Living traditions and cultural heritage — Silver Plains homestead

Lesley and Paul Jolly

Lesley Jolly is an anthropologist at the University of Queensland and has worked with the Lamalama community on Cape York Peninsula, on whose land the Silver Plains homestead once existed. Paul Jolly is an art historian at the Queensland College of Art and has participated in a survey of European heritage sites on the Cape York Peninsula for the National Trust of Queensland.

Contested heritage

Old Silver Plains homestead on Cape York Peninsula has significance for both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians. It is associated with early European incursions into the area and is located on the ancestral territory of the local Lamalama people who have consequently been intimately connected with Silver Plains station since its beginnings. This article will address strategies for reaching an accommodation which may satisfy all cultural interests.

What's there?

The structures which make up old Silver Plains homestead are situated about 500 metres north of the Stewart River and about 100 metres south of the Port Stewart Coen Road, some five kilometres to the west of Port Stewart. See Figure 1. The site (Lots 109 & 110 on Plan SD 13, Parish of Moojeeba) was part of Silver Plains station but now legally belongs to the Lamalama people, traditional owners of the area. The Lamalama will have primary responsibility for the site in the future.

The homestead site consists of a house, a butcher's shop and about 10 mature mango trees. Until very recently, there was a set of some 15 stumps in a rectangular pattern just to the east of the house and stock yards just to the west, but all traces of these have been removed. The house is built of roughly-dressed bush timbers with the walls of vertical slabs set into grooved base and top plates. The roof is gabled and made of corrugated galvanised iron. The building has a central core and is surrounded on all sides by a verandah. The floor is pressed earth.

Figure 1 Location of Coen, Queensland.
The butcher's shop is set at right angles to the house a few metres to the south and is built in a similar manner. It has two rooms with a verandah to the north and south. It still contains an impressive cutting block and hanging rails. Both buildings are in a ruinous condition. There are mature mango trees along the north and around the eastern and southern aspects of the site. See Figure 2.

**History of the site**

The first substantial European contact with the Cape York region was made by gold miners. Their successes along the Palmer River in the 1870s led to the establishment and early development of Cooktown and the formation of the first roads and eventually, railway, across the southern part of the area. During the 1870s gold prospectors moved north from the Palmer into the more remote regions of the cape. The prospector, William Hann, reached and named the Stewart River in 1872. There were some alluvial workings around Coen on the Great Dividing Range by 1876, and the Wilson reef near Coen was being worked by 1887. The culmination of this northern search came in the 1890s with the discovery of large payable reefs such as the Great Northern Reef at Coen, the Batavia field on the Wenlock River and Ebagoolah. Most of these workings were short lived, declining more or less with the First World War.

Port Stewart, as a point of access to the goldfields, dates from the mid-1880s, when the Massy brothers opened a road from the mouth of the Stewart River up to Coen to bring freight to the Coen area more cheaply than overland from Cooktown. With the discovery of gold at Coen and Ebagoolah, Port Stewart thrived briefly and by 1900 had three hotels and two wharves. The Moojebba Township Reserve, a site five kilometres from the mouth of the Stewart River, had been surveyed by J. T. Embley in 1895/6, but no township was ever built.
On 22 January 1900, Charlie Silver, who had worked on the telegraph line in 1885-6, applied for an occupation licence on Moojeeba. He applied again in 1904. The post office directory of 1900 and 1907 lists Charlie Silver as owning a dairy. He is considered to be the first non-Aboriginal owner of Silver Plains and is credited with the first building activity on the site.²

Although near to the Stewart River, the actual site of the homestead is on high ground and generally above flood level with good quality soil. (These are features much appreciated by the Lamalama.) The building history of the site is unclear. There is a local tradition suggesting that the first house on the site was the one on the stumps and that it was destroyed in a cyclone, but nothing on the site itself or in the records really indicates a date or even a sequence of building. While the origins of early building on the site remain unknown, there exists an intriguing possibility. A house had been built in 1899 by one Ben Carloss, a gold miner in the Coen area in the 1890s, on what is now Station Creek, about 10 kilometres east of Coen. Before Carloss and his family took up residence in their house, they moved to Ebagoolah and sold the house to Charlie Silver.² Silver may have shifted the house down to Moojeeba.²

