accommodation with them in the form of Nissen huts. When the troops left, the huts were dispersed all over the Islands, to be used as garages, schoolrooms, peat sheds, storehouses and even homes. The local paper commented in October 1945 "*As seen at Fox Bay East a Nissen hut can look quite becoming when painted to match the general colour scheme of the station. The red roof and the white coloured sides in this case made the hut look as if it had been part of the station for years*"²⁷. The steel-framed and corrugated iron-covered sections could easily be assembled into the desired length of building and there are very few settlements in the Islands without one or more of these useful structures. Their curved profile has become a familiar part of the Islands landscape.

More recently, the Conflict of 1982 brought British troops back to the Islands, together with the modern-day counterpart of the Nissen hut: the Portakabin. These portable buildings also have become widely distributed across the landscape, serving as working, storage, or accommodation units. The plastics and composite materials used in their construction may not be as long lasting as the iron and steel of the Nissen huts, but many have been adapted into 'permanent' buildings set on concrete

foundations, their flat roofs covered with pitched corrugated iron and their sides painted to disguise the military green. Often the only clue to their origin lies in the windows, with their distinctive rounded corners.

For larger units, the military 'Packaway' metal framed and clad buildings have proved ideal and several farms now utilise these as shearing sheds. The prefabricated army buildings of the Conflict and its aftermath appeared at a useful time for the Islanders. In the 1970s and 80s many of the large old farms were subdivided and sold as smaller sections. The old settlement buildings were rarely conveniently situated for all the new owners to share and they began to build up their own settlements, frequently based around one of the original 'outside' houses built to serve the remoter camps. A shearing shed was often the most pressing and the most potentially expensive need, so surplus military buildings of the right dimensions were a great benefit.

No account of Falkland Island buildings would be complete without mention of one of the most distinctive characteristics; brightly coloured paintwork. This has several functions. It is decorative and enables people easily to give individual character to their homes. It protects wood and metal from the moisture and salt in the air.

But it has an additional value in camp, where an isolated house or even a settlement would be difficult to find in the relatively featureless and trackless landscape unless it stood out from its surroundings, although with the recent advent of roads this has become less important. Colour has traditionally given farm settlements a corporate identity too, as each had a unifying colour scheme, partly for convenience and economy and partly for the sake of appearance. One might have red roofs with cream coloured walls, another green roofs with white walls. A change was cause for comment "*We hear that Rincon Grande has forsaken its Cambridge Blue colour and is now being garbed in white faced by green ----- we wonder why ?*"²⁸ Only the larger buildings on a farm would be exempt from the general colour scheme. For reasons of cost shearing sheds, and store sheds were often coated in relatively cheap and long lasting black bitumen or red oxide paint.

Traditionally, the normal pattern for domestic buildings in Stanley is for the roof to be painted in a strong colour, most commonly red or green, and the walls to be paler, usually cream or white. Decorative woodwork on barge boards, finials, porch trims and window facings is often in a contrasting colour to roof and walls. Outbuildings such as wash-houses or garden sheds are painted to match the main building.

However, these traditional finishes require constant maintenance and in recent years people have begun to look to less time-consuming alternatives. Timber framed houses are still the most common type, whether pre-fabricated or custom-built and corrugated iron continues to be used extensively on roofs, but it is often purchased with a plasticised coloured coating already in place. Imitation roof tiles of a hard wearing composite material are also found. Weatherboarding is giving way to brown or white plastic cladding or dark stained wooden planking. Brick chimneys are becoming a rarity, with steel almost universally favoured.

These changes apply to old buildings being renovated as well as to new ones. It is a common sight to see Victorian weatherboarding replaced by plastic cladding, large,

plastic-framed sheets of glass or sliding doors substituted for sash windows, brick chimneys demolished and replaced by steel tubes. Large conservatories are taking the place of the old front porches and decorative woodwork such as porch trims and barge boards are often discarded in the process of modernisation.

The quest for ease of maintenance is not the only threat to the survival of traditional buildings. The changing way of life is making redundant many structures which were once a vital part of the Falkland Island scene. Before 1982 people had to rely on themselves for many of the necessities of life. At one time virtually every home in the Islands had a peat shed, a garden shed, a hen house. These are gradually falling into disrepair as people convert their stoves to run on imported diesel fuel, a market garden supplies an ever-widening range of fresh vegetables and a dairy delivers eggs and milk.

Even in Camp, greatly improved transport systems mean that people often no longer have to provide these things for themselves. Cowsheds are being pulled down as milk cows become redundant. Many other old agricultural structures are disappearing. Stables and horse corrals are little used now that sheep work is largely carried out using motorised transport. The old wooden 'palenques' used to hang beef carcasses will probably not be needed when the modern abattoir, currently under construction, begins operation.

It is only since the 1980s, when the way of life in the Falklands began to change at a pace unprecedented in the last 150 years, that the preservation of buildings has become an active concern. Several approaches are being utilised. Firstly, a programme of research and recording is being undertaken to gather as much information as possible. Secondly, legislation has been put in place to allow the designation of certain buildings as being of historic or architectural importance. This makes it a legal offence to contribute to the unauthorised alteration, deterioration or demolition of a listed building. Thirdly, a series of exhibitions and educational projects has been designed to encourage both adults and children to take a greater interest in the subject. The small size of the Islands population is a great asset here as people can often trace family associations with the buildings in question and so feel a personal involvement.

A fourth approach involves trying to find less labour- and cost-intensive ways of preserving the traditional exteriors of buildings. Solutions to this problem currently being investigated include the plastic-coated 'permanent finish' corrugated iron and water-based exterior paints which are longer-lasting and easier to apply than the traditional oil-based gloss. A related question concerns the comfort of those who live in period buildings and the search for answers to problems such as making double-glazed windows aesthetically compatible with a Victorian house.

Lastly, a system of Government grants has been established. Owners of designated buildings can apply for financial assistance to help them maintain these buildings in an appropriate manner.

It is hoped that in these ways at least a part of the historic landscape, so expressive of the pioneering past of the Falkland Islands, can be preserved.

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ABBREVIATIONS: FIJ = FALKLAND ISLANDS JOURNAL
FIA = FALKLAND ISLAND ARCHIVES
BAA = BUENOS AIRES ARCHIVES
FIM = FALKLAND ISLANDS MAGAZINE

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Falkland Islands
December 1998