GILBERT HERBERT

In May 1835, following preliminary moves like the notable efforts of Wakefield and the National Colonization Society, the venture to settle South Australia received formal expression with the gazetting of the Board of the Colonisation Commission. The British Government, the South Australian Company and the Commission now constituted an uneasy triangle of forces, interacting rather than cooperating to give somewhat erratic direction to the founding and the development of the new colony. Events moved quickly, and the first ships destined for South Australia left England as early as February 1836. By the end of that year, when Governor Hindmarsh came ashore from HMS Buffalo, reluctantly to approve the site for the new capital of the Colony, and to name it Adelaide, there had arrived on the shores of the new settlement - in addition to the varied stores, provisions, ordinance, surveying equipment, building materials, livestock and other necessities of pioneer life - some 114 persons of a superior class and 414 emigrants of the labouring classes, all in need of immediate shelter. By mid-1838, this number was to grow to nearly 3,000, whose pressing housing needs could be met in various ways: by improvisation, using primitive local building materials like reeds or pise de terre; by utilising materials brought in by the ships, like wood or bricks, often in conjunction with local materials; or by exploiting pre-made elements imported from home, which ranged from joinery items like doors and windows to complete dwelling systems. These latter could be tents or framed canvas shelters, or they could be what today would be called prefabricated houses.

As early as October 1835 the attention of Robert Gouger, then secretary to Wakefield, was drawn by one Fred Boucher to the possibility of an emigrant taking his own dwelling with him from England. The idea had obvious potential, and as we shall see had already been tentatively applied in other Australian settlements. To further this concept, in mid-1836, the Colonisation Commissioners worked with the South Australian Company to proceed with the venture of the Emigrants Depot. It was planned that this should include - in addition to framed tents some thirty-seven wooden houses each comprising two double-roomed dwelling units.(Fig. 1)
This was an ambitious and ill-starred undertaking, in which first Peter Thompson, a London builder of dubious reputation was involved, and then a carpenter named Richard Smith, himself an intending emigrant. Gouger looked elsewhere for a solution, at least for himself and his friends, gentlemen of the superior class. He turned to Manning, the London manufacturer of the Portable Colonial Cottage – so described in Loudon's *Encyclopaedia* of 1833 – examples of which had been exported as early as 1830 to the Swan River Colony (where young William Manning had settled), New South Wales, and Van Diemen's Land. (Fig. 2)

At the time of initiating the South Australian colony this firm, now under the direction of Henry Manning, stood out against its competitors as a well-established, solid concern. Despite general instability and change, it remained at its premises at High Holborn at least until the end of the century, active in various aspects of the building trade. The wooden cottage produced by Manning in the 1830s would today be called prefabricated, but then was described as either temporary or portable. These terms very precisely defined its goals. The system consisted of a series of building elements made complete in every sense – the woodwork painted, the windows glazed – in the London workshops, for transmission to and erection by simple means on a remote site. These elements – floor joists and boards, grooved structural posts, wall panels, windows and doors, roof rafters and beams – were made according to standard dimensions of a modular nature, so that, in Manning's words, 'no mistake or loss of time can occur in putting them together'. To facilitate erection, all parts were numbered, and no special skills or elaborate tools were required: 'whoever can use a common bedwrench can put this cottage up'. For transportation, it was designed to 'pack in a small compass'. In advocating his cottages for uncertain colonial conditions, Manning stressed that they 'may be taken to pieces and removed as often as the convenience of the settler may required'. As time went on, he foresaw, the specifications could also be upgraded: the tarpaulin roof (the system's most unsatisfactory feature) could be replaced by more durable materials like shingles.