It is not known when the house presently on the site was built. Oral history suggests that the new house and the associated yards were built by an Aboriginal carpenter, William Fox. Fox was a child in 1900 and his two half sisters had been raised by and worked for Mr and Mrs Silver.² Fox, or whoever it was, built with typical bush timber techniques. Although cheap and simple, bush timber buildings generally are not crude and lumpy. They are, rather, products of a skilful craft, of which old Silver Plains homestead is an excellent,
if very dilapidated, example. The technique involves getting timbers close to
the building site and giving them the minimum amount of preparation before
use. Straight logs of approximately the right diameter are chosen (about 10 cm
for uprights), stripped of branches and bark, cut to the right length and either
sunk directly into the ground or, in the case of more substantial buildings such
as dwellings, morticed into base and top plates. This is the case with the Silver
Plains building. The cladding on these buildings is occasionally vertical slabs
where the slabs are slotted into base and top plates, or corrugated galvanised
iron. See Figure 3.

Whatever the situation, a house was certainly there when Herbert Thompson
purchased the lease for the property in 1926. A description of a house at the
site occurs in the diary of Norman Tindale, an anthropologist working in the
region in 1926/7. The diary entry is dated Monday 31 January 1927:

Mounting insects all morning. Packed gear for removal to Port Stewart in the
morning. We have stayed here over a week. Tom Goldfinch is the caretaker
for Thompson the owner who is away. The station is an old four roomed
house with big verandahs set in the midst of an elevated glade on the right
[crossed out] left (northern) bank of the Stewart R. 33 from Port Stewart on
the road to Coen. There are some fine mango trees in the garden, a coconut
tree, a few orange trees + a cascara bean tree with beautiful foliage and bright
yellow flowers. Tom grows sweet potatoes and a few tomatoes etc. He has a
banana and pineapple garden across the river but the natives had rifled it
recently + nothing was left for us. Wallabies (agilis) and emu come close up
to the station in daylight and can be shot from the verandah. Birds are scarce
in variety; coucal pheasants are plentiful as are the mountain lories. We have
seen one crocodile in the river and heard of others.

The site was occupied until 1957 when the station was taken over by Dr Lee and
Mrs Eileen Wassel (Eileen was Herbert Thompson's daughter) who moved into a
brand new house about 20 kilometres to the north. One of the main jobs on the
station was the dipping of cattle, which had always taken place at this northern
site. This was one reason for moving the homestead's position. In addition, the
decline of Port Stewart and the diminished traffic along the road, meant there was
no good reason to rebuild on the original site. Since 1957, the original site has
been used intermittently for stock work and has gradually fallen into disrepair; a
process enhanced by its occasional use as a source for building materials.

At first, Silver Plains station offered two local services. Charlie Silver ran the
cattle side of things, supplying meat to the goldfields, while his wife ran a milk
run and served teas to travellers. But this did not last long. The history of all
the goldfields on Cape York Peninsula was one of a frantic "rush", followed by
disappointment. The gold was often heavily mixed with silver and occurred in
smaller than expected lodes. Coen was typical in this respect and consequently
the amount of traffic passing through Port Stewart and past Silver Plains
homestead soon decreased.

Although the decline in mining and decreasing use of the Port meant that the
Silver Plains homestead had less of a role to play in providing for travellers, it
continued as a cattle station even after Charlie Silver's departure. By 1916 the property was owned by W. R. Johnston. In that year the property was purchased by the Queensland Government as part of T. J. Ryan's program to try to break the meat monopoly and reduce meat prices. The scheme was not successful and the cattle stations involved were privatised again in the 1920s. Silver Plains was offered for auction in March 1926 when it was purchased by Herbert Thompson.

