Buildings of the fur trade: an introduction to Tasmanian skin sheds and snaring huts

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From the late 1880s to the 1950s, Australia was an active participant in the international fur trade, placing large volumes of marsupial and other skins on world markets. While nearly all states participated in the trade, Tasmania played a particularly important role. Due to the colder climate, Tasmania produced many of the better quality skins that were exported from Australian shores. With such skins receiving premium prices, many rural Tasmanians became transhumant hunters, travelling up into the higher, colder regions of the state each winter to hunt. One of the artefacts of this nationally distinctive practice was the development of a special type of building used to dry skins in wet, relatively cold conditions. These buildings, known as skin sheds, have never been formally described. Once ubiquitous features of the Tasmanian high country, they are now quite rare. It is the objective of this discussion to develop an understanding of the structure and function of these buildings by reference to those skin sheds built in and around the upper reaches of the Mersey Valley in northern Tasmania from early this century to the 1970s. It is hoped that this brief introduction to the subject will prompt further work on these interesting but rare buildings.

The Tasmanian fur trade and the development of skin sheds

Tasmania played a prominent and special role in the Australian fur industry. Since the development of the export trade around the 1890s, Tasmania consistently contributed significant totals to the national figures: for example, in the eight years during which there were open seasons – from 1923 to 1931 – catches of nearly one and a half million wallaby and kangaroo skins and nearly five million possum skins were recorded in Tasmania. While similar to other states in the way its fur industry was organised and regulated, the Tasmanian industry was significantly different in a number of other aspects. The most important difference related to climate. Tasmania is generally wetter and colder than the other states. This factor had two fundamental impacts upon the way the industry operated in Tasmania. One was on the nature of the furs: Tasmania generally produced better quality furs than other places in Australia. As Mr T.C. Plante of Melbourne explained, writing to the head of the New Zealand Government in 1891:

Although the [brush possum] species of Victoria yield a fur of little value, except such as live in the cold mountainous parts, the case is different with the Tasmanian species, which are of much greater value; the animal is larger, producing fur denser and of much better quality, and the colour is black or reddish brown.

The higher prices obtained for these better quality skins made hunting an attractive seasonal activity for many rural Tasmanians, and made the fur trade an important part of the Tasmanian economy. Although prices fluctuated considerably, there were exceptional years when good Tasmanian hunters were able to make over a year's wage in a matter of weeks. In 1928, for example, a
top quality, grey brush possum skin was worth 21 shillings. This was exceeded in the boom year of 1946 when the value of such a skin reached 26 shillings. This was at a time when a semi-skilled rural worker might receive between 15 and 20 shillings a day in paid employment. A hunter would need to catch only one such possum a day to make more than the normal weekly wage. Most full-time hunters, of course, caught many more. Basil Steers and his father Bill, for example, would average around 1400 wallaby and possum skins for a six week season from the February Plain. The best quality skins, however, were generally only found during winter and then only in the cold and remote stretches of the Tasmanian high country. It was to these places that many hunters traveled each year, enduring some of the most extreme weather conditions found in Australia. In so doing they created a form of reverse transhumance.

The second major difference between the Tasmanian fur trade and that of the mainland states lay in the way skins were initially processed. When a possum or wallaby was caught it was skinned and the skin stretched and dried to a standard rectangular shape. Under more benign weather conditions, skins were typically nailed either on to a paling fence, a barn or shed wall to dry. In Tasmania, particularly during winter, these air or sun-drying techniques were problematic, especially in remote areas where there were no buildings and where cold and wet conditions could often render normal drying techniques ineffective. In responding to these problems Tasmanians developed a specialised building form known as the skin shed in which skins were dried indoors with the aid of a fire. These buildings were typically located in remote high country areas, although hunters in rural areas may well have opportunistically used them from time to time.

Skin sheds and snaring huts of the Upper Mersey Valley

The Mersey River rises on the alpine Central Plateau of Tasmania and flows northward into Bass Strait. Its upper reaches, now within the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park, are mountainous and subject to extreme weather. Glaciated in the past, the area currently has a humid to perhumid cold climate. Rainfall 15 to 20 kilometres to the west at Cradle Valley (914 metres above sea level) totals 2797 millimeters per annum. This falls on an average of 240 days per year with the heaviest falls being recorded in July and August. Daily temperatures range from a mean daily maximum of 17 degrees Celsius in February to a mean daily minimum of minus-0.5 degrees in August. Snow and frost may occur at any time of the year above 1000 metres, with an average of 52 snow-days per annum at Cradle-Valley. Ground temperatures in the Mersey have been recorded as low as minus-17 degrees Celsius. Cloud free days are rare – at Cradle only 32 days a year.

