

## Remembering the cane: conserving the sugar legacy of far north Queensland

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Far north Queensland's post-contact history and identity are entrenched in the story of sugar. The industry's influence remains evident in the milling towns and in the cane fields along the tropical coastal plains. Although it has developed and changed over time, the sugar industry is still central to the region's economy, an anchor that provides communities with livelihoods and continuity. From downtime to harvest, and crushing to transport, the sugar season guides the region's rhythms of life and still shapes local identity. Cultural traditions of the sugar migrants permeate the region and breathe life into the district. Weatherboard farmhouses and outbuildings stand like sentinels in the cane fields around Tully, Innisfail, Babinda and Mossman. Old canecutters barracks are still visible in the landscape, rough resting places that were once home to a transient, seasonal workforce. Tram tracks still crisscross fields and townships despite the development of road transport and bulk sugar refineries. And sugar mills, almost Dickensian in their appearance, punctuate the landscape with chimney stacks belching smoke plumes of cloying, syrupy aroma.

This visible link between the past and the present is a veritable feast for cultural heritage workers, and provides an opportunity to document, manage, conserve and interpret the sugar legacy of far north Queensland before it is lost. Understanding how the heritage industry chooses to do this, how it currently conserves, promotes and interprets this sugar history, and how it *could* conserve, promote and interpret it, is critical for remembering and recognising how sugar has shaped the region's development.

The opportunities for protecting this sugar legacy, however, are beset by existing and emerging threats. The lack of appropriate museum facilities in far north Queensland impedes the ability to collect, research and exhibit the story of sugar to a range of different audiences at a regional level. Ageing buildings are vulnerable to cyclones and flood damage, and susceptible to development and change. The downturn of the industry has seen cane farmers replace sugar with mahogany crops or bananas. Other farmers, wary of a contracting industry or bequeathing farms to children with no interest in farm life, are selling their land to corporations or developers. Many of the old canecutters and farmers are now in their twilight years, their stories yet untold. Changes in technology have also resulted in old machinery being replaced. Innovations are vital to the sustainability of the industry, but the loss of old equipment impacts on our ability to visually interpret the industry's evolution.

Age, economy, exodus, climate and vulnerability: these threats place some of the built and moveable cultural heritage, and much of the intangible cultural heritage, on the endangered list. It is important, therefore, to identify what aspects of the sugar legacy merit remembrance,

by reinforcing the historical significance of far north Queensland's sugar history. This provides a rationale for remembering this history in a heritage context, and provides direction for practitioners who must identify what type of heritage assets best capture and convey this significant story. It is essential, too, to have an understanding of what methods heritage workers, cultural institutions, collecting agencies and tourism providers use to interpret and remember the sugar story, and what facilities are available to do this.

The particular focus of this paper is on the different ways the far north's sugar history can be remembered through heritage. It reviews the way local tourism activities and museums depict the region's sugar history, and reflects on significant stories found in the region's literary heritage. It analyses sugar-related heritage already listed on the Queensland Heritage Register (QHR), and discusses research being conducted to identify more places via the Queensland government's state-wide heritage survey in far north Queensland.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on how one particular building type, cane barracks, demonstrates the impact of the industry across the region, its interpretive potential and the difficulties involved in conserving it in far north Queensland.

### **Reinforcing the Historical Significance of Sugar in Far North Queensland**

Since the mid-1870s, the sugar industry in far north Queensland has changed substantially. The plantation system, which was the genesis of the industry, was replaced by government-supported central mills between 1897 and 1925. Indentured labourers from the Pacific and South Sea Islands were the region's first canecutters, but they were replaced by southern European and other 'white' labours after the introduction of restrictive immigration laws by the federal government. This second wave of canecutters was also replaced, this time by machinery when cane harvesters were introduced during the 1960s. Sugar transportation has evolved from tramlines and bins to 'canetainers' and road transport, and mills have gone from labour-intensive workplaces to fully mechanised and computerised plants. These transformations have been well documented in the scholarly literature, local publications and company histories, as well as in student research.<sup>2</sup>

After George Dalrymple identified several fertile coastal valleys as suitable for settlement and cultivation during a government-funded expedition to investigate the country between

<sup>1</sup> The far north region is defined by Thom Blake's context study, and comprises the Cairns Regional Council, the Cassowary Coast Regional Council, the Tablelands Regional Council and a small portion of Cook Shire. See T Blake, *Queensland cultural heritage places context study*, Report to the Environmental Protection Agency, November 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Griggs from James Cook University has published widely on the history, development and science of the sugar industry, particularly in north Queensland. Significant mill histories include Alan Hudson, *Sweet success. A story of South Johnstone Mill*, Brisbane, Christopher Beck Books, 1995; Alan Hudson, *By the Banyan. Tully sugar, the first 75 years*, Brisbane, Christopher Beck Books, 2000; John Kerr, *Northern outpost*, 2nd edition, Mossman, Mossman Central Mill Company Limited, 1995; and Clive Morton, *By strong arms*, Gordonvale, Mulgrave Central Mill Company, 1995.

