



Our cottage in the early 1970s, as depicted by Ronald Rivett.

Moving to Gundaroo in 1972

By DAVID BISHOP

THE LONG dry summer of 1972 was dragging its feet towards the autumn. We'd just come back from our Uni holiday fruit picking in hot, humid Hanwood in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, all cashed up and ready to swap hard physical labour for more serious mind-work.

We'd been living in a group house in Canberra. But the owner had decided to sell up, leaving four of us house hunting in vain in a Canberra real estate market not kindly to groups of young students.

I spotted an ad in The Canberra Times offering for sale, for around \$9,500, 'Strawberry Cottage' in Morning Street

Gundaroo, which, from memory, included five blocks of land.

It was wildly out of our price range. But, hoping we might be able to rent it, we piled into my old VW Kombi and rattled our way out along the dusty, rutted road, across several dry creek beds, to have a look.

In those days, Gundaroo comprised almost entirely small empty paddocks with tiny, mostly abandoned houses, many of them ancient timber slab huts with one wall removed to accommodate the odd truck, tractor or farm implement.

Thirsty for information on possible housing, we called into Matt Crowe's Wine Saloon, which, in those days, was licensed to sell only Australian

wines. Matt invited us into his lounge room, now the Colonial Inn restaurant, poured us each a glass of Claret and was up for a yarn ... and what a yarn!

It seems old Charlie Wilson, who had been the gardener at 'Bowylie' Station for forty years, had, at sixty eight, given up the bachelor life, retired from his gardening career, married 16-year-old Penny from Gunning, whom he'd met when she was working as a domestic at 'Bowylie', and moved into a little, rundown weatherboard house in Morning Street, opposite the Catholic Church.

Well, after a couple of years, the long-drop dunny filled up and the water tanks rotted out and fell empty, so the happy couple had no choice but to



Our cottage in Morning Street as it is now.

head back to Penny's mum in Gunning, leaving their house potentially available for desperate students.

A quick trip to Gunning and, after Charlie had offered to sell me his Morning Street orchard for \$50 and to rent his house for \$1 a week, he agreed to sell his house for the price he paid two years earlier – \$800.

At Easter 1972, when we moved in, there were only five inhabited houses in Morning Street and thirteen in the rest of Gundaroo, including the Wine Saloon, the Post Office and the Caledonia and Gundaroo Stores.

Eva and Clarrie Lees lived next to us with Sylvia, their 19-

year-old daughter, and their 19-year-old cockatoo, which could play hopscotch with a rock and imitate Eva, squawking, "Got your wallet? Got your licence?" when he spotted Clarrie sporting a hat and jacket ready to go to town.

American tourists, brought to Gundaroo by Matt and Beat Crowe for a taste of the outback, offered the Lees small fortunes to take Cocky back to the States, but they were never interested.

Their life was complete because, at some stage, they'd won the lottery and bought their dream – a bit of steep land in the Lake George hills off the Marked Tree Line of Road towards Collector.

Clarrie died not long after we moved in, and Eva's brother, Tom Greenwood, moved in for a while from their family home on Back Creek Road to keep her company. Next door to us on the other side, Charlie and Walter Greenwood had moved out of their tidy timber slab cottage (pictured below) to over-winter at their sister, Amy White's, house, never to return to live.

Charlie, it seems, owned almost all of the vacant land in Gundaroo, which was, at the time, almost all of Gundaroo. None of that land was sold during his lifetime. They used it to house their trotting horses and to run the odd sheep brought in from their rural holdings.



Greenwood's cottage next door.

Photo by Rog Fryer

It wasn't until many years after Charlie, Walter and Amy had died that Len White, who lived with his wife, Hazel, on Cork Street, next to the Uniting Church, was persuaded to sell most of the land, marking the start of Gundaroo's rapid population expansion – and the rejuvenation of some early homes and buildings, such as our Morning Street cottage, below (2021)

Gundaroo is rare as a modern community village in that much of the infrastructure is owned or controlled by the community, rather than by the local council.

The Literary Institute, the Soldiers' Memorial Hall and the Gundaroo Park are all owned by the community, being held in trust by community members.

The Gundaroo Common, the Gundaroo Showground, at the

eastern end of the Common, and the Police Horse Paddock are all owned by the State government but managed by and for the community.

But the world changes and life moves on, sometimes for the best, sometimes not.

When Matt and Beat Crowe died, their will stipulated that the business should be offered for sale first to members of the community. So, for several years a consortium of community members owned and operated the business.

There was another demand in the will. Len White's custom, at the end of the working day, was to sit at one end of the bar and have a few glasses of McWilliams Cream Sherry. Future owners were required to serve Len his sherry for the rest of his life for twenty cents a glass.

Back in the seventies the Gundaroo Bushfire Brigade had one old truck with a water tank on the back and a couple of hoses. There was a fire bell in Cork Street to summon firefighters.

But if there was a fire in the evening, the truck would tour the town pulling people out of their houses and Matt's wine bar to head off across rough paddocks with several willing hands hanging on tightly. Of course it wasn't uncommon for the truck to return with one or two firefighters 'dislodged', leaving them to find their own way home.

Many of those who figured large in the Gundaroo of the 1970s have since died. But fortunately, many are still around, connecting us all to a past that will continue to enrich our lives into the future.