



# FENCES OF AUSTRALIA

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## PREFACE

*Previous page: Jarrah split post and wire fence near Manjimup, WA, is typical of early fencing throughout the south-west.*

*Opposite: Gates at Coonatto Station, 70 km east of Port Augusta, SA. The station once covered 2300 sq km, where 130,000 sheep were shorn.*

*Page 9: One of the more bizarre fence materials used around a WA wheatbelt homestead.*

Fences in the rural landscape are prosaic affairs. They denote ownership and they contain or exclude various kinds of stock. But they are more than that. A well-built post and rail or stone fence, for example, is a thing of beauty, a monument to pride in workmanship and a cause for wonder at the skill and hard work involved. A well-ordered farm with fences to demarcate the paddocks may signify enterprise and success, while an old decaying fence, half covered by sand, invokes an image of a failed venture, hardship and despair. Rural fences are uncompromisingly practical; they exist only to serve a purpose. A good fencer, however, takes pride in producing a 'workman-like' job because, while they may not be built for show, fences will be there for all to see for many years.

The materials, design and method of construction reveal a great deal about the surrounding landscape, the type of farming enterprise and even the economic conditions of the time. This is especially so for older fences, which were always made with the materials most readily available. Tracing the history of fencing in Australia reveals many of the fascinating changes in social and economic conditions that stimulated fencing inventions and developments.

Apart from this fascination, there were two things that piqued my interest in fences. The first occurred when I was about six years old and lived in the small mill town of Mornington in Western Australia. My school teacher, who also boarded with us, was transferred to a school at Gate 69 on the Rabbit Proof Fence at the end of her first year. No one had the faintest clue where Gate 69 might be and I have no idea how she finally got there. Years later I located the site of the Gate 69 school, now long gone. It turned out to be 69 miles

south of Cunderdin on the 1165 kilometre long No. 2 Rabbit Proof Fence. The school operated for five years from 1942 to 1947 and served just six families.

The second insight came when I was visiting the Yale University forest in Connecticut. This was forest that had regrown on cleared farmland after it had been abandoned for the more productive agricultural land in the Midwest of the United States in the mid-1800s. Stone fences from the original farms remained throughout the forest. My guide pointed out that it was possible to determine whether the adjacent paddocks were used for grazing or hay-making by the size of the stones used for packing between the two 'skins' of the fence, hay paddocks being picked clean of even the smallest stones.

Seeking out fences to photograph has given me an excuse to travel to all parts of Australia. These symbolic structures give cause to think about the lives of the people who built them and wonder at their skills and enterprise.





*This reconstructed fence at the old bakery, Greenhills, WA, is a variation of the Harper fence, constructed of separate panels rather than overlapping rails.*

## POST AND RAIL

In the closely settled areas of Australia, which were mostly well forested in the early days, the post and rail fence became the standard for fencing, for small holdings at least, from 1798. It quickly became a symbolic image of rural Australia, eventually enclosing thousands of hectares of land.

The simplest post and rail fence consisted of pairs of closely spaced posts (about the same diameter as the rails), each pair spaced according to the length of the rails. The rails were dropped between the posts, alternating between panels. The posts were then tied at the top with green hide or wire to stop them spreading. The advantage of this form of fence was that it could be built with unskilled labour using rails from small diameter trees or from saplings.

These fences were variously known as a 'double post and rail', a 'drop fence', a 'sapling fence' or, in Western Australia, a 'Harper fence'. The Harper fence, named after an early Beverley settler, was usually made with jam and was a popular form of fencing in the 1880s and 1890s in the farming areas of the Great Southern region. It was a much more efficient use of timber than the palisade fence that had commonly been built before. For many farmers a jam Harper fence was 'good for a generation or two' and was much preferred to the more expensive wire fence with an 'average twenty years' life'. A variation on the Harper fence used a double set of posts to contain the rails, the fence being made up of a series of independent panels.

