

The House(s) that Jack Built

Thanks to Peter Komidar January 2025

In Kowen Forest, there were actually three houses called the House that Jack Built. Bulbeck and Boot note that the house usually considered 'the house that Jack built' was situated on corner of Jack's Break and Welch's Rd (see Section X) "across the road from the Kowen BMR huts" (see Section X). Forestry overseer, Tom Ebsworth advised that the house was built in 1950 or 1951". Like Reedy Camp, it was likely built on the site of an earlier, much more rudimentary, forester's home. Notwithstanding still being new, the home was likely abandoned following the consolidation of housing within the Kowen Forestry Settlement in the mid-1950s and by the 1970s the house was derelict. Both Ian Gordon and Tom Ebsworth remember when the house was used for storing superphosphate, and that it was standard weatherboard in its construction". Meanwhile, in a pers comm to John Evans, Phil Munnings noted that the house was "used by the local lads for drinking sessions and who knows what. It wasn't pretty. By 1979 or 1980 it was starting to collapse. A local owner builder approached me for permission to salvage the timber from the house but by the time approval came through from ACT Forests the house disappeared completely". Aerial photography taken in 1981 shows no evidence of the building. Bulbeck and Boot note that remnants of the house were scattered over a wide area. However, the area was converted to pine plantation in the 1990s and all traces of the house have been lost.

Interestingly, across the road, in the block owned by Geoscience Australia, the pile of rubble that is the remains of the 'BMR huts' that were demolished in the late 1990s is often confused with being the remnant of the House that Jack Built - which it definitely is not. More information on Geoscience Australia's footprint within Kowen is covered in Section X.

The second house that Jack built was located south of the Kowen Forestry Settlement on the eastern side of Kowen Rd just south of the Macarthur Rd the intersection with Kowen Rd. Bulbeck and Boot estimate its construction to be in 1950 or 1951. It is shown on ACT Forests maps dating to the late 1970s but not on the 1981 aerial photographs. The site has since been returned to pines but is likely the source of crockery shards one can still find on Macarthur Rd. Once again, the site was likely abandoned in the mid-1950s following consolidation of housing within the Forestry Settlement but may have been used for other purposes up until its demolition.

The third and final house that Jack built is Reedy Camp which we've already met. Evidence for this is a pers comm to Bulbeck and Boot by Norman McInnes, further supported by the nature of the materials in the rubble pile which are consistent with a 1950s construction date.

We have three houses all called 'the house that Jack built', so who is Jack? There are three likely candidates: Jack the Forester or Jack the Builder, or both.

Phil Munnings, in a pers comm to John Evans claims that the first house was "probably built the 30s" by "Jack E who was a forestry worker, ganger and overseer at Kowen from the 20s through to the 60s. He ruled eastern ACT with an iron fist and had a really weird local dialect. I was the Forester-in-Charge at Kowen in the mid to late 70s. Jack's legacy remained there then, with most of the workforce being descendants or relatives of his, typically born and raised in the house". If Jack lived in the house, this would explain why the road that passes the property was called Jack's Break.

So did Jack also build the other two houses?

How do we reconcile Phil's statement that the house was built in the 1930s with Tom Ebsworth's recollection and with Bulbeck and Boot's assessment of the age of remaining building materials setting a construction date of 1950. The only way to square the circle is if all three buildings were successfully tendered for by a professional builder called Jack. So while Jack E may have built a home there in the 1930s it was subsequently replaced with a new home built by Jack the Builder.

Mystery solved?

Tenders For Timber Homes Accepted

Canberra Times, 18 May 1951

Tenders amounting to £37,902 have been accepted by the Department of Works and Housing for home construction, path construction, and the supply of office equipment.

Top price is £19,972 by Capital Builders, Flinders Way, Griffith, for the erection of five timber homes at Uriarra, and one timber house at Pierces Creek.

Two timber houses at Mt Stromlo will cost £6,470, and two homes at Kowen £6,200.