Cardwell and the Endeavour River, the region was quickly selected by investors and plantation owners. Between 1878 and 1891, nine sugar plantations became operational in far north Queensland.<sup>3</sup> The plantation system was propped up by syndicates from the southern states and ran on the back of indentured Melanesian, Chinese, Javanese and Malay labour. Aboriginal labourers were also used on the Vilele plantation near Bloomfield River and on Hambledon, Goondi and Mourilyan plantations.<sup>4</sup> Some plantation owners erected slab huts, but most workers were forced to build their own accommodation. Sugar plantations involved growing sugar cane and converting it into raw sugar in mills located on the property. Narrow-gauge railways were established on some of the early plantations, enabling steam locomotives to haul wagons of harvested cane to the mills and bagged sugar to local ports.

Significant changes in Queensland's sugar industry occurred during the late 1880s and 1890s. The *Land Act* of 1884 increased the availability of small-scale farms, and allowed the government to implement its closer settlement agenda and challenge the stranglehold of plantation owners on viable agricultural land. A world-wide downturn in the sugar industry, high milling costs and small farmers struggling with limited access to plantation mills also provided the government with an economic rationale for advocating for the development of a central milling system and pursuing its ideal of a state of yeoman farmers.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, problems with indentured labour prompted the government to explore ways of restricting Melanesian workers and replacing them with 'white' workers. This proposition was not supported by farmers in the far north who were dependent on Melanesian labourers, and the push for central milling stalled until the significant 1893 *Sugar Works Guarantee Act* was passed.

The *Sugar Works Guarantee Act* allowed the government to lend money to groups of landowners on mortgaged, cleared, arable land for building central sugar mills without placing restrictions on their labour force. Landholders in Mossman and Mulgrave successfully obtained a share of these funds. Although CSR and the Union Bank decided to continue growing cane themselves on Goondi, Hambledon and Mourilyan plantations, they also subdivided part of their estates into small farms for sale or lease to interested settlers who would grow sugar cane for their mills.<sup>6</sup> Later, in 1911, a royal commission considered

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Bolton, *A thousand miles away*, Brisbane, Jacaranda Press in association with the Australian National University, 1963, p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> Kerr, *Northern outpost*, pp. 24–6; Dorothy Jones, *Trinity Phoenix. A history of Cairns*, Cairns, Cairns and District Centenary Committee, 1976, pp. 162–3 and pp. 167–71; Dorothy Jones, *Hurricane lamps and blue umbrellas. The story of Innisfail and the Shire of Johnstone North Queensland*, Cairns, Bolton Printers, 1973, pp. 152–70.

<sup>5</sup> David Cameron, 'Closer settlement in Queensland: the rise and decline of the agrarian dream – 1860s to the 1960s', in *Struggle country: the rural ideal in twentieth century Australia*, Melbourne, Monash University ePress, 2005, pp. 06.1–06.21, DOI: 10.2104/sc050006.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Griggs, *A concise history of the far north Queensland sugar industry, 1860–2000*, A report prepared for the Cultural Heritage Branch, Cairns, Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, August 2007.

20 places throughout Queensland as possible sites for more new mills, which resulted in mills being built at Babinda (1915) and South Johnstone (1916). Tully was the last of the central mills to be constructed, in 1925. Small towns developed around each of these central mill locations, and some of them, like Gordonvale (Mulgrave), Mossman and South Johnstone, are still largely extant.<sup>7</sup>

Restrictive (and divisive) immigration policies at the turn of the twentieth century had a major impact on the make-up of sugar communities in far north Queensland. The *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* prevented various classes of people from immigrating and excluded people on the basis of literacy by means of a dictation test. The *Pacific Islanders Labourers Act 1901* prohibited the recruitment of Melanesians to Australia after 1904 and established a time limit for their repatriation.<sup>8</sup> Both Acts caused concern for sugar farmers in the far north, because 'Kanaka' labourers had a higher productivity rate than 'white' workers.<sup>9</sup> At the turn of the century, these 'white' workers were mostly Italians. Other Southern Europeans gradually followed – particularly Sicilians, Yugoslavs and Maltese – and they became the major transient workers in the industry. They worked in gangs and lived in the cane barracks that farmers were required to provide, first under the 1905 *Sugar and Shearers Accommodation Acts*, and then more specifically under the 1915 and 1952 *Workers Accommodation Acts*. After World War II, during which many former migrants were interned, the cutting era peaked in 1955, with the industry employing 8754 cutters.<sup>10</sup> Numbers declined after 1958, and by 1973, with the introduction of cane harvesters, the industry was fully mechanised.

Racial tensions did not diminish with the removal of Melanesian and Asian labourers. Although sugar was a white-only industry by the 1920s, migrants, particularly Italians, experienced opposition to their presence in the sugar districts. During the late 1920s and 1930s, when the industry and mills were expanding, tensions rose between gangs of specific nationalities. Conflicts arose at sign-on, there was division over union membership, and transient workers were frequently associated with gaming houses and brothels. Innisfail, for example, once a key town in the far north's sugar industry, was condemned in 1933 by *Smith's Weekly* as the 'Nightmare City of North Australia' with its 'dreadful dagoes ... filthy foreign scum ... [and] morass of Southern European filth'.<sup>11</sup> Many migrants overcame this disturbing hostility and eventually made the far north their home. Towns like Silkwood,

<sup>7</sup> Harry Easterby, *The Queensland sugar industry. An historical review*, Brisbane, Queensland Government Printer, 1932, pp. 46–50; Alan Hudson, *Sweet success*, pp. 47–51.