Of course the Manning cottage was not the first prefabricated structure. Unique 'one-off' examples of pre-made houses are recorded in the eighteenth century; and in Sydney for many years there stood one of the twelve 'moveable hospitals' manufactured in 1787 in the workshops of Samuel Wyatt for 'His Majesty's distant possessions'. But the Manning cottage is a pioneer in the field of prefabrication in several important respects. It embodied and made explicit for the first time, the essential principles of prefabrication: industrialisation in the manufacturing process, standardisation of parts, dimensional co-ordination, flexibility in design, ease of transportation and erection. The manufacture of housing was conceived by Manning as part of a process which embraced advertising and promotion, fixed
PORTABLE COLONIAL COTTAGES.

II MANNING, 231 HIGH HOLBORN, respectfully solicits the attention of intending settlers to the high character his Cottages have obtained. Their usefulness and superiority of construction, either as stationary or moveable residences, as regards durability, comfort, and the facility with which they may be taken down, removed, and refixed by the most inexperienced, is now fully ascertained and acknowledged. In evidence of which H. M. refers to the private and published letters of T. B. Hack, Esq., the Rev. C. B. Howard (Colonial Chaplain), Robert Gouger, Esq. (Colonial Secretary), T. B. Strange, Esq. (Colonial Secretary, pro tem.), G. Kingston, Esq. (Colonial Surveyor)—[the three latter gentlemen have each ordered a second Cottage since their experience in the Colony of the first which they took]—to Capt. Hindmarsh (late Governor of South Australia), Capt. Gresor, and numerous other gentlemen in and from the Colony.

Also to Capt. J. G. Hall, Worgrave, near Henley-on-Thames, who has there resided, in one of these Cottages, for several years.

See Gouger’s ‘South Australia,’ page 71; and Loudon’s ‘Encyclopaedia of Cottage Architecture,’ pages 251 to 257.

H. M. has lately had the satisfaction to make and ship a Cottage, on a large scale, to South Australia, for the Chief Justice Cooper.

From the well-known superiority of these Cottages over any others hitherto introduced into South Australia, H. M. considers it unnecessary to add more than to state that they pack in a small compass, and may be completely erected in a few hours, with joists, floors, doors, and locks; windows glazed and painted, inside and outside. Price 15l. and upwards.

Dressers, Safes, Tables, and every description of economical Colonial Furniture made to pack in each other to save freight.

Letters (of inquiry only) must be post paid.
Fig. 3 Detail of a sketch of William Fairbanks' Manning cottage in North Terrace, Adelaide, c1844 (State Library of South Australia).
prices and firm delivery dates, economies of scale and reliability of product – Manning was justifiably proud that several of his customers returned to order again! Finally, the concept of prefabrication was seen here in its specific social and economic context, as a crisis solution providing 'instant', but essentially short-term, solutions to the housing problem in the initial stages of colonial settlement.

By 1837, the first Manning cottages were being erected in Adelaide. John Barton Hack, a businessman of means and a Quaker, erected two Manning cottages on a site in the parklands of Adelaide (after a temporary location in Glenelg), to give him a reasonably spacious four-roomed house, and in April 1837 he could report proudly to his mother at home: 'We dined in our parlour today'. Later that month he reported: 'Our next neighbour, Mr. Howard, the clergyman ... is erecting one of Manning's six-roomed cottages, and is busy at work from six in the morning until six at night'. Howard, the colonial chaplain, and Hack had brought their Manning houses with them. The fame of the cottage rapidly spread, due to such successful examples, and to the active advocacy of men like Gouger, by then the colonial secretary and an early customer. Within the next year or two, in addition to many unpretentious cottages of one or two rooms ('houses of a cheaper description for labouring men, mechanics etc', as Manning termed them), more substantial Manning houses had been acquired by many of the notable figures amongst the early South Australian settlers; Capt. Hindmarsh, the governor, and T.B. Strangways, his son-in-law and colonial secretary pro tem., after Gouger's dismissal; George Kingston, Col. Light's successor as surveyor-general, and Lieut. Frome, who followed him; Capt. Chesser, master of the Coromandel, Capt. Freeman, of the Tam O'Shanter and Capt. John Walker, R.N.; Judge Cooper, the chief justice; the Morphett brothers, men of affairs and Henry Watson, Hack's brother-in-law; and the landed gentry, Samuel Myles of Morphett Vale, Isaac Worthington of Encounter Bay, Capt. Francis Davison of Mount Barker, and Capt. George Frederick Dashwood, of Dashwood's Gully. This formidable list is of South Australian customers only. To it must be added eminent men in West Australia, Victoria, and New Zealand. All these lists are, of course, partial. The total number of Manning houses in South Australia seems large. The documentary evidence so far examined, some of it clear-cut – in the graphic descriptions contained in letters and diaries, in the rate book, and country register records, in explicit references in advertisements – would indicate some sixty or seventy Manning houses in South Australia. But there could be many more than this, for the records are far from complete. (Fig. 3)

