

YOUR VIRTUAL DISCOVERY VISIT – 39 TO THE HERITAGE STORIES OF ROTTNEST ISLAND



The Virtual Visit series was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic when Rottnest Island was closed to the public due to social distancing restrictions and periods of use for quarantine from March to June 2020.

Now that the Island is again open to visitors, these Virtual Visits are continuing in 2021 to enable a further enjoyment of stories introduced at the Wadjemup Museum, the Chapman Archives or sites around the Island.

Enjoy, reflect and share.

DUBROVNIK ON THE SWAN?

While not ignoring the fanciful creation of Richard Roach Jewel in the form of the summer residence of the Governor [now the Rottnest Hotel and Samphire], there are two men, who through their buildings, have shaped the Rottnest Experience – **Henry Vincent** and **Ronald Jack (Gus) Ferguson**. The Rottnest Experience has been eloquently defined by George Seddon as:

Rottnest has played a significant part in sustaining Western Australians' self-image as a society that is friendly, gregarious, simple, unpretentious, physically orientated, pleasure loving and egalitarian.

Based on his travels in Italy, Dubrovnik and the Greek Islands, **Gus Ferguson** identified the latent Mediterranean quality in Henry Vincent's convict-built 19th century cottages and prison infrastructure. Beginning in 1971, under contracts with the Rottnest Island Authority, R.J. Ferguson & Associates developed over 300 individual cottages, as well as a variety of support elements. Applying the sense of village and links with local materials, that he saw in Dalmatia, Dubrovnik and the Greek Islands, Ferguson was able to create, almost without us recognising it, the social and physical attributes of a Mediterranean village. A series of almost identical cottages integrated with the original prison buildings or set into the steep dunes of the island, now forms a cohesive ensemble promoting a village like sense of community. Rottnest today conjures an evocative and powerful sense of place, which typifies the *Rottnest Experience*.



Whatever else his record may show, **Henry Vincent** built with a utilitarian purpose: sturdy, basic, and with materials at hand. Without realising it, he incorporated key Mediterranean village elements which Ferguson was able to utilise in his Rottnest accommodation evolution, 100 years later. This is what Henry Vincent gave us:

- A sea wall to control erosion and create a level platform in the coastal dunes;
- An elevated view of the ocean with mature trees providing dappled shade;
- Single story structures with low pitch roofs built of local materials
- Verandas and courtyards for shade, outdoor living, cooking and socialising;
- Spaces for movement between buildings providing access to the sea and cooling breezes;
- Low level walls and parapets to divide public and private spaces but still permit engagement with neighbours and those passing by;
- A variety of building forms and detail which creates individuality within a unifying theme; and
- Varying building setbacks to create a meandering pedestrian pathway rather than a road.



With pressure mounting in the 1960s for additional accommodation, development could have gone in a different direction. A brick cottage erected to the north of the main Thomson Bay settlement in October 1960. served as a template for future development, This design was repeated across Thomson Bay. The cottage was a single storey, three-bedroom unit constructed of cream bricks, with a chocolate base string course and a range of differently

finished roofs, including mottled blue tiles. The most striking feature of this first cottage was the inclusion on the side wall of a Rolf Harris mural of a Quokka. ***Does anyone have a photo of this mural? Is this entry in the Chapman Archive, the mural in question? <https://archives.rvqa.asn.au/2013/01/01/quokka-cottage-from-lost-perth-lp-publishing-2013-includes-photo/>***

Ferguson was one of many critics of these cottages and after a preliminary study, he was invited to become part of the solution. His strategy was to first increase the density by inserting new cottages in between the existing ones, and by turning single cottages into duplex and triplex units. He reworked the 1960s cottages to match, bricking around the existing circular steel columns, reroofing them in asbestos sheeting and re-pitching the roofs lower at 7.5 degrees. Low brick courtyard walls were added with large, chamfered edges, complete with half height ledge and braced gates, and barbecue plates inset. These courtyards were staggered along the road, creating a meandering path. All cottages were then rendered and painted in an orange lime wash, creating a unity between the early convict-built core and the new infill units. The success of these first units led to a series of projects including North Thomson, South Thomson, Longreach and Geordie Bay accommodation areas and services.



With the completion of these last two major settlements, the transformation from a piecemeal, haphazardly planned hideaway to a unified, romantic escape was complete. With his innovations and interventions, Ferguson was able to skilfully return a sense of architectural harmony to the island and to link diverse elements from many periods into a cohesive expression of a relaxed and meandering village. When George Seddon describes the sense of place created by the original settlement, the parallels with the new settlement become apparent:

The old settlement is compact, and the houses are close together, but the boundaries between private space and public space are sharp. The stone cottages mark boundaries with stone walls and fences... People feel quite confident about walking close to the cottages, because there is no sense of intrusion, and so a pedestrian scale is maintained.



Unfortunately, with current privacy and identity theft concerns, it is not possible to illustrate the village atmosphere of Rottnest accommodation with personal photographs featuring occupants enjoying their Rottnest experience. You will have to imagine cottage guests chatting with neighbours or passers-by while they enjoy their BBQ or evening beverage. It is however very much in the sense as described by Professor Seddon.



Full Circle: Henry Vincent’s seawall (above) and Gus Ferguson’s units (below) built into the seawall extension at North Thomson with subtle colour differentiation.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y7nexWqsAs>

<https://fremantlestuff.info/people/vincent.html>

“New Rottnest Cottage”, The West Australian, August 20, 1960, p 21.

<https://www.sahanz.net/wp-content/uploads/murray-a-mediterranean-on-the-west-coast.pdf>

<https://research-repository.uwa.edu.au/en/publications/waterfront-cottages-rottne-rj-ferguson-amp-associates>

<https://www.fergusonarchitects.com/>

There are over 50 entries in the RVGA Chapman Archive under the search term “cottage”,