<sup>8</sup> B Cope, S Castles and M Kalantzis, *Immigration, ethnic conflicts and social cohesion*, Centre for Multicultural Studies, University of Wollongong, AGPS, 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Clive Morton, *By strong arms*.

<sup>10</sup> James Jupp, *The Australian people: an encyclopaedia of the nation, its people, and their origins*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 492.

<sup>11</sup> *Smith's Weekly*, 'Innisfail – Nightmare City of North Australia', 1933, p. 1.



Innisfail and Tully are now infused with the culture and customs of these early migrants and use this to promote the region's diversity and character.

Cane harvesters, road transport and bulk sugar terminals changed the face of the sugar industry during the era after World War II. During the 1940s and early 1950s, CSR examined the methods used in the bulk loading and shipment of raw sugar around the world. From 1954 onwards, bulk handling facilities were built at six Queensland ports, including Mourilyan (1960) and Cairns (1964), and old-style storage sheds filled with piles of bagged sugar at Queensland's sugar mills were replaced by bulk storage tanks.<sup>12</sup> In 1971, Mossman Mill gained prominence as the world's first sugar mill to install a computer to control the manufacturing process, gather research data and improve the mill's operational capacity.<sup>13</sup> These modifications and enhancements changed the operational face of the industry by gradually reducing the number of workers required at mills.

Fewer workers, increased mechanisation and continuous crushing have resulted in cane barracks being abandoned or dismantled, tramlines being decommissioned, equipment being replaced and mills being updated. Innovations have continued during this era of mechanisation and rationalisation, but the industry has contracted due to the deregulation of sugar markets. This has resulted in some mills being decommissioned, farmers opting out or going out of business, and different industries, such as banana growing and tourism, emerging in their place. For the industry, of course, there are some significant gains from these changes. However, innovations have also meant that the tangible and intangible cultural heritage associated with the far north Queensland sugar industry has not been well conserved.

This brief overview of the far north's sugar history demonstrates its value as a significant regional story. It also highlights key historical themes that can be used to record, conserve and remember this heritage. From a chronological perspective, the story of sugar in the far north can be divided into three key phases: the plantation phase, the central milling phase, and the mechanisation phase.<sup>14</sup> Sugar production activities occur within each of these industry phases, and a set of sub-themes, outlined in Table 1, is a useful guide for identification and significance assessment:

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Griggs, 'Moving sugar to market: part 2', *Australian Sugarcane*, December 2001–January 2002, pp. 16–17.

<sup>13</sup> Kerr, *Northern outpost*.

<sup>14</sup> Griggs, *A concise history of the far north Queensland sugar industry*.

**Table 1: Sugar sub-themes to help guide heritage workers for collection and identification purposes**

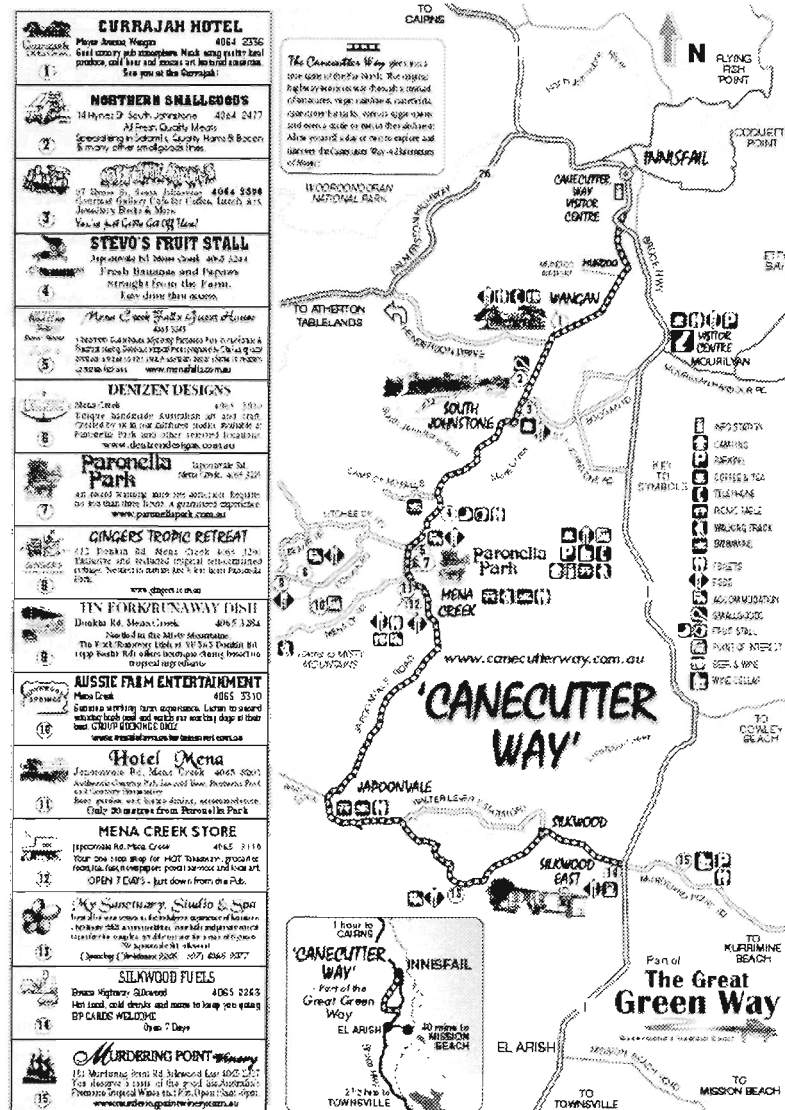
Theme	Built heritage	Moveable heritage
<b>Growing cane</b> Farm production, including growing, living and trialling new plant breeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cane farms</li> <li>• Machinery and equipment sheds</li> <li>• Research stations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agricultural machinery and implements</li> <li>• Associated domestic artefacts</li> <li>• Oral histories</li> <li>• Photographs</li> </ul>
<b>Cutting cane</b> Work associated with harvesting cane, manual and mechanised processes, workers accommodation, and so on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cane barracks</li> <li>• Machinery sheds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cutting equipment</li> <li>• Associated domestic artefacts</li> <li>• Archives, particularly union</li> <li>• Oral histories</li> <li>• Photographs</li> </ul>
<b>Transporting cane</b> Different methods of getting cane from farm, to mill, to distribution agent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tramways</li> <li>• Sugar wharfs</li> <li>• Bulk sugar terminals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locomotives</li> <li>• 'Canetainers'</li> <li>• Cane bins</li> <li>• Oral histories</li> <li>• Photographs</li> </ul>
<b>Processing cane</b> Mill-based activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mill buildings</li> <li>• Milling trains</li> <li>• Power sheds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vacuum pans, clarifiers, hoppers, boilers</li> <li>• Oral histories</li> <li>• Photographs</li> <li>• Layout plans</li> </ul>
<b>Administering cane</b> Managing cane work, workers and equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offices</li> <li>• Sign-on venues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Archives</li> <li>• Computers</li> <li>• Oral histories</li> </ul>
<b>Community cane</b> Associated community places that have emerged because of the influence of cane in a district	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Churches</li> <li>• Brothels</li> <li>• Hotels</li> <li>• Shire halls</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral histories</li> <li>• Photographs</li> </ul>