As far as is known, four examples of Manning's work remain in South Australia, of which three are houses. The remains of Henry Watson's large house, erected in 1839 and encased in brick the following year, still stand on the original site on Pennington Terrace, North Adelaide. A cottage is to be
Fig. 4 Manning cottage interior (c1845), near Greenock, photographed 1979 (Adelaide University).

Fig. 5 Interior of Capt. Francis Davison's Manning cottage at Blakiston (1840), photographed 1979 (Adelaide University).
Fig. 6  Manning's meeting house for the Society of Friends (1840), North Adelaide (survey by architecture department, Adelaide University).

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found, in fairly good condition and slightly altered, on a farm just south of Greenock, possibly erected there in 1845 after transfer from Adelaide. (Fig. 4) The upper floor of a two-storeyed house on the homestead at Blakiston consists mainly of one of the two Manning cottages brought out from England by Capt. Francis Davison at the end of 1839, and erected early the following year. (Fig. 5) The remaining extant example of a Manning building is the Friends' Meeting House, made by Manning at J.B. Hack's urging for the Society of Friends, and erected in North Adelaide in 1840: a charming and elegant little structure, cherished and well-preserved, and still in regular use after more than 140 years.

In 1838 Gouger wrote, in his Founding of South Australia: 'Of wooden houses, those made by Manning of Holborn...are by far the best. They have answered remarkably well, and by far surpass any other wooden houses in the colony. It is, in my opinion, highly desirable for each colonist to take out some habitation from England'. But here Gouger, with prescience, adds a rider: 'At any rate, this should be done until the year 1840 shall make its appearance'.

By the end of 1839, strong criticism of the imported wooden houses began to be voiced in private correspondence and in the local press. The poor quality of many of the imports, especially those of Manning's rival Peter Thompson - Thompson's trumpery affair, one of his buildings was derisively called -brought disrepute to the prefabrication industry as a whole. Manning suffered from this general disillusion, despite the fact that most critics specifically excluded him from their tirades. 'Manning is a respectable tradesman and his goods are no take in', was a widely-held opinion. He was after all, a man of substance, addressed with respect as Mr. Manning, and could be invited to one's Club to discuss business matters - so testifies Capt. Dashwood in his Diary! This respectability did not exempt Manning from the general criticism of the wooden houses on the grounds of poor performance; poor thermal insulation, vulnerability to termite attack, and inadequate roofing. But the most weighty factor in the decline of the prefabricated house trade was the simple fact that there were now more durable, more conventional alternatives available. Henry Watson could advise, in 1839: 'It is...totally unnecessary to bring Manning's houses - excellent brick and stone houses are now to be had'. In the first six months of 1840, about forty per cent of all new residential construction was of brick and stone, and most of the timber buildings were constructed locally, as the pool of local labour increased. Trading in imported houses became ever more difficult. From 1839, and through 1840, advertisements offering existing Manning houses for sale in Adelaide were repeated many times, but the market proved increasingly reluctant. By 1841 or 1842, all references to these imported houses ceased in the local press. Manning's impressive South Australian campaign, short and intense was over.