Pastoral dilemmas: case studies of pastoral holdings

To maintain structures of no practical use or allow them to fall into decay? This is the major dilemma facing the owners of pastoral properties in Victoria.

The pastoral settlement of Victoria produced a wonderful legacy of 19th-century homestead complexes. In their heyday these complexes included fine mansions with manicured gardens, large stables, numerous out-buildings and living quarters for rural workers. Very few have survived without dramatic reductions to their once vast land-holdings and very few retain a complete array of associated structures or are still in original family ownership.

A number of pastoral complexes are included on the Victorian Heritage Register and subject to the provisions of Victoria's Heritage Act. This paper outlines Heritage Victoria's recent experiences in relation to five pastoral properties:

- Ercildoune Homestead, Ercildoune
- Dhurringhi Homestead, Murchison
- Strathtulloh Homestead, East Melton
- Warrock Homestead, Casterton
- Chatsworth House, Chatsworth.

Ercildoune Homestead: too many faces

Ercildoune, situated west of Ballarat, is a fine example of the Western District pastoral estates of the 19th century. Ercildoune was founded by brothers Thomas and Somerville Learmonth in 1838. As well as being prominent figures in the opening-up and settling of the Western District, the Learmonth brothers were at the vanguard of merino wool production in the mid-19th century. They built the early stages of the homestead, constructed a number of buildings and structures and laid-out the foundations of the grand and elaborate garden.

In 1873, Sir Samuel Wilson purchased the property: he made extensive additions to the house and further developed the garden. Sir Samuel also developed a deer park and trout hatchery, and continued the production of fine merino wool on the property.

In 1920, the property was sold to Major (Sir) Alan Currie. Sir Alan's achievements at the property included the installation of a hydro-electric scheme.

Ercildoune’s era as a private family home ended in the 1960s when Lady Currie sold the property, donated much of her fine art collection to the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery and held a public auction of the remainder of the contents.

By 1960 Ercildoune had been developed for over 130 years by a series of enthusiastic owners and the remaining grounds, out-buildings, gardens and engineering structures reflected their personal interests.
In 1960 the homestead allotment was purchased by a local family who incorporated the property into their sheep farm. The house was open to the public on an occasional basis and presented as an unfurnished but interpretable grand house, including displays of historic views from the property. Unfortunately, during this period, parts of the garden became overgrown and many of the out-buildings fell into disrepair as they had no apparent use. National Estate grants were provided to assist in repairing the roof and out-buildings. The house was not viable as a museum but did provide access to the property for many locals.

In the mid-1990s a portion of the property, including most of the significant buildings and structures, was sold with 180 acres of land attached to the title. At this stage a Conservation Management Plan was funded by the Heritage Council to assist the new owners in planning for the future of the complex and another small National Estate Grant was provided to assist with repairs to the out-buildings. The parcel of land was large enough for the property to be used as a specialist farm and the new owners were keen to expand the tourism potential of the property.

Unfortunately, the collapse of the ostrich market saw Ercildoune back for sale in another two years. The subsequent purchasers planned to live at Ercildoune and commenced works to that end. Their proposals included modification of the service areas to provide a new kitchen/family room area. Midway through the works program works ceased, leaving new openings half finished, kitchen cupboards uninstalled and the re-wiring half installed. The property was again put-up for auction. It would be reasonable to observe that at each change of ownership there has been a loss of integrity of the complex and a higher risk of vandalism and theft during the frequent periods that the property has been unoccupied.

Ercildoune was purchased earlier in the year (1999) by new owners who tell me they are ‘there for the long term’ and will be carefully planning each stage of their works program. The main house will be used as a private family home and hopefully Ercildoune will once again become one of the district’s premiere establishments.

What lessons can be learnt from Ercildoune?

• Benign neglect is often less destructive than misguided over-activity.
• Strategic expenditure of money to address critical neglect, such as the repair of roofs and downpipes at Ercildoune, is a cost effective way of stabilising decay while the future of the property remains uncertain.
• It is critical to monitor the period during which a property is on the market and immediately after the sale as it is during this period that items have been removed from Ercildoune without approval.
• Do not assume that items, which have been included in previous sales – such as kitchen dressers and historic photos – will be on-sold with the property. In fact, assume and plan for the opposite.
The story of Erildoune over the last fifteen years indicates that in many ways heritage legislation is only so much window-dressing for the good times, without on-going monitoring of registered places and a workable enforcement strategy.