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With a readily available resource of suitable trees, the more sophisticated split rail post and rail fence was economical to build but it required considerable skill. The first skill to learn, and possibly the most difficult, was selecting a good 'splitter'. A suitable tree had to be straight-grained and a reasonably durable species. Not all trees of a particular species are good 'splitters' and it required a good eye and experience to pick one. It made the difference between a comparatively easy job and an impossible one. In Western Australia, jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) was the only species suitable, although a few fences were made with blackbutt (*Eucalyptus patens*). A variety of species of stringy bark and iron bark were used in eastern Australia.



Above: A jarrah split post and rail fence built in the 1970s in Manjimup, WA.

Above, right: A modern post and rail fence where both the posts and the rails are cut with a chainsaw, rather than being split. The mortise and tenons are also cut with a chainsaw. PHOTO COURTESY OF SUE BRADSHAW

Right: The durability of jam is demonstrated in this Harper fence, now more than 100 years old, at Mourambine, WA.



*A three-rail jarrah split rail fence near Pemberton, WA (left), and a hybrid split rail/paling fence at Perup, WA (right).*

Rails, generally between 2.1 and 2.4 metres long and 20–24 centimetres deep, are split using wedges, maul and axe. Where the trees are relatively small, the rails are split tangentially or ‘on the back’, producing a round-backed rail. Where larger trees are available, they are split radially or ‘on the quarter’ and require a log of at least 60 centimetres diameter. The ends of the

rails are tapered with an axe (or more easily with an adze) to make a tenon about 15 centimetres deep. Mortises (about 5 x 18 centimetres) are cut into the posts using either a mortising axe or an auger and chisel. Using a mortising axe – essentially a felling axe cut down to a 50 millimetre face – requires great skill and would only be attempted by the best axemen.



*The most challenging task in building a split rail fence is finding a tree that is a good ‘splitter’, even among the normally straight-grained jarrah.*

The tenons for the rails are overlapped in the mortise and protrude to the other side. Tenons can be fitted tightly into the mortise (most common in Western Australia) or more loosely so that panels can be taken out without the need to remove a post. Two-rail fences were the most common but three rails (and even four or five rails) were also used where necessary, especially for stockyards.

Before the days of creosote, the buried ends of the split posts were often charred in a fire to make them more resistant to termites and rot. Fences, particularly the posts, made of less durable species might last only ten to twenty years but those made of durable species might last one hundred years with very little maintenance. Post and rail fences were not only built from local materials. In 1854 alone Tasmania exported sufficient sawn and split posts, rails and split palings to the mainland for more than 1000 kilometres of fencing.



*Sawn post and rail fences are the favoured fence type for horse studs and training centres at Harvey, WA (left), Benger, WA (top), and Angaston, SA (bottom).*

Fencing remained relatively rare on larger farms where stock were controlled mainly by shepherding until the 1850s, when wire started to become available. The building of post and rail fencing began to decline from that time, despite the cost being comparable for a number of years. On smaller farms, where timber and labour were more readily available than cash for wire, post and rail fences continued to be popular into the 1890s and even into the 1920s in some places. An unusual example of extensive split rail fencing is the impressive 3.5 kilometres of four-railed jarrah fence built around a 120 hectare horse paddock at Deeside in Western Australia in the early 1900s.

Recent years have seen a resurgence in popularity of post and rail fences, partly for aesthetics and partly for practical reasons. While a few are still made in the traditional manner, the modern post and rail is more commonly made with a chainsaw. In these fences the rails are cut tangentially from

smaller diameter logs and the tenons and mortises are all cut with a chainsaw. The rails are usually set with the round side out. While not the same as a traditional fence to the purist, they are nevertheless an attractive and highly practical, solid, low maintenance fence and they too require considerable skill to make well.

The other form of post and rail fence using sawn rails was not common in earlier times but these days is the fence of choice for many horse establishments, especially those with valuable bloodstock.