### Remembering the Cane through Tourism, Museums and Literature

How is the story of sugar, and its associated themes, remembered through the far north's cultural heritage, and museum and tourism assets and facilities? Visitors wishing to immerse themselves in far north sugar heritage can follow the *Canecutter Way*, a trail that traverses the original highway between Silkwood and Innisfail.<sup>15</sup> This rural drive begins in the once bustling town of Silkwood with its former picture theatre, diminutive National Bank building (now used as a museum) and tramway. It then cuts through the undulating cane fields and remnant tropical rainforest, passes rural Japoonvale and continues to Paronella Park at Mena Creek. It goes on through to South Johnstone, passes the mill and main street tram tracks, until it reaches a visitor centre just outside Innisfail. Although scenic, this tourism drive falls short of providing any real historical information or context. Travellers aren't told, for example, that as they drive through South Johnstone they are driving on Hynes Road, named after John Hynes who was shot while on the picket line in 1927 during the biggest strike to occur at the South Johnstone Mill. Nor does the brochure make mention of the Innisfail Cemetery, where Hynes' grave, along with other graves, tells the story of the

<sup>15</sup> The Canecutter Way, website, accessed 27 May 2009, <http://www.canecutterway.com.au/>.

region's significant sugar-related migrant history. It also fails to highlight and explain the various renovated cane barracks that are a feature of the drive. In many ways, therefore, the *Canecutter Way* represents a missed opportunity as a vehicle to effectively remember the sugar history of this district.



### Canecutter Way tourist map

Source: Brochure available from <http://www.canecutterway.com.au/>.

Another 'drive' tourism trail was produced as part of the Queensland Heritage Trails Network. The accompanying publication was an informative guide that provided maps and highlighted significant sites.<sup>16</sup> Organised on the basis of geographical location, the *Wet Tropics Heritage Trail* and the *Tropical Coast Heritage Trail* promote places related to the sugar history of the region. Now out of print, this tourism guide is available only online, but as neither of the trails is available in full from the website, this heritage-based tourism product is now inaccessible.

A number of other attractions offer interpretative experiences for those interested in sugar. Tully and Mossman mills offer guided mill tours and show visitors how sugar cane is grown,

<sup>16</sup> Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, *Heritage trails of the tropical north. A heritage tour guide to far north Queensland*, Brisbane, Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, 2001.

harvested and processed into raw sugar, molasses and other by-products. Mossman Mill also houses a small museum in a former mess hall that takes visitors on a visual journey through the history of the mill. Two coal-fired steam locomotives at Port Douglas, which were the last ones the Mossman Sugar Mill used before changing to diesel locomotives, haul the Bally Hooley tourist train on a short trip between the marina and the cane fields.<sup>17</sup>

The Australian Sugar Industry Museum in Mouriliyan opened in 1977 and made headlines with its innovative travelling exhibition, *Refined White*, which explored Pacific and South Sea Islander labourers in the sugar industry. The museum's outputs and prominence have diminished, however, and the museum now falls short of conveying the 'drama, heritage and innovations of the sugar industry' that were once central to its operational mission.<sup>18</sup> The museum's inability to remain viable and creatively explore the far north's substantial sugar legacy in a material culture context is a major failing (and issue) for the region.<sup>19</sup> Apart from local historical society museums with their small displays and their interesting, but often inaccessible, collections, there are no museums that focus strongly on sugar or, indeed, on any of the other significant industries that have shaped the region's development. The lack of a suitable regional museum means that much potential moveable cultural heritage relating to the sugar industry is therefore endangered. This loss could impact significantly on researchers' and tourism operators' ability to both remember and tell stories about growing, cutting, transporting, processing, administering and living with sugar.

