

Kowen Kapers - The House that Jack Built

Peter Komidar

Jack's Break is one of four major firebreak roadways in Kowen Forest. It runs from the NSW border in the north down to the Molonglo River in the south. One km from the border you'll find a long but narrow stretch of native woodland adjacent to the road. The ecosystem has been identified as Yellow Box ±Apple Box tall grassy woodland, a critically endangered ecological community. At the southern-most portion of this block you'll also find a pile of rubble that was once the House that Jack Built. The house and its name still appears on my 2017 paper map (remember them?) of the Kowen District (Bungendore 8727-2N).

The 5.5 ha block upon which the House that Jack Built once stood, has an interesting history. In ACT Forests maps from 1964 and 1974, the block is identified as a 'paddock'. This is not unusual as there were several such paddocks associated with workers' housing in Kowen Forest. Paddocks provided feed for horses and bullocks, the heavy machinery of the early 20th Century and as late as the mid 1950s, horses were still used by forestry workers for transportation around the plantation.

Following the decision in the 1950s to consolidate all workers housing within the Forestry Settlement, the outlier houses were demolished and their paddocks were mostly replanted with pine. The House that Jack Built, however, was not demolished and its paddock was never converted to pine. (While there are some pine trees present on the block, they are wildings - escapes from the surrounding plantation - rather than deliberate plantings).

With regard to the house itself, the fact that the House that Jack Built is situated alongside Jack's Break would, at first glance, seem to indicate that both the road and building were named after a forestry worker called Jack. Moreover, a cultural heritage survey of Kowen notes that there were two other buildings called 'the House that Jack Built' in Kowen Forest - both of which were bulldozed in the 50s. Clearly, this prolific builder must have been such a prominent person that he had three houses and a major road named after him. An oral history of ACT forestry workers, however, makes no mention of any individual named Jack working or residing in Kowen Forest.

An alternative explanation for this mystery relates to a nursery rhyme of the same name. According to *Oxford Reference* the poem, first published in 1753, is one of the most famous of all English nursery rhymes. 'This is the House that Jack Built' remained a popular nursery rhyme in the 20th century and would likely have been known by at least some of the Kowen forestry workers. In the vernacular, it came to signify an owner-builder house. So it is possible that this house, along with the two previous houses of the same name, adopted the humorous/semi-derogatory title which had nothing to do with the building's owner or builder. If this is the case, the road would actually have been named after the house, rather than a man.

More than just accommodation for a rank and file forestry worker, the House that Jack Built was almost certainly the home of the forestry overseer. We know this because it survived

consolidation in the 1950s, it had a large block and while it was some 2 km from the Forestry Settlement, as the crow flies, it was serviced both by a dedicated telephone line and its own bore.

The ACT was granted self-government in December 1988 at which time formal ownership of land within the Kowen District was transferred from the Commonwealth to the ACT Government, with the exception of two blocks, the Geomagnetic Observatory site in East Kowen and 2 ha of land around the House that Jack Built (known as Block 78) - both of which were retained by Geoscience Australia on behalf of the Commonwealth. At that time, the house was still intact and the phone line active. Recalling that up until the mid 90s, internet access was limited almost solely to copper wire phone lines, Block 78 would have been considered a desirable location and Geoscience Australia had plans for developing a station to field test remote equipment. However, amid the late 1990s mania for government cost cutting, it must have been decided that a field testing station was of too low a



priority to be pursued and while the land remains the property of Geoscience Australia to this day, Block 78 endures untouched.

And here it is important to insert the author into the discussion. I began sled dog running in Kowen in 1996. At that time, the House that Jack Built was still standing, albeit in less than mint condition. It had some broken windows, a couple of damaged internal fibro walls (kicked in by vandals I assume) and was daubed with the ubiquitous pseudo Satanic heavy metal graffiti so popular in the late 20th century. But by 2000, the House that Jack Built had been demolished. Today, only a pile of rubble remains as mute testament to the House(s) that Jack Built.

Directions: From the Bingley Way entrance **(A)** proceed to the Kowen Forest Horse Entrance **(B)** and turn left. Follow Wamboin Break until the first intersection with Jack's Break **(C)** (signposted). Turn right and along Jack's Break until you reach the native woodland block on your left **(D)**. Continue for another 400 m to the intersection of Jack's Break and Welch's Rd **(E)** (signposted). Enter the block to discover the House that Jack Built **(F)**. The return journey is 6 km.

Additional Comment:

Yeah I did come across your blog reference to it. My problem was that it didn't jibe with a few facts I had under my belt. 1. That the house was still standing and in good nick when I first came across it in 1996. 2. There is no reference to a Jack in the oral history of ACT Forests book (or any newspaper article) - which would surely have been the case if he was the overseer. 3. I could also find no mention of workers in Kowen being related. In fact forestry workers were a pretty multicultural bunch with a fair proportion from slavic, German and Italian heritage - as well as the Aussies.

So, in the absence of any solid reference to a Jack working in Kowen at the time, I came to the conclusion that the House that Jack Built was so named because of the nursery rhyme. And similarly, as I visited the house in 1996 and apart from some minor vandalism damage it was disused but in good condition, I considered that the house Munnings said had collapsed in the 80s must have been one of the two other houses that Jack built that are referred to in the Bullock and Boot cultural heritage survey of Kowen carried out in the 90s (they said that there were 3 HTJBs two of which were demolished in the 50s. - perhaps one of those was left derelict and demolished at a later date but before in survey - ie the 80s -that Munnings is referring to?).

I ran the article past Peter Langton - the current boss of forestry operations in Kowen and head of the ACT forest scientists association. He said it lined up with his understanding. He also mentioned that a retired forester was writing a history of ACT forestry. He passed on my details but the guy hasn't got in touch with me yet. If he does, I'll be sure to ask him about the HTJB and whether there was a Jack that has eluded my investigations to date. And if so, I'll let you know!

Also when I found out that the block around the house was actually Commonwealth land (from Langton) I contacted Geoscience Australia about the block - which is where I got the info about the field testing station. Once again - unlike the Munnings info, they confirmed that in the late 80s, far from being derelict, the house was in such good nick that the block was explicitly retained by the Commonwealth in the handover of land to the ACT - for the purposes of converting the house into a field testing station.

So like so much of Kowen - mysteries abound. But on the balance of evidence, I went for Jack being a nursery rhyme.