**Dhurringhile Homestead, Murchison: there is no escape...**

The tower of Dhurringhile looms above the horizon along the road from Murchison to Tatura.

Dhurringhile – with its mansion, staff quarters, stables and shearing shed – represents the way of life of a wealthy squatting family. In this respect it is significant for its association with the Winter family whose pastoral and gold-mining interests financed their extensive landholdings.

In the early-20th century the very size of the place led to lack of use and neglect for many years. The property subsequently took on a number of institutional roles. First, as an internment camp, then a Prisoner of War camp during World War II; it was used as a migrant boys’ home in the years following the war and a rehabilitation prison from 1965.

In 1995 a Conservation Analysis was prepared to plan for the property’s future. The report identified that the many activities that had taken place at Dhurringhile contributed to its cultural significance. The report recommended a rationale to guide decision-making. As a result, it was decided to relocate prisoners out of the mansion. Now that this has been achieved, there are plans to restore and reinstate work to the significant internal spaces as part of an ongoing rehabilitation program.

Dhurringhile provides an opportunity for educative purposes across its wide range of institutional uses and original pastoral and social activities. The Conservation Management Plan has been a most useful guiding document as part of this process.

**So what can be learnt from Dhurringhile?**

- Conservation Plans can be a very useful instrument to argue a case for works or funding at a departmental level.
- What may seem incongruous outcomes, such as the tourism potential of a prison complex, may in fact be good lateral thinking.

**Strathtulloh, East Melton: time for a sea change...**

This wonderful, old rundown house recently featured in an episode of the hugely successful ABC’s Sea Change and is about to undergo a ‘sea change’ of its own.
The Strathtulloh property was established in 1840 by Charles James Garrard; the detached kitchen building built of local stone is the earliest remaining structure. The random-coursed bluestone house with dormers and cellar was built later, possibly about 1869.

It is many years since anyone has lived in the Strathtulloh homestead. The roof of the building has been maintained, but the house has become rundown and an inherent structural problem along the rear elevation requires attention to make the building livable; however, the owners of Strathtulloh are currently investigating this option. Their architects, Craig Rossetti Pty Ltd, have proposed a single-storey pavilion linked via a lightweight walkway to the rear of the homestead. The homestead will be repaired, including partial rebuilding of the rear wall and the insertion of a bathroom in the attic space.

The proposal appears to be a well thought out and total concept for the building and will be supported by a heritage report to be prepared by a conservation architect, Bryce Raworth.

East Melton is now on the suburban fringe of Melbourne and the pastoral landscape is being divided up for hobby farms. This is a dramatic change to the rural setting of Strathtulloh. However, the house is sited overlooking a creek and will maintain a reasonably rural outlook on three sides.

**What lessons can be learnt from Strathtulloh?**

- The registered curtilage of a pastoral property in an outer urban area should provide for the maintenance of a rural setting.
- Proposals for the rehabilitation of rundown buildings should be encouraged and facilitated.

**Warrock, Casterton: an isolated wonder**

If you haven’t visited Warrock, don’t delay – I hear the termites are in the process of eating it!

Warrock is an endangered national treasure. The property contains Victoria’s – perhaps Australia’s – most important collection of colonial farm buildings. Fifty-seven structures dating from the 1840s, mostly built of sawn timber, extend over undulating parkland of ancient river red gums. Homestead, woolshed, grainstore, dairy, bacon house, blacksmith’s shop, bullock byre, branding shed, belfry and many other structures tell a story of life on an isolated sheep station.

The licence for Warrock was purchased by George Robertson in 1844. Robertson was a trained cabinet-maker and an interest and knowledge of fine timber detailing is evident in Warrock’s picturesque Gothic-styled buildings. The development of the grounds around the house also reflects the horticultural interests of George and his wife Mary.
The Robertson's had no children, but Warrock remained in the family for five generations under the care of the Pattersons. The Patterson era ended in 1992 when the homestead, the property buildings and 880 acres were sold to the Larkin family.

