

Itimbwe Ranch mid1949 - mid1951 Part 2 The House



The Ranch House

This was a large house rather than a mansion. There were no 'spare' rooms; not counting the dressing room (which doubled as a bedroom), there were only three bedrooms, all the other rooms were equally functional; a lounge room, dining room and kitchen – rooms one would find in most homes. Features like high ceilings were standard in buildings of that period in the colonial tropics.

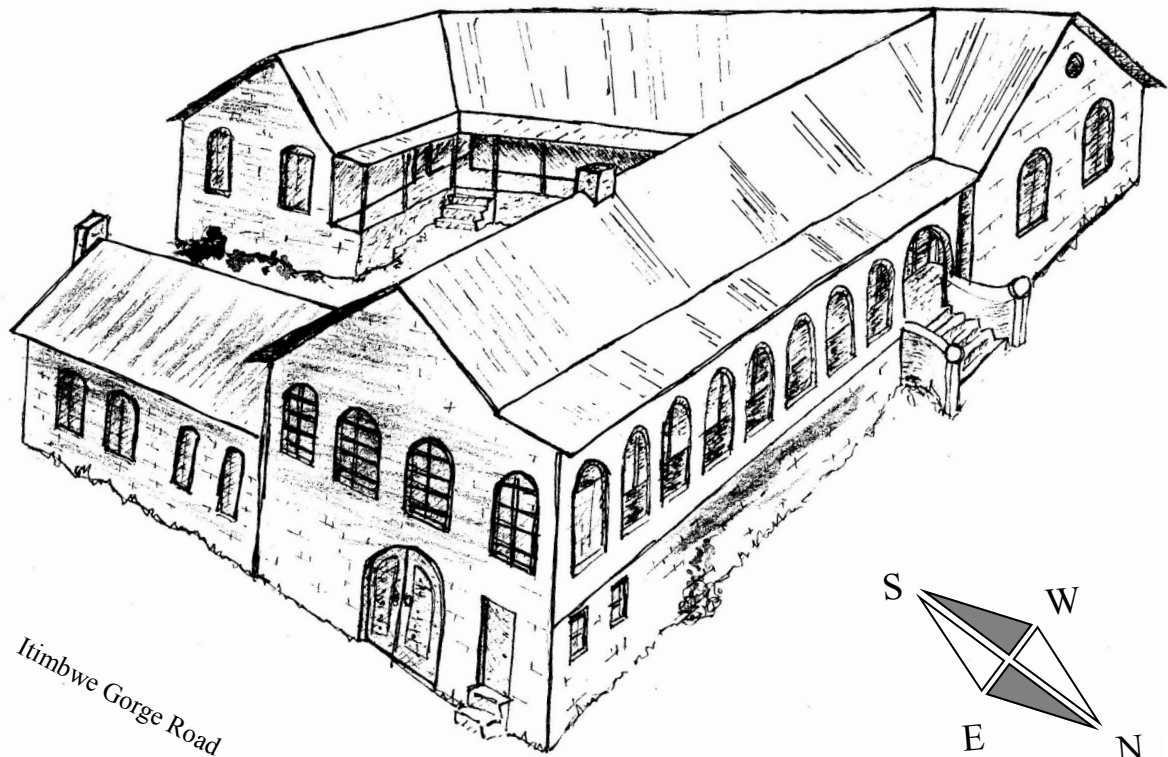
The sketch is just that—a sketch. Roof lines and relative proportions are only intended as indicative. So a note of caution needs to be given here. My descriptions of the rooms of the house are essentially the recollections of a boy of seven with some input from remembered conversations with my parents years later and written down even later. Space from the point of view of a small boy, is altogether different to that of an adult so what I thought then as massive or very large was not necessarily the case. Estimating those dimensions now from photographs of the building I have come to the conclusion that although the rooms were large by the standards of Australia in the twenty-first century they were generous rather than excessive.

This was a magical place to live in as a child. My brother and I invented endless variations of all of our games, quarreled endlessly and discovered nooks and crannies in the house and new things to play with every day. Let loose outside we had different adventures and learned and learned and learned—how to; climb trees, make a dung beetle pull a matchbox cart, recognize wild fruit, catch the little fresh water crabs in the stream, how the natives got wild honey, how to make string from a stick, how to make a hut... Every day was packed with new experiences.