The sugar story also features in the region's literary identity and heritage. Novels and theatrical plays have romanticised and mythologised the canecutting era during the heyday of manual cane harvesting and production.<sup>20</sup> Most notable, perhaps, is Jean Devanny's *Sugar Heaven*. Published in 1936, *Sugar Heaven* is set in far north Queensland against a backdrop of industrial activism and struggle. It is recognised principally as a novel about 'work', but it is also striking for its evocative descriptions of north Queensland's cultural sugar landscape. The cane fields, tropical jungle and townships around Tully, El Arish, Silkwood, Mourilyan and Innisfail all feature strongly in Devanny's prose. Although controversial, *Sugar Heaven* nonetheless exudes a strong sense of place and of identity shaped by place. It depicts a landscape rich with people, buildings and traditions and offers an insight (albeit through a narrative lens) into the life and locations in far northern sugar towns during the 1930s. Many of the places that formed the stage for the novel's events still exist; they

<sup>17</sup> See 'Welcome to the Bally Hooley website, accessed, 27 May 2009, <http://www.ballyhooley.com.au>

<sup>18</sup> Jah Lahney, 'The Australian sugar industry museum', *etropic: electronic journal of multidisciplinary studies in the tropics*, vol. 3, no.1 (2004), <http://www.jcu.edu.au/etropic>

<sup>19</sup> The lack of a regional museum affects more than just the sugar industry. Timber, pearling, mining and agriculture have all been central to the region's development and have the potential to provide a sound thematic framework for building a vibrant and dynamic social history museum based in Cairns.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Devanny, *Cindie: a chronicle of the cane fields*, London, Virago Modern Classics, 1986 (1949); Jean Devanny, *Sugar heaven*, Vulgar Press, 2002 (1936); Ray Lawler, *Summer of the seventeenth doll*, Sydney, Currency Press, 1957.

include the Mossman, Tully and South Johnstone mills, the Plaza Theatre in Tully, the Regent Theatre in Innisfail, the Jubilee Bridge and School of Arts in Innisfail, and the cane barracks and tramways around El Arish and Silkwood.

Such realistic settings are useful for contemporary heritage professionals working to conserve the region's sugar legacy and heritage. Devanny's literary prompts provide a link between place and identity, and a view of her sugar community. This type of link is crucial to the central discourse of sense-of-place academics who recognise the important role that place plays in shaping and establishing individual and community identity.<sup>21</sup> Sense-of-place issues resonate with heritage work. For heritage professionals to understand the importance of places to communities, they must appreciate their social value. Measuring and assessing social value is often subjective and contentious. Methodologies for identifying social significance are underdeveloped and challenge professionals to distinguish between local and state heritage significance. It is, however, a crucial aspect of integrating an historical dimension to regional identity.

These different tourism and interpretative mediums provide visitors and locals with a brief view of sugar's influence in the region's history and development. However, they could be strengthened and integrated into sugar-based tourism initiatives that draw on the sugar-related heritage places throughout the far north.

### **Remembering the Cane Through Heritage-Listed Places**

Sugar-related heritage is listed on the QHR and on the Cairns Regional Council's local register.<sup>22</sup> The QHR currently has five main properties associated with the far north's sugar history. These are affected by management and sustainability issues. McCowat's Farm, in Garradunga near Innisfail, was registered as a farm complex comprising a residence, a cottage, an implement shed and barracks, all of which demonstrate the principal characteristics of sugar cane farms. The complex was severely damaged during Cyclone Larry in 2006 and the barracks were destroyed. The Cane Cutters Memorial, erected in 1959 on the banks of the Johnstone River in Innisfail, is strongly associated with the story of migrant canecutters, particularly the Italians. Made from white marble and inscribed in both English and Italian, it is a recognition of the Italians' significant contribution to the development of the region. The Babinda State Hotel, constructed in 1917, was built by the Queensland government after the 1911 *Sugar Works Act* prohibiting the sale of liquor in

<sup>21</sup> G Seddon, *Sense of place*, Nedlands, University of Western Australia Press, 1972; RC Stedman, 'Sense of place as an indicator of community sustainability', *The Forestry Chronicle*, 75:5 (1999), pp. 765–70; BW Eisenhaur, RS Krannich and DJ Blahna, 'Attachment to special places on public lands: an analysis of activities, reasons for attachments, and community connections', *Society and Natural Resources*, 13, 2000, pp. 421–43.