European graziers began to occupy the Upper Mersey high country in the 1830s, attracted by a range of montane grasslands and grassy woodlands. By the 1840s...
all the major plains and woodlands within and around the valley were being grazed. Beginning in 1860 many of the more fertile grasslands were purchased by graziers and farmers. By 1910 this process of selection was largely complete, with active competition between graziers for leases over large areas of less fertile country. Around 1890 hunting for the fur trade became a significant activity within the valley and continued as an important industry until the late 1940s when depressed skin prices signaled a general decline. Although a number of people continued to hunt into the 1980s and 1990s, skin prices were erratic and insufficient to generate any concerted hunting activity.

Those who hunted the Upper Mersey came predominantly from the small rural community of Mole Creek, a place traditionally up to a two-day horse ride to the north-east. The Mole Creek district was settled in the mid to late-1800s, predominantly by immigrants of British origin. During the peak years, around the 1930s and 1940s, up to 30 hunters, either individually, in pairs or groups of three, hunted for possums and wallabies in and around the valley during the winter hunting season. A variety of hunting techniques was used ranging from shooting, the use of specially trained dogs in the snow, metal rabbit traps, spotlighting and snaring. Each hunter or hunting group used a particular 'run' or area on which to hunt, the boundaries of which were established by the mutual consent of the hunters themselves. A run might be as much as 5000 hectares in area. The operational centre of the run was a hut with an associated skin shed, usually located in a sheltered position close to firewood and water.
The skin shed was the skin-processing site. In its most simple form it was a rectangular, slab-walled, windowless building with a steep gable or skillion roof and a dirt floor. Skins were stretched and nailed to the interior walls with the wet side facing inward toward a fire built in the centre of the shed on the floor. The fire drew air in from outside, warming and circulating it around the building. Combined with direct heat and smoke from the fire, the skins usually dried within 24 hours.

The walls of the skin shed were generally built of split eucalypt slabs. These slabs - perhaps 2 to 3 centimetres thick, 20 to 30 centimetres wide and 2 metres tall - provided a firm surface on which the skins could be stretched and nailed. In a significant departure from normal building construction techniques, these slabs were placed on the inside walls of the building rather than as cladding on the outside. While a number of different building techniques were employed, nearly all skin sheds were constructed with slabs nailed to the inside of the top and bottom plates. Whether the shed was built on a rectangular foundation of overlapping bedlogs, or whether living trees or stumps were used as corner posts, the vast majority all had the structural framing timbers on the outside (Figures 1 & 2). There were two main reasons for this. Slabs placed on the inside gave a much firmer surface against which to nail skins and maximised the drying space on the inside wall close to the fire. Skins had to be stretched and dried to a standard shape. Studs, bedlogs and braces on the interior wall around the fire limited valuable pegging space.

Skin sheds did not have chimneys. Smoke played an important role in the drying process, in conjunction with draughts that blew in between the slabs. To the extent, however, that skin sheds were also working and sometimes living

Figure 2 Plan View. Skin shed construction (Type B2), Basil Steers' February Plain No.1 Hut.
spaces, smoke made life uncomfortable. Hunters, consequently, sought to design the building in such a way so as to limit smoke. A number of design features were commonly used. In the Mersey Valley the prevailing winds typically blow from a westerly direction. A traditional response was to build the shed on an east–west axis with an open eastern-facing gable. As the wind passed over the roof of the hut it drew smoke out of the open gable. Other responses included the development of clerestory rooflines.

**Toward a typology of skin sheds**

Interviews with elderly hunters, conducted over a decade, together with extensive fieldwork and archival research, suggest that more than 100 skin sheds once existed in the Mersey Valley. Of these, as few as twelve currently remain standing. Exposure to the elements and to fire, following the decline of commercial hunting in the valley around 1950, has taken a heavy toll. Of the more than 100 skin sheds that may have existed, nearly 70 have been identified. Of these, it has been possible to establish the structure and form of just over 50 skin sheds using information gained from extant structures, oral interviews with hunters, a limited photographic record and site investigations. Analysis of this data reveals that the Mersey skin sheds fall into two broad groups: simple skin sheds and more complex structures which, for this study, have been called 'snaring huts'. Each group has a number of different sub-types (Table 1).