Not all experiences perhaps appropriate for children as young as we were.

Building Design Sketch

Viewed from above, the layout of the house was that of an unfinished rectangle. The sides of which can be thought of as aligning roughly with the four points of the compass.



Building Site

The building was positioned on the side of a hill so that part of it was at a lower level than the main living areas. The kitchen and barn were placed on this level giving them access to the all weather Gorge road from Abercorn as well as the Western Abercorn road and the route to Siiasi. This eastern face of the building was also just a short distance from the dairy.

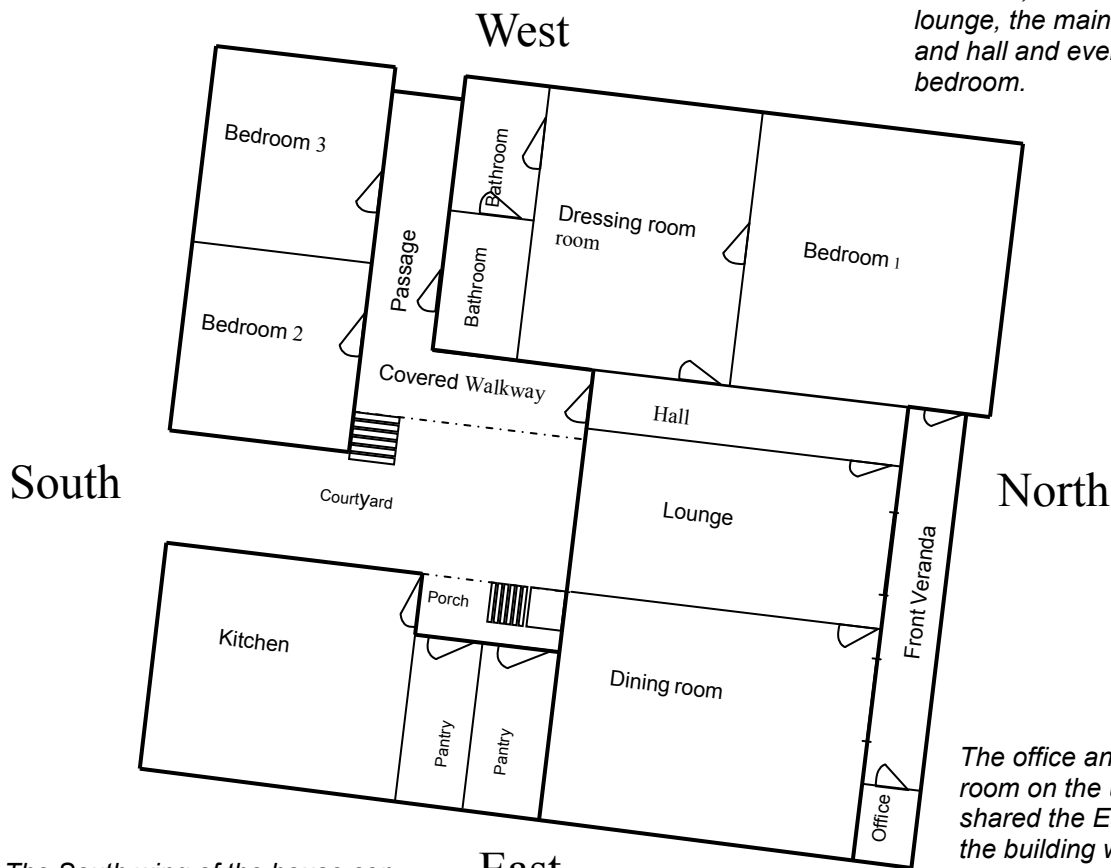
A circular driveway fronted the house, the centre of which was a raised 'rose garden' about 14 metres in diameter and a little over a metre at its highest. A flagpole at the end of a flagstone path and rock steps had been erected in the middle of this 'island'. Apart from some straggly bushes, one or two woody old rose plants and a lot of grass nothing grew on the mound.