Commonly made with round treated pine posts and sawn hardwood rails bolted to the posts, they are usually painted either white or black. Their important advantage over wire fences is that they are highly visible, to prevent horses accidentally

running through them, and there are no wires for the horses to catch their hooves and injure their legs.

A variation on the post and rail fence is the look-alike polymer 'strap' fence. Popular for horse paddocks, the 'rails' are made of a 10–12 centimetre strap of polymer welded to two or three plain wires which can be strained over long distances in the same way as a conventional wire fence. The straps are attached to the fence posts through brackets that allow the fence to stretch over its full length if hit by a horse, so

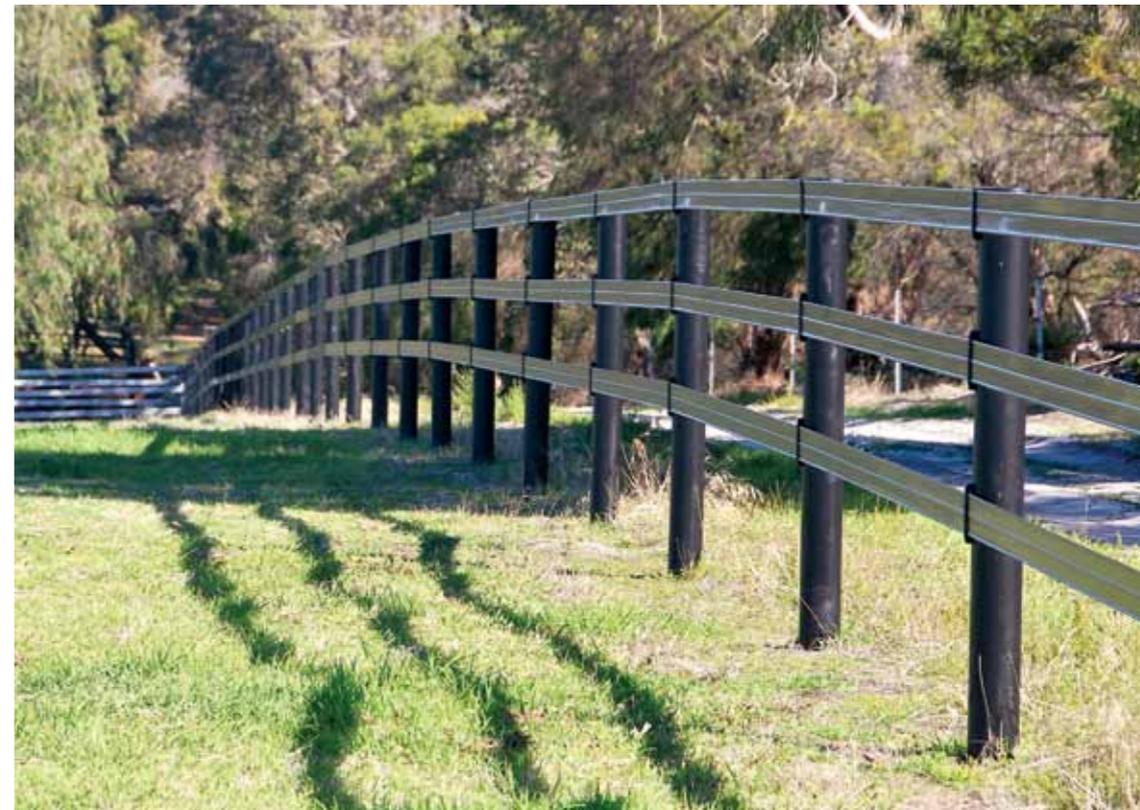
avoiding injury to the horse.

As a further refinement the polymer can be impregnated with conductive material and connected to an energiser to become an electric rail fence.

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*Flexible polymer strap fences have become popular for horse paddocks. They provide good visibility, minimise injury and are easily constructed.*