**Skin sheds**

In the Upper Mersey, skin sheds were typically attached to, or built in association with, a pre-existing hut or group of huts. This was the classic and most simple form of the building. The grassy plains and woodlands of the Mersey Valley and surrounding areas have been used for cattle grazing since the 1830s. From that period to the early part of this century a number of parcels of land were selected (or leased) and improved by their owners for grazing. Huts were built on these remote selections to accommodate graziers during their periodic visits bringing in cattle, clearing land and so on. Many of the cattlemen who used their high-country land for grazing were also hunters who returned to their runs in the winter to hunt.

These men typically built two different types of skin shed. Some built separate skin sheds close to their main hut (Type A1) while others built their skin shed onto the side of their hut (Type A2). The Walters' skin shed at Walters' Marsh, Boy Miles' skin shed at Arm River, and Glover's at The Selection are examples of this first sub-type. The Dublin Plain Hut, Dick Miles' hut at Borradaile Plain, and Lees Hut at Howells Plains are examples of the second. The third sub-type (Type A3) is speculative and based on limited evidence. Two huts, Du Cane and the old Lake Windermere, had very large wooden chimneys, so large that people could relatively easily walk into them and move behind the fire. Architectural investigation of Du Cane Hut indicated nail marks on the timbers on the inside of the chimney while photographs of the chimney of the old Windermere Hut reveal external structural features consistent with skin shed
construction. Neither Du Cane nor Lake Windermere was designed as a hunting building although hunting did take place either from them or near to them. It is probable that at some stage hunters opportunistically chose to significantly enlarge the pre-existing wooden chimney of both huts instead of building a separate skin shed either independent of the main building or on to the end of it.

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Table 1 Skin shed typology
Excluding the Type A3 structure, those Type A skin sheds which have been identified were generally built in association with a pre-existing hut in a situation where the owner or lessee of the land was already engaged in a regular summer grazing operation. Even if only used for a number of months each year these were, therefore, permanent or semi-permanent sites. They were typically areas that were readily accessible by horse and often by bullock dray. In domestic terms, Type A huts had significant advantages. The greatest benefit was the comfort hunters obtained from not having to live in their skin shed day-in and day-out. To operate efficiently, a skin shed had to be a draughty, smoky place – not a place anyone would choose to inhabit by choice. The disadvantage, however, of maintaining two separate buildings was the need to keep firewood up to two fires. This was a very significant issue. A skin shed fire, which generally needed to be kept burning for twelve to sixteen hours a day, used many tonnes of wood each season. This wood could only be obtained with the use of a cross-cut saw and an axe. A significant part of a hunter’s time, therefore, was spent finding and preparing firewood for his fires. On more accessible sites bullocks and horses would be used before the season commenced to drag firewood into the hut, thus limiting this problem to some extent.

**Snaring huts**

The second group of buildings is the snaring huts. These were buildings that were purely associated with hunting, and were designed specifically with that intention in mind. Only rarely tied to any other land-use, in the Mersey Valley these huts were located in more remote and inaccessible country at higher altitudes. Access was limited to hunters’ tracks and horses could often only be used in summer, after the snows had melted. Unlike the Type A skin sheds, Type B snaring huts were often speculative buildings not necessarily designed to last for long periods of time. Many were built on a framework of logs lying on the ground, some were built around corner posts embedded in the soil and others were built using tree stumps as corner posts. In those cases where it was not possible to use a horse to carry equipment or to drag timber, these huts were often located close to large trees suitable to be split for palings, slabs and shingles.

Type B snaring huts combined the domestic as well as the industrial function in one building. It was this combination that Type A builders sought to avoid because of inherent problems with draught and smoke. In seeking to side-step these problems, Type B hut builders displayed significant ingenuity in design. Within the Type B family there were three sub-types. The first of these, Type B1, was the most basic. This simply involved the construction of a gable-roofed, elongated skin shed with bunks and a table at one end and the fire at the other, as typified by Ted Gale’s hut at Arm River, Os How’s hut at Arm River, and the huts of Phillip and Nicholas Miles at Dublin Plain. While the most basic and uncomfortable of all the Type B huts, there was still room for local adaptation. The Trappers Hut, for example, carried slabs on the inside of the
framing timbers around the skin shed end of the hut but reversed this around the sleeping end. It had a secondary elevated roof above the skin shed end and was aligned roughly east-west with an open gable facing east – both initiatives designed to better cope with the smoke. It had corrugated iron on the roof above the fire to prevent ignition from sparks and some palings on the roof above the sleeping end to lessen condensation and provide better insulation.