<sup>22</sup> The far north state-wide survey team is currently working with the Cairns Regional Council to oversee a heritage study of the Cairns region.



sugar-growing areas led to Babinda's two hotels being closed, with a resulting lack of accommodation. The Cairns Wharf Complex and the Port Douglas Wharf and Storage Shed are also registered places. Both were used to transport a range of commodities, but were particularly central to the sugar industry. The White Shed, at Cairns Wharf, was built specifically to store bagged sugar in 1923. Both sheds are currently unused, require repairs and are vulnerable to the region's climate.



McCowat's Farm, partly destroyed by Cyclone Larry in 2006

*Source:* Heritage Branch, Department of Environment and Resource Management Queensland.

In addition to these properties, there are a number of other QHR heritage places associated with the region's sugar history. Paronella Park, which recently topped the list of Queensland's 150 'must do' tourism activities, is a romantic tropical destination. Its link to sugar history is through its designer, José Paronella, a Spanish migrant who came to Queensland initially to cut cane. More than anything, however, this popular tourist destination reveals a personal story rather than a collective representation of the sugar industry and its influence. Another registered site linked to sugar is the Johnstone Shire Hall. Recently refurbished after being seriously damaged by Cyclone Larry, this substantial interwar building was built during the 1930s during a period of sugar-related expansion. Innisfail presents a significant streetscape of art-deco-style buildings that were constructed during this period – a physical indication of the region's strong sugar-driven economy.

An analysis of these places in relation to the themes identified in Table 1 shows that all but one theme is represented. However, if considered in relation to the major sugar districts of

the far north, it is evident that most places are concentrated around Innisfail and are thus not representative of the region’s extensive sugar districts (see Table 2):

**Table 2: QHR sugar-related places in the far north: theme and location**

QHR heritage place	Primary theme	Secondary theme	Location
McCowat’s Farm	Growing cane	Cutting cane	Garradunga, near Innisfail
Cane Cutter Memorial	Cutting cane	Community cane	Innisfail
Babinda Hotel	Administering cane	Community cane	Babinda
Cairns Wharf	Transporting cane	Administering cane	Cairns
Port Douglas Wharf	Transporting cane	Administering cane	Port Douglas
Paronella Park	Cutting cane	n/a	Mena Creek, near Innisfail
Johnstone Shire Hall	Community cane	Administering cane	Innisfail

To redress this imbalance, the Queensland government’s state-wide heritage survey has been working to identify gaps in relation to key historic themes in particular regions. This project, launched in northern Queensland in February 2007, had a multifaceted agenda: to include an update of heritage databases, identification of new places, protection of significant places and engagement with constituent communities. These objectives were underpinned by two project methodologies: a management model prepared by Godden McKay Logan and a thematic framework developed by Queensland historian Thom Blake.<sup>23</sup> Blake’s study divided Queensland into 17 geographic regions and identified key historic themes in each. In the far north, sugar was one of nine themes identified as significant.<sup>24</sup>

The far north state-wide survey team (FNSWS team) have used community engagement as a key tool in the project methodology. This has involved defining and liaising with relevant community stakeholders and regional heritage specialists. Initially, a brief thematic history was required for each theme. In order to maximise engagement with local experts, regionally based professional historians were contracted to write thematic overviews of 3000–4000 words.<sup>25</sup> Authors were required to hypothesise how the different developments within each theme might manifest as buildings or potential places of interest to heritage workers. The overview of the far north’s sugar history was written by Dr Peter Griggs, a historical geographer from James Cook University specialising in sugar.<sup>26</sup> The FNSWS team has benefited substantially from his expertise and input.

<sup>23</sup> Godden MacKay Logan, *Rediscovering Queensland: the places methodology study*, Report prepared for the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, December 2005. T Blake, *Queensland cultural heritage places context study*.

<sup>24</sup> Other themes included agriculture, communication, dairying, migration, mining, timber and forestry, tourism and World War II.

<sup>25</sup> J Wills, ed., *Far north Queensland thematic histories*, Brisbane, Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Griggs, *A concise history of the far north Queensland sugar industry*.

The FNSWS team has also met with local historical societies, museums and special interest groups and held community meetings in key locations to increase engagement in heritage issues. Although the main purpose of these meetings is to identify heritage places, the meetings have also provided an opportunity for addressing community concerns and confusion regarding heritage listing and protection. Many participants have been reluctant to ‘dob in’ neighbours or friends who might own a heritage building. This was particularly noticeable in the case of cane farms and cane barracks; meetings often assumed an uncomfortable silence when queries were made about these types of buildings.

Despite these minor setbacks, a total of 81 sugar-related places were identified during the research phase of the project (from the contextual histories, academic research and community meetings). Heritage places related to the sugar history are located along the thin coastal strip between the sea and the tableland from Euramo, just south of Tully, to Whyanbeel, just north of Mossman. These place lists are still not exhaustive, but they do provide an important overview of the industry’s impact in the built environment. Table 3 illustrates the different types of sugar-related places identified during the survey process.