Until 1957 the location of the homestead, just west of Port Stewart on the road to Coen, meant that it had an important role in communication routes. While Port Stewart was a viable port, the station house had a role in servicing travellers; and even when the port declined after the First World War, the homestead continued this service for mailmen and the rare road traveller. One such was Hector MacQuarrie who arrived at Silver Plains in a Baby Austin in 1928:

We motored to the gates of Silver Plains homestead and found there two native women left in the stern charge of the old fellow who had helped us up the river bank. As a chaperone he appeared inadequate. The young women spent their time laughing at him, calling him "the ole man", ordering him about most peremptorily, and finally chasing him up the mango trees to find ripe mangoes for us. The identity of the Aboriginal people mentioned here is not known, but it is likely that they were Lamalama people because the Lamalama have provided most of the labour on Silver Plains since it began. According to Aboriginal law and tradition, large parts of Silver Plains, including the site of the original homestead, are Lamalama territory. Strong Aboriginal presence is well attested from the time of the arrival of the whites. (The name of the planned township, Moojeeba, was a corruption of the local word for the area, Ngulyipa.) Since pastoralists arrived in the district, the lives of the Lamalama have focussed on Silver Plains station. Both Aboriginal men and women worked with the stock and as domestic help.

Here, as elsewhere, the whites appropriated Aboriginal labour without the workers having much choice. However, the Lamalama who worked on the station were at least still on their own country and often enjoyed extended periods of bush living with their older or unemployed relatives during the wet season and during other slack periods. Work with the cattle became prestigious and although they remember harsh and exploitative working conditions, the Lamalama also have fond memories of the old homestead and value the use of the site.

The most dramatic event in Lamalama interaction with Silver Plains station happened when the lessees of Silver Plains had those Lamalama not directly employed on the station removed entirely from the area. From the mid-1950s, the lessees of Silver Plains lobbied the Queensland Government to remove the Lamalama, who, they claimed, were spearing cattle and were involved in prostitution. These claims played into the hands of bureaucratic authorities who at the time were concentrating Aboriginal people in larger communities for administrative convenience. In June 1961, a boat duly appeared in the Stewart
River and policemen informed the Lamalama that they were to be taken to Bamaga (750km to the north) for health checks. Everyone in the camp was taken but the dogs were left behind, later shot by the police. All possessions and houses left behind were burned. As some of the Lamalama people were not in camp at the time of the removal, but were employed on surrounding stations; this meant families were split up. Those taken away were not allowed to return for about 15 years. A number of the older folk died in Bamaga and great social disruption and distress resulted.

In the mid-1970s the Lamalama people tentatively started moving back to Coen and visiting their Port Stewart homeland again. As they have acquired vehicles which have made gaining access to their land easier, they have begun to spend longer visiting periods, and an outstation about half way between Port Stewart and old Silver Plains homestead has gradually grown more permanent over the last few years. In June 1992, the Lamalama were the first Aboriginal people to be granted title to a portion of their traditional land under the Queensland Land Act 1991. In 1993, the blocks of land on which old Silver homestead stands, were purchased from Cook Shire and transferred to the Lamalama. Since then, the Lamalama have cleaned the area around the homestead of much of the tangled undergrowth, removed the old stumps and the yards, and have built a large shed, a small shed and a toilet block on the high ground near the site of the old vegetable garden. As this site is above the annual flood level, this operation allows the Lamalama to spend more of the wet season at their outstation rather than in the local town of Coen.

**Interests in the site**

The heritage significance of old Silver Plains homestead for the European community is quite clear. The building is important because it represents early European incursions into the area. In particular it has something to say, in its location on the road between Port Stewart and Coen, about early communications in the area. It also demonstrates early European building and settlement practices. If this were the only significance of the site, there may a case for considering its listing and preservation.

But there is another notion of significance — different, but equally legitimate. This is the notion that concerns the local Aboriginal community. The Lamalama have a very long association with the area. The site of old Silver Plains homestead is on a part of their traditional land which they now own under Queensland law. Their working lives have been very closely associated with Silver Plains, and the most traumatic event in their recent history occurred at the instigation of the Silver Plains lessees. The site is elevated and fertile, which enable the Lamalama to have access to their own land all year round. On the one hand, the site itself is very attractive, but on the other it contains, in the fabric of the homestead, unwelcome reminders of past injustices. The use of the site without the traumatic presence of the homestead would help the Lamalama re-build a viable and independent life. This other view of significance places an
alternative perspective on the conservation of white Australia's heritage. Considering the relative value of the homestead in physical and contextual terms, and its unfortunate condition, the homestead presents an opportunity to improve the Lamalama's living traditions.

