Avondale Research Station: representing 150 years of Western Australian farming

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Representing 150 years of Western Australian farming

By D.A. Johnston, Information Branch

Avondale Research Station at Beverley in the Avon Valley, 130 kilometres from Perth, is a most appropriate setting for the Department of Agriculture to offer students, tourists, scientists and farmers a combined look at practical farming, the principal breeds of sheep and cattle, research activity and a technological collection of farming implements dating back to the early settlers.

Avondale Research Station is open to the public as a 1979 Anniversary Year contribution by the Department of Agriculture in cooperation with the Primary Industries Committee of W.A. Y. 1979.

The homestead

The east wing of the homestead probably dates from the 1850s and has been added to by enclosing the verandahs. It was originally built of bush poles with a shingle roof but fire destroyed the supports and part of the roof.

The bricks are of local clay, laid in English bond. The additions show newer bricks and bonding techniques. This building was re-roofed in the 1880s or '90s and has since been largely restored to its turn-of-the-century appearance.

The Technological collection

A modern display shed, built in 1978 houses the largest collection of important types of agricultural machines used in Western Australia since foundation in 1829. The oldest machines date from the 1850s and 1860s, represented by two early 'stripper' harvesting machines.

Nearly all items were donated by the rural community and restored in the Department's workshops. The collection is priceless and much of it is in working or near-working condition.

Modern machinery on show provides an immediate visual demonstration of technological change.

The stables and barn

Both the stables and barn are believed to date from about the 1890s. They are iron clad and are oregon-framed like many early Western Australian buildings. The stable is on termite-resistant Wandoo stumps. There is no stallion stall or provision for young foals.

In 1911 shearing was done at the southern end of the stables. The barn is louvred for ventilation and has had many uses. It is now the Research Station workshop.

The office

The office building was originally a laboratory built for the study of the
sheep disease enterotoxaemia. Here the late Dr Harold William Bennetts did much of his pioneer research and so did Dr, later Professor, Eric John Underwood. The Beverley community contributed to the cost of the building. The office is not open for public inspection.

**The silo and other buildings**
The silage silo built in 1927 has a capacity of 100 tonnes. There are still several other similar silos in the Avon Valley. The shearing, seed-grading and machinery sheds, store facilities and yards have been built since 1924 and show interesting style changes in farm buildings.

**Sheep, cattle and horses**
Except at the annual Perth Royal Show and district agricultural shows, only at Avondale can visitors see at one place, the principal breeds of sheep and cattle which are the basis of Western Australia's major animal industries. Here they are seen in their domestic environment. Reminiscent of horse transport and working the land with horse-drawn implements, the beautiful Clydesdale horses are living links with the past. From time to time they are used to demonstrate the use of old farm machinery.

**The cultivar garden**
These demonstration plots, best seen in late winter and spring, show the wheat, oats, barley, rapeseed, lupins and clovers which are, or have been, important to our farming. Some wheat varieties go back to the 1860s. This garden is especially interesting to farmers, agronomists and plant breeders.

**Fauna and flora reserve**
More than 50 ha of hill and pasture land have been fenced off in a unique attempt to re-establish natural vegetation of an area after 140 years of sheep grazing. Within the reserve, four vegetation sites have been protected from the native animals — five species of marsupial, and emus — which have been re-introduced. Other rare species may be introduced later.
Avondale has a long history of involvement with the local community in the fields of research and agriculture extension. Initially in the 1920s the emphasis was on producing better quality cereal seed for farmers, then the station became more and more involved with the problems of animal diseases, nutrition and fertility. New varieties of wheat, barley, lupins, oats, rapeseed and pasture species are tested here and cereal breeding, herbicide and pesticide trials, tillage and grazing studies, animal fertility and pasture work fully occupy staff and facilities.

Early ownership
Avondale is situated on land assigned in the 1830s to the first Governor of the Colony, Captain (later Admiral) Sir James Stirling R.N. and To Captain Mark Currie, R.N. The land was first surveyed in 1836 by Thomas Watson and two years later Stirling and Currie leased their holdings to Nicholas Carey, who was to acquire both properties. Carey died in 1889 in Guernsey, leaving the property to his grand-nephew, William Herbert de Lisle, who took up residence in 1893 and obtained the title in 1894. Shortly afterwards de Lisle sold about half the estate of 5398 ha and then developed much of the remainder. In 1904 the property was sold to William James and Charles J. Butcher, who offered it to the Crown in 1908. The Crown finally purchased Avondale in December 1910.

From 1911 the Avondale Estate was administered by the Lands Department and much of the area was divided and sold to soldier settlers after the Great War of 1914-18. The remaining homestead block became a research station in 1924 when it was vested in the Department of Agriculture.

Visiting hours
Tuesday to Saturday 10.30am to 3.30pm. Sunday 10.30am to 4.30pm, Mondays — closed except on public holidays. Admission is $1 per adult and children 20 cents. For special tours apply to the Manager. The Station will close for harvesting and school holidays between about December 14 and March 17.