**Table 3: Overview of sugar-related places identified during the state-wide heritage survey**

Theme	Type of place	Principal locations
Farming cane	5 cane farms	Cairns, Japoonvale, Mossman
	2 plantation mills	Bloomfield, Gordonvale
	1 research station	Gordonvale
Cutting cane	54 cane barracks	Spread along the coastal plains between Euramo, south of Tully, to Whyanbeel, north of Mossman
Transporting cane	2 tramline systems	Mossman district, Innisfail district
	1 riverside wharf	Maria Creek
Processing cane	1 plantation mill	Bloomfield
	3 central mills	Mossman, Mourilyan, Gordonvale
	1 memorial mill gate	Gordonvale
Administering cane	2 mill offices	Tully, Mossman
	1 shire hall	Mossman
Community cane	1 RSL hall	El Arish
	1 school of arts	Mourilyan
	2 churches	Innisfail, Silkwood
	1 cemetery	Innisfail
	1 brothel	Innisfail
	2 hotels	El Arish, Mossman

Not all of these places have the potential for state heritage listing. The FNSWS team, therefore, had to rationalise the list of places in relation to the main objectives of the state-wide heritage survey – to identify potential places of state heritage significance. This sorting

process used the key historic themes identified in the thematic histories to help determine whether a place should be shortlisted for further research and potential nomination. Some places, like the brothel in Innisfail which was identified by the community, were deemed significant as places that highlighted the social manifestations of a transient workforce but have been almost impossible to substantiate with supporting documentation. Another place, the Mourilyan Mill, once so significant to the region’s sugar production, was damaged during Cyclone Larry. It never reopened and is now being decommissioned and sold. Some places not considered for state listing were still considered important and will be included in reports to local governments at the end of each regional project, as per the overall state-wide survey project methodology. Table 4 outlines which sugar-related places were identified for further research.

Table 4: Shortlist of sugar-related places identified during the state-wide heritage survey

Theme	Type of place	Principal locations
Growing cane	Meringa Research Station	Gordonvale
Cutting cane	Brie Brie Barracks	Mossman
	Smart Barracks	Cairns
	Strazguzzi Barracks	Edmonton
	Marino Barracks	Caravonica
	Bennett Barracks	Aloomba
	Bombadieri Barracks	Babinda
	Vella Barracks	Babinda
	Rungert Barracks	Japoonvale
	Rossi Barracks	Gordonvale
	Maifredi Barracks	Euramo
	Frazer Barracks	Tully
	Marano Barracks	Mourilyan
	Casey Barracks	Kurrimine Beach
Transporting cane	Innisfail tramways	Innisfail district
	Mossman tramways	Mossman district
	Maria Creek Wharf	Maria Creek
Processing cane	Vilele Plantation Mill	Bloomfield
	Mossman Central Mill	Mossman, Mourilyan
	Memorial Gate Mulgrave Mill	Gordonvale
Administering cane	Mossman Central Mill Office	Mossman
Community cane	Mary Mother of Good Council	Innisfail
	St John’s	Silkwood
	Innisfail Cemetery	Innisfail
	Pigeon Hole Flats (brothel)	Innisfail

Remembering the Cane Barracks: A Case Study

Cane barracks constructed after 1915 feature strongly in the list of identified sugar places. This is no accident: the FNSWS team had two very extensive reports to draw on, as well as

a recently published local history.<sup>27</sup> Given the number of barracks within these reports, however, a contextual framework was required for identifying which barracks were most significant.

Cane barracks are Queensland sugar-industry-specific buildings located on cane farms throughout far north Queensland. They were built as a result of government legislation in response to the demands of European migrants for better working conditions. The legislation stipulated the need for farm labourers' to be provided with accommodation, and rather than giving a blueprint for barrack design or form, the *Workers Accommodation Acts* 1915/16 and 1952 outlined general standards to be upheld in the accommodation, and stipulated that these would be examined by regional inspectors annually.<sup>28</sup> The legislation included details about the number of beds in rooms, the bedroom size, ventilation, lighting, the provision of vessels for cooking, eating and drinking, sanitary conditions and storage. Although barracks vary in style and materials, each can tell the story of how the sugar industry between 1905 and the 1960s relied upon seasonal migrant labourers to manually harvest cane. They are, therefore, powerful symbols of a way of life that has made a significant contribution to the evolution of far north Queensland's community and environment.



L-shaped barracks in Japoonvale, which have been burnt and damaged by vandals  
 Source: Heritage Branch, Department of Environment and Resource Management Queensland.

<sup>27</sup> Bianka Vidonya Balanzategui, 'The tropical Queensland sugar cane industry: a structural and material survey 1872–1955', Townsville, Material Culture Unit, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1994; Dennis Formiatti, *Sugar cane barracks of far north Queensland*, St Lucia, University of Queensland, 1984; Eugenie Navarre, *The cane barracks story: the cane pioneers and their epic jungle sagas*, Cairns, E. Navarre, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Attempts to find regional inspectors' reports in order to clarify and confirm the way barrack construction was monitored, however, have to date been unsuccessful.





Aged and dilapidated cottage-style barracks in Mowbray Valley near Mossman  
Source: Heritage Branch, Department of Environment and Resource Management Queensland.