Warrock is open to the public and provides a fascinating trip back in time to those lucky enough to visit. But is luck enough to base the future of this important place: house, gardens, ephemera, artefacts, setting? The property has the potential to become a ‘must-see destination’ for those travelling the state, but it may be years before this vision is realised and, in the interim, maintenance is required and needs to be paid for.

Over the years, considerable public funds have assisted in the preparation of a publication, reports, conservation plans, measured drawings, record of artefacts and conservation of the building and garden – but conservation of the equipment has never been tackled to date.

So what can we learn from Warrock?

• This endangered national treasure requires an agreed strategy to ensure its long term future.
• The complex requires an on-going maintenance and repair plan.
• There is a need for commitment and co-operation across a range of federal and state government agencies.

Chatsworth House, Chatsworth: a fairy tale...

Chatsworth House is one of the most elaborate and socially prominent homesteads of the 1850s to 1870s period, from which the major elements date. It is complete with men's quarters and stables, while the surrounding landscape garden is one of the few surviving schemes attributable to Edward Latrobe Bateman.

A decade ago a report was commissioned to try and find a viable solution for this pastoral property. The owners were unconvinced that the complex had a future as a viable agricultural property. The property's substantial outbuildings were in serious disrepair and there was a proposal to subdivide the property. The report did not support subdivision of the out-building on a separate allotment from the main house and garden and a permit was refused by the (then) Historic Buildings Council. A revised subdivision including the major historic features in one 42-hectare allotment was subsequently approved.

After some time, the property was sold and - in true fairytale fashion - it was purchased by someone who fell in love with it. Care, attention and money was lavished on it to restore the building – including the falling down out-buildings – to their former glory. The work was mostly carried out by local tradespeople.
with the exception of the ‘paint marblers’.

The owner, a French gentleman with an interest in restoring old properties, had placed Chatsworth on the market for several million dollars but it has now been withdrawn from sale. The owner has indicated that, in France, the government provides tax deductibility for works to heritage properties, and that this was a specific incentive for reducing the rate of decline of rural heritage.

**So what lessons can be learnt from Chatsworth?**

- Returning these properties to an ownership more economically aligned to the circumstances of the original - as a home for powerful, wealthy individuals - can provide fabulous results.
- Consideration should be given to retaining sufficient land around homesteads to provide a viable rural business: this contributes to the future of a complex.
- Keeping the house and associated out-buildings on one allotment makes good sense.
- Consideration should be given to tax deductibility or some other form of incentive for works to heritage properties which have been identified as ‘at risk’.

**Summary**

In 1999 I attended the 150th celebrations at Overnewton, the original pastoral run in the Keilor area, north of Melbourne. Dr Leslie Norton and his family have lived at the property for 25 years and it was opened to the public for the first time since the 1950s. Around 1500 people attended with another 1500 on the waiting list. Quite amazing numbers.

People remain fascinated with the mystique of the pastoral property. Perhaps a grandly co-ordinated open-house scheme would increase public awareness and boost funding opportunities for the properties concerned.

The case studies referred to illustrate a small range of the issues associated with the conservation of pastoral properties. Issues range from expectations associated with changes of ownership, to the benefits of the Conservation Plan, the need to plan work carefully, consideration of settings and the opportunities offered by cultural tourism. The benefits to a property purchased by an owner interested in the history of a property and willing and able to spend money on its repair is also shown.

However, it is simply not good enough to rely on luck for the future of these fragile places. We need to operate more actively and more strategically, with real monitoring programs and mechanisms and funds to provide short term repairs while facilitating longer term solutions. And this needs to be done with compassion and an understanding of the broader rural issues of poverty and isolation.
Heritage Victoria is acutely aware of the difficulties facing owners and the real risk that places will simply deteriorate into non-existence. We are currently investigating options for a risk management program and increased funding to private owners.

Acknowledgments

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references

Chatsworth House, Heritage Victoria Register data entry.


Strathulloh Homestead, Heritage Victoria Register data entry.