Rural fences: perhaps the most common, (and most commonly neglected) component of European cultural landscapes in Australia

By now most professionals interested in managing (rather than just conserving) European cultural landscapes would accept that we need to do more than retain a few mansion-scale homesteads. We also need to pay attention to the various components of rural enterprises that generated the wealth that built the mansions. Woolsheds spring to mind, but what about the fences that dissect the landscape? Fences are essential for managing stock, and divide the landscape into paddocks, the cultural building blocks that together make up properties, districts and regions.

Despite (perhaps because of) their ubiquity, they are essentially invisible components. They are simply so common, that they are regarded as part of the background. They are certainly not regarded as items worthy of study in their own right. Yet, of all the potential relics of European culture in our landscape, fences must be the most abundant. There are no estimates of the total length of fences in Australia, but it must run into millions of kilometres. Surely this is sufficient reason to look again at these invisible lines? In this short note, I summarise the status of my own research on fences, what I perceive to be the major gaps, links with other aspects of cultural heritage, and some dilemmas in management.

Some terminology — wires or rails are the horizontal bits; posts are vertical bits stuck in the ground and supporting the wires and/or rails; droppers are vertical bits that keep the wires apart and are usually above the ground, or if touching the ground, are not buried in it.

Approach to fences

My research takes an integrated view of fences. The fences are structures in their own right, but they also complex indicators of the evolution of society and landscapes. It is not possible to understand fences without also examining legislation, patents of fencing products, the origins of fences in Australia, regional patterns and variation in structure, changes in fencing technology over the last 200 years, and of course changes in the rural industries and the financial system. The research combines searching archives, primary and secondary sources, for background information.

One project involves specifically searching for and recording all Australian patent applications (not just patents granted) on fencing products. I am designing a database to record the relevant information complete with some of the diagrams accompanying the patent specification. This information allows fences to be assigned a 'no older than' date based on the date of the patent of, for example, a specific post or dropper. A related project is searching rural periodicals for advertisements for fence products. When linked with the patent database, this provides excellent information on the commercial development and evolution of fence components.

Fieldwork is designed with a rigorous protocol to record fence structures (see figure 1), dimensions and the nature and type of components. The data are
entered onto a purpose-designed database to permit analysis. To date I have sampled nearly 700 fences in NSW. To help place NSW fences in perspective, I have also sampled 650 fences in Arizona (USA), 150 in Sonora (Mexico) and 80 scattered over several provinces of Argentina.

![Diagram of fence types](image)

**Figure 1** Examples of the range of variation in fences found in far-western NSW near White Cliffs. (Source: Pickard 1993)

### Output from these studies

So far, I have published several papers either directly on fences, or using fences to interpret landscape history. Output from these studies will be:

- A complete listing of all Australian fence patents (hopefully complete with illustrations). This will be valuable to cultural heritage practitioners who want to identify specific components and assess the significance of a specific fence.
- An analysis of the range of variation in fence structure across NSW. Structure data, etc. will be analysed with multivariate classifications and ordinations to prepare a draft typology for field validation.
- Comparative studies of Australian and overseas fences.
- Guidelines for assessing the significance of fences based on the location, structure, and components. For the heritage practitioner, this is the most important outcome, but it relies heavily on the studies listed above.

### Gaps in knowledge and understanding

The biggest gap in knowledge is not knowing the full range of fence types in NSW. I have identified some 50-odd structural types independent of variations in the type or manufacture of posts, droppers (see figure 2) and wires. While
this gap remains, it is not possible to develop a workable typology to summarise the enormous variation.

![Diagram of fence cross-sections](image)

**Figure 2** Cross sections of steel fence posts and droppers found in fences near White Cliffs. (Source: Pickard 1993)

The major gap in understanding is knowing precisely why a specific fence was built — the rationale behind its structure. Why do farmers still use wooden posts when steel posts are so much cheaper? Why build a rabbit-proof fence when there are rabbits on both sides? Why build a fence at all? Only farmers and graziers can answer these questions. A major effort of interviewing is essential. Based on my experience and observations so far, I believe that there is considerable cultural inertia in fences, and regional differences may be as much due to this, as any so-called rational cause.

**Multiple links with European cultural heritage**

The links with other aspects of cultural heritage are limited only by the imagination. Advertisements provide information on early posts and droppers; patents show ingenuity in design (but often a marked lack of understanding of manufacturing and selling!); legislation is a proxy of social change; steel posts reflect the technology of steel making; paddock boundaries are a consequence of views on stock management; fence design; the list is endless! And of course, fences express a deeply held view that boundaries must be established to demarcate territory. This is one of the primal urges in Western society, and transcends nationality.
Managing fences as items of European cultural heritage

The problems described so far pale into insignificance when we start looking at managing fences as heritage items. Fences are designed to work for about 30 or 40 years and then be replaced. Some have lasted well over a century, but they are still ephemeral. What do we do with the significant examples? Do we record them and let them fall down? Do we record them, pull them up and erect them in a museum? How do we persuade the owners that the ratty fence in the back paddock is significant and should be retained? Nothing new about these questions, but the sheer number of fences exacerbates the problems enormously.

Assessing the significance of a fence

Before the significance of a particular fence can be determined, we need more information on the range of structures, technologies, components, etc. that have been used and which remain today. My work is incomplete, and (surprise, surprise) needs funding. Without the detailed sampling and measurements in my survey, significance simply cannot be established. Assertions that a particular steel post is rare cannot be justified without the necessary background information being supplied by my overall survey.

If any cultural heritage practitioner needs assistance with rural (NOT urban or hobby farm) fences, please contact me.

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