Type B2 snaring huts involved a slightly more sophisticated approach to dealing with the issue of smoke. The basic structure of the hut was the same as the Type B1 huts, but an attempt was made to create a greater separation of the domestic space from the working space. The best extant example of this type of construction is Basil Steer’s February Plain No.1 hut. Halfway along the hut, three eucalypt slabs nailed to a ceiling joist extend from each wall into the hut partially separating the skin shed from the rest of the hut. Above the ceiling joist the gable is also filled in. These two adaptations create the effect of a second, separate room with a large doorway between the two rooms. Steer’s hut is also built on an east-west axis with an eastern-facing open gable. Other examples of the Type B2 design include Harry Andrew’s hut at Borradaile Plain, the Field hut at Kings Plain and Basil Steer’s No. 2 hut on the February Plain.

A completely different solution was adopted in the case of the Type B3 snaring hut. Here a skillion-roofed structure was built onto the end of the skin shed. This was a common design, which worked particularly well when placed at the eastern end of a hut with an eastern facing open gable. Under these circumstances it was very difficult for smoke to enter the sleeping skillion. This design was used at various times by well-known Mersey high-country hunters such as Arthur Youd, Tommy McCoy and Basil Steers. Again, personal adaptation improved the design even further. At his Lake Ayr hut, McCoy built an enclosed verandah off the northern wall of his hut to provide protection from the weather to his doorway; and in his Kia-Ora hut Paddy Hartnett built his hut with rounded corners so that no part of the skin shed was too far away from the fire.

The single Type C hut was a one-off design built by Basil Steers at the Pine Hut Plain around 1970. With the benefit of vehicular access and wide experience in building and using snaring huts, this hut, which still stands, represents the most complete development of Mersey Valley snaring hut design. Sharing features of Type A and Type B huts, it is rectangular with palings around the sleeping end and slabs on the inside of the framing timbers around the skin shed end. The most striking difference, however, is that it is made up of three separate rooms. The southern-most room is the domestic end. It has a wooden floor, bunk, a table and an internal tin chimney. The skin shed, located on the northern end, is separated from the living quarters by a middle room that is warmed by the back of the tin fireplace and was used to store wood and dry clothes.

Of the 50 skin sheds identified as part of this study, nearly 60 per cent were Type B structures. The most prevalent single design was the simple snaring hut.
Animals and Birds Protection Board. Report for the Years 1929-1931 inclusive. Tasmania (1931). Two species of possum, the ringtail possum (Pseudocheirus convolutor) and the brush possum (Trichosurus vulpecula) were hunted as well as two species of wallaby, the Bennett's wallaby (Wallabia rufogrisea v. bennetti) and the red-bellied pademelon (Thylogale billardierii). The Bennett's wallaby is colloquially referred to as a kangaroo in Tasmania.


6 B. Steers, Transcript of an Interview, interviewed by Simon Cubit, 1993a.
8 B. Steers, Transcript of an Interview, interviewed by Simon Cubit, 1993a.

(B1) of which 20 were recorded. The next most prevalent was the freestanding skin shed (A1): 14 of these were recorded. The relative distribution of these different skin shed types is a reflection of the particular cultural geography of the Upper Mersey. No chronological differences in structure were observed. The oldest structures that remain are essentially of the same form as quite modern buildings. To Basil Steers, the reasons were quite evident: 'I learnt from the old snarers and that's how they always built the old huts...most of the huts were all built on the same principle because you had to have a hut where you had your fire in the middle to dry your skins'.

It is interesting to note, however, that while the form and function of the skin shed appears to have remained relatively constant in the Upper Mersey, innovation in function took place elsewhere. A pair of hunters who operated around the Middlesex Plains - Surrey Hills area in the 1970s, for example, modified the function of the skin shed. Instead of nailing their skins directly to the slab wall of the skin shed, they nailed them onto boards 30 centimetres wide by 50 centimetres long and then hung the boards on nails in the skin shed.

For the same reason there appears to be little if any observed relationship between the structure of particular buildings and the personal prosperity of any of the hunters. What does emerge, however, are differences based upon the particular building skills of individual hunters. Those who were good builders generally built better structures. Many builders developed particular nuances of style. As previously discussed, Paddy Hartnett rounded out the corners in his skin shed. Ted Gale, another hunter, was known for his very steep gable roof lines.

Conclusion

The skin sheds and snaring huts of the Upper Mersey thus emerge as an interesting and important resource with the potential to provide us with much information about a little known aspect of Australian life. While continued research is required to establish the significance of the buildings, works such as the current study should alert land managers to the potential importance of the structures and guide their management.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank hunters such as Basil Steers, recently deceased, for patiently providing much information about hunting practices and structures. I would also like to thank Graham Angel for drawing the figures and table.