The failure of Australian heritage authorities to consider living traditions in discussions of heritage significance is the centre of a growing debate. In an article entitled 'Cultural Values and Cultural Imperialism', Sharon Sullivan draws attention to what this means in an Aboriginal context. She argues specifically:

... that our [dominant while Australian society] definition and categorisation of cultural heritage management has elements of cultural imperialism which give us problems of conservation ... especially in the integration of living traditions into our cultural heritage management policies and strategies.褶

Silver Plains is a case in point. It would be unfortunate if the issues here were polarised into a simplistic 'conservation' versus 'living traditions' debate. Cases such as this have the potential, rather, to broaden the understanding of cultural heritage to include living traditions. A first step is to understand some of the assumptions in conventional heritage thinking which may blind heritage practitioners to the presence and value of living traditions. In developing her theme, Sullivan identifies quite a few. Those directly relevant to the problem of old Silver Plains include:

• The concern with the fabric rather than with the spirit of a place.
• The concern with the dead rather than with the living.
• The concern with the past rather than with the present.褶

It is around these assumptions that arguments about old Silver Plains would probably fall. Conventional heritage wisdom as embodied in the Burra Charter would support those who wish to retain the fabric. This is in opposition to those Lamalama who wish to live at the site, and would prefer to build new houses rather than restore the old. The Lamalama focus is on the present and the future. They wish to improve things for themselves and to try to right some past iniquities. If the site were to be listed without consultation with the Lamalama, then the Lamalama would be entitled to see that action as commemorating their own domination by white society. If the site were preserved or restored, then the Lamalama would be again denied full justice.

What must be done to incorporate the living traditions of the Lamalama into a management decision about old Silver Plains homestead? The first stumbling block is the conventional emphasis upon the fabric of a place. If this could be overcome, then a major obstacle would be removed. There are two precedents which may help here. The first one is the British practice of putting up a blue plaque at the site of a famous person's birth or some other event. It is always interesting to come upon these plaques, although what is being commemorated is the site (such and such was born here) and not the fabric. In a low-key way, it is the spirit of the place that is being acknowledged. The second, more powerful one comes from within the Australian Aboriginal community.
Aboriginal sacred sites or story places are often extensive areas of land without any obviously noteworthy features—it is the spirit of the place which is important rather than any tangible material presence. Both of these examples attest to the real possibility of recording something as culturally significant without having any actual fabric.

The promotion of another culture and way of life does just as much to "enrich our lives now" as the preservation of any fabric. In other words, viable living traditions can be a major part of Australia's heritage.

If these ideas are accepted, then the problem of old Silver Plains can be resolved. A sufficient amount of the significance related to white culture can be retained and commemorated, while the Lamalama enjoy full and private use of the site. As a working model, it could be proposed to the Lamalama that:

- The site and buildings are measured and photographed.
- The site is marked with a suitably discreet plaque at the roadside, the information on the plaque to be negotiated with all parties.
- The mango trees are retained.
- A fence is erected around the site to ensure privacy.
- The Lamalama use the site the way they choose.

Such a model would retain the relative importance of the high ground near the river on the road between Port Stewart and Coen. A plaque could explain this and other points of significance of the site. Mango trees are an evocative sign of white habitation in the region and their presence would do much for the perception of heritage significance as well as fitting in with the life of the Lamalama. The remaining buildings would probably be lost, but given that they are in such a poor condition and that there are other examples of bush timber technology in the region, this would hardly be a tragedy; and from the point of view of the Lamalama, the extinction of the buildings would be a welcome triumph over some of the oppressions of the past. The fence would help protect the privacy of the Lamalama—a necessary precaution as there have already been some instances of trespass by tourists. The overwhelming advantage of this model is that, for all concerned, it expands the concept of heritage to include vivid living traditions.

Acknowledgments

We have received a great deal of help with this article. We owe many thanks to Sunlight Bassani for discussing the Lamalama people's interests with us. We would also like to express our appreciation to Jinx Miles, Ian McRae, Dawn May, Nicky Horsfall, Michael Neal, John Halloran, Allan Dale, Di Hafner, Annie Ross and Bruce Rigby.

Since this article was finished, the homestead, butchers shop and yards have been removed. The mango trees remain.