The FNSWS team undertook an inventory of all the barracks within the available research reports, and used all three sources to prepare an itinerary for fieldwork.<sup>29</sup> The study region consisted of the coastal lowlands of the Cassowary Coast Regional Council and the Cairns Regional Council. Throughout the survey, the FNSWS team identified a number of additional barracks. They also found that many of the barracks in the reports were no longer extant, the main causes for their demise being cyclones, removal, renovation or deterioration. The final inventory report is now the most up-to-date overview of extant cane barrack buildings in the far north region.<sup>30</sup>

Four major barrack types were identified during fieldwork: linear, L-shaped, double and cottage. There were a number of consistent features in the barracks: a cooking recess, a water supply, a wash-house, toilets and waste disposal. Many of these were stipulated in the legislation. There also appear to be four major types of material used to construct barracks – ripple iron, timber, brick and concrete block – although a fifth – asbestos cement – was also identified during the survey. Materials used were governed by the *Workers Accommodation Act 1915–21*, which stipulated:

<sup>29</sup> The FNSWS team are grateful to Eugenie Navarre for sharing contact details and information she gathered during her research for *The cane barracks story*.

<sup>30</sup> Joanna Wills, *Far north state-wide survey cane barracks inventory report*, Brisbane, Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, 2008.

Every building ... shall be constructed of wood, iron, brick, pise, cement or other such material as the Minister may approve, and shall be properly provided with light and ventilation to the satisfaction of the inspector ...

Floors of sleeping and dining rooms [were] to be wood, cement, brick, flagstones, tiled, asphalt or other approved by Minister.<sup>31</sup>

Setting and orientation were also assessed during the fieldwork. Barracks located close to mills, in aesthetic locations, near tramlines or close to other farm buildings were considered of interest. Some barracks are particularly picturesque, such as the linear ripple-iron barracks at Behana Gorge Road set in the shadow of Walsh's Pyramid near Gordonvale. Its rustic appearance, however, shows evidence of imminent decay and this barracks will be lost unless significant repairs are undertaken to stabilise them.



The picturesque linear Behana Gorge Road barracks are vulnerable to white ants and 'one big blow'  
Source: Heritage Branch, Department of Environment and Resource Management Queensland

The FNSWS team hypothesised that different milling districts might have interpreted barrack specifications differently. This is particularly evident in relation to the location of the bathroom/ablutions block. In the Babinda and Cairns districts, for example, bathrooms appear to have been incorporated into the main structure, such as in the Bennett, Muzic and Bombadier barracks. In South Johnstone, Mourilyan and Tully districts it seems more common for ablution blocks to be in separate buildings, such as in the Casey, Rungert, Marano, Maifredi and Frazer barracks. Another district variation was identified in the Mossman district. Although local residents noted that L-shaped and linear barracks had once

<sup>31</sup> Sections 13 and 14, *Workers Accommodation Act 1915–21*, Queensland Parliamentary Papers 1916/17, vol. 3, pp.148–9.

been prevalent in the district, the FNSWS team found no surviving examples. They did, however, identify two-roomed cottage-style barracks and noted that these were not found in any other district. Attempts to verify this stylistic difference through documentation and research have been thus far unsuccessful.

Extant examples of double barracks are rare. This is due in part to the region's climatic conditions, but it is also due to the trend, post-1930s, to build smaller barracks as large groups of canecutters were seen as being unwieldy. The survey identified only three examples of double barracks. One in Mena Creek has been renovated and substantially altered, while another on the Cook Highway near Machan's Beach in Cairns has been altered internally. The best example, at Garradunga near Innisfail, retains its internal corridor and bedrooms. However, it was badly damaged during Cyclone Larry in 2006 and lost its kitchen and part of the roof.



Double barracks at Garradunga, damaged by Cyclone Larry in 2006  
*Source:* Heritage Branch, Department of Environment and Resource Management Queensland.

Another significant issue identified was the potential for collecting oral histories in conjunction with this type of survey work. The FNSWS team met with many cane-farmers during the survey who were able to provide an interpretative framework and engaging stories about the barracks. The final inventory report highlights those barracks that had interesting owners and associated histories.

In total, 54 cane barracks were surveyed. This is a significant number considering that manual canecutting was replaced by cane harvesters during the 1960s. The geographic spread of extant barracks demonstrates the integral part that sugar played throughout the

region, particularly when one considers that many other examples have been lost. While not all barracks can be conserved using state heritage legislation, there is great potential for the development of accompanying interpretive material to ensure that this important aspect of sugar heritage remains accessible. Despite the number of remaining examples, the barracks are succumbing to age, tropical weather and farmers wanting to replace, renovate or remove them, and they are thus under threat. Although cane barracks cannot currently be considered rare, they have the potential to become rare in the near future unless care is taken to conserve particular examples. The cane barrack survey has sought to identify those with the most heritage significance in relation to the owners' history and to the typological elements outlined above.

## **Conclusion**

Conserving and remembering this significant history through material and built heritage is an ongoing challenge for far north Queensland. The state-wide heritage survey is addressing this gap in a built heritage context, but it faces significant challenges from communities who are wary of heritage listing, from industry change and from a hostile tropical climate. The conservation and presentation of memories and stories through material culture requires a major overhaul and appropriate facilities and could be the basis of further (and challenging) integrated cultural planning. This task requires addressing the perpetual heritage conundrum of sustainable and integrated heritage management, and means that heritage agencies and local councils need to work together more closely to conserve heritage at a local level as well as at a state level. It might also involve heritage agencies integrating their work into regional interpretation plans and tourism strategies. Such activities necessitate going beyond the act of merely listing and preserving to convincing community stakeholders that this rich heritage can be conserved and interpreted in a way that is viable and manageable for the owners and communities involved.