One theory for this was that the soil was in fact some of the spoil' (excavation debris) from the excavation for the western and southern cutaways of the building. Mainly clay, it had little topsoil in it so very little nutrients. The same theory would partly help to explain why very little grew in the courtyard though there lack of rain and sunlight might also have contributed. There was little evidence that this material was wasted so it can be surmised that it was used to create a level foot-print for those two sides of the house.

Floor Plan Sketch

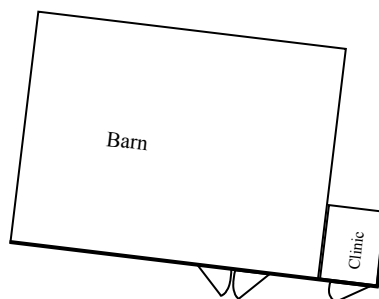
A hallway joined the dressing room from which there was a door on the left to the second of the bathrooms and another on the right that led into the main bedroom. These three rooms with the third bedroom, furnace bay and bathroom comprised the west wing of the building.

The front of the house faced roughly North and from the veranda provided access to the office, the dining room, lounge, the main entrance and hall and even the main bedroom.



The South wing of the house consisted of two bedrooms, part of the courtyard and the south wall of the kitchen. A covered but open walkway connected these bedrooms to one of the bathrooms in the West wing. A similar passageway overlooking the courtyard ran along the courtyard face of the west wing provided access to the main hallway.

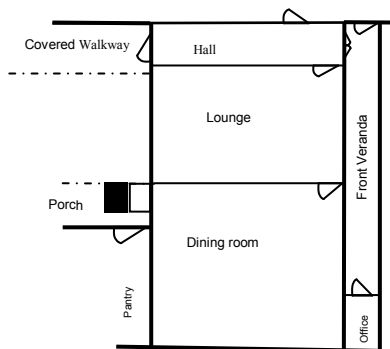
The office and dining room on the upper level shared the East wall of the building with the clinic, barn, pantries and kitchen on the lower level. The dining room was connected to the kitchen by a short staircase and covered porch.



Also facing East, below the office and the dining room were the clinic and the barn.

Itimbwe Ranch House Room Tour

North Wing



Veranda and Office

The public face of Itimbwe was a grand place. The steps up from the driveway put one on the wide veranda in front of the main double glass windowed entrance door. Looking down the veranda to the east were seven columns on a supporting balcony that ran its length. Each supported an arch about two metres tall. There were four French windows on the right; two for the lounge and two for the dining room. Grey slate floor tiles contrasted with the whitewashed walls and their dark stained wood frames..

The sense of grandness inspired by the veranda was spoilt by the creation of the office at the Eastern end. There a window had been installed between the last full column and its half column partner from the balcony to the archway. A wall and door were added to complete a small room. The result of these modifications was a potentially practical use of an otherwise wasted space and at the time it was installed it may not have looked too out of place. The main problem with it was it became very hot due to its position. The subsequent efforts to make it usable were what made it so ugly. The Office was the least used of any room in the house.

Hallway

The ornate glassed double front door opened to a long and spacious hall with white walls and high ceilings to accentuate its dimensions. It was sparsely furnished: a tall glass fronted gun cabinet, a black hinged bench cupboard for shoes and boots with a straight back that contained a small oval mirror, and a combination hat and umbrella stand were ranged along the left wall. Both walls boasted a pairs of mounted buffalo and antelope horns. A door opened to the lounge room to the left and another further on to the right led to the large 'dressing room'. This gave access to the main bedroom and to two adjoining bathrooms each with its own toilet.

Lounge

The door beside the gun cabinet led into the lounge room. This was by far the most attractive and interesting room in the house. Although not as spacious as the main bedroom, the furniture and bookcases in it seemed to make it much friendlier. Where the other rooms lacked objects of much interest this place was, if anything, overcrowded with them. Along the left hand wall were ranged a glass-fronted display cabinet and a solid, long legged insect collection cabinet and between them a large writing desk.

Two French windows provided access to the veranda while another two plain windows on the opposite wall overlooked the kitchen courtyard. These provided light during the day and allowed the evening breeze to cool the room in the hot weather.

The furniture within the lounge room consisted of armchairs and some small tables. Some of the easy chairs were leather covered and padded but most were the common African made variety. The little drinks tables were all made by