



ENDURING LEGACIES

Laura Colman, Natural Heritage National Trust (WA)

Mallee fowl. CALM.

On 19 October 1970, Frederick Albert Fidge, a farmer from Narembeen, wrote to the *West Australian*, pleading for “a break in what is becoming a tedious, continuous trek through treeless areas in the Wheatbelt.” Less than 5 months later Mr Fidge became the first person to enter into a conservation covenant with the National Trust to protect the bushland on his 398-hectare property in Narembeen. This was a controversial move at a time when widespread clearing for agriculture was still actively encouraged by the government. According to his nephew’s wife Helen, “there were a few raised eyebrows, but now we can see just how right he was.”

Salinity is now a significant problem in the Narembeen area, due to the extensive clearing that began in the early 1960s and continued into the 1980s, leaving just 7.1% of the native vegetation in the shire uncleared. Native plants are adapted to be efficient at collecting and using rainwater and, consequently, very little water drains away into groundwater. The removal of native plants means that the majority of rainwater runs off and is absorbed into groundwater, resulting in rising water tables, which bring the natural salt deposits to the surface.

Salinity makes land infertile for conventional farming and the salt drains into streams, rivers and lakes affecting ecosystems. In towns’ salt can damage buildings, roads, railways and other infrastructure.

Despite decades of land clearing in the Wheatbelt, however, this area still exhibits astounding biodiversity. The results of a 5-year survey conducted by the Department of Conservation and Land Management were announced on 13 April 2005 and they suggest that, despite the extensive damage to natural habitats, Western Australia’s Wheatbelt is still a thriving biodiversity hotspot. However, the survey also warns

that more than 800 species of animals and plants in the Wheatbelt are at risk of extinction because of rising salinity.

Frederick Fidge may not have foreseen the full extent of the damage caused by land clearing but, according to his nephew Ross, he was concerned about salinity. He also recognised the practical benefits of conserving native vegetation. In his letter to the *West Australian* he said, “The advantages to a property of this uncleared land include shelter from cold winds, soil erosion reduction and provision of bulwarks to stop run-off water creating gullies, etc.”

Helen Fidge, who still lives in the Narembeen area with her husband Ross, says that Frederick “was very much a tree person and it distressed him to see widespread land clearing for agriculture.” It is clear from his letter to the *West Australian* that Frederick was passionate about conserving the vegetation on his land for the long term, “ensuring preservation of something that money cannot restore.”

The National Trust’s conservation covenanting program was officially launched in April 1999; however, the Trust has been protecting heritage values, both manmade and natural, with covenants for many

years. Frederick Fidge’s vision for “private conservation areas” laid the foundation for the existing program.

The format and wording of National Trust covenants has not changed a great deal since 1971 and, as the Fidge case shows, the model works. However, the National Trust now recognises that native vegetation requires active management, as well as legal protection, if it is to be conserved for future generations.

The covenanting program now incorporates a stewardship component, which provides support and advice on bushland management to owners of covenanted bushland. The Trust’s stewardship officer, Steve Newbey, works with landowners to develop and implement a management plan and is on hand to answer management queries as they arise.

When Frederick Fidge’s covenant was registered in 1971 there were no stewardship services available; however, the National Trust is now inviting all owners of covenanted bushland to join the stewardship program so that they can receive the same support and benefits as covenantors do now.

The property previously owned by Mr Fidge has recently changed hands and the Trust’s Covenanting Coordinator, Sophie Moller, has contacted the new owners, Robert and Julie Hayter, to invite them to join the stewardship program and answer any questions that they may have about the covenant.

Today, 34 years after the covenant was registered and some years after his death, Frederick Fidge’s legacy lives on. Comparison of aerial photographs from 1972 and the present day shows that, not only has the bushland remained intact, but that it has actually regenerated in some areas. It is a small win for conservation in a landscape that has seen so much destruction of natural habitat.

CONSERVATION BY FARMERS

FA Fidge, Narembeen: Many farmers for a long time have made efforts in the interests of conservation by leaving a small portion of their land uncleared.

The advantages to a property of this uncleared land include shelter from cold winds, soil erosion reduction and provision of bulwarks to stop run-off water creating gullies, etc.

But if a farmer dies or sells his property the new owner usually knocks down this valuable asset, only, in nine cases out of ten, later to lament his stupidity.

Farmers want to be able to get these valuable patches of timber registered as private conservation areas, thus ensuring preservation of something that money cannot restore – a break in what is becoming a tedious, continuous trek through treeless areas in the wheatbelt.

I would dedicate 50 acres of mixed morrel, gimlet, tea tree, mallee and wodgil under this scheme, thus in this way helping the curlews, mallee hens and porcupines, etc, to exist a bit longer.”

*The West Australian
Monday 19 October 1970*



Gimlets. Mick Davis, WWF Australia.

“I read with great interest your letter in the October 19th issue of the West Australian about farmers leaving a small portion of their land uncleared in the interests of conservation.

The National Trust is very much in favour of this idea and at present is working on a scheme whereby a landowner may dedicate a part of his property for this purpose in perpetuity...”

*Extract of letter from NJ Armitage,
National Trust of Australia (WA)
to FA Fidge
22 October 1970*

“Further to my letter of 22nd October, I have just been notified that the National Trust Amendment Bill incorporating the right to obtain restrictive covenants has now been duly passed by both Houses of Parliament.

The general effect of this is that a property owner can make a covenant with the Trust not to destroy, deface, alter etc his property, and this covenant remains binding on any subsequent owner of the property.

I believe that it is some such scheme you had in mind when you wrote your letter...”

*Extract of letter from NJ Armitage,
National Trust of Australia (WA)
to FA Fidge
5 November 1970*



Frederick Albert Fidge, known as Bert to his family and friends. Ross Fidge.

“Your letter of 5 November 1970 received yesterday, was to me the best xmas mail I have ever had.

Not only am I anxious to dedicate the 50 acres mentioned previously, but would like the whole of all uncleared land on my property of 982 acres to be left always as it is, the whole area being approx 180 acres. Lately I have given the matter a lot of consideration and nothing would make me happier...

...I am a bachelor about 60yrs in not good health at present. I have lived here since I was 20 years old, except for 3 years service last war so, having few outlets for sentiment, this little place means a lot to me.”

*Extract of letter from FA Fidge to
NJ Armitage,
National Trust of Australia (WA)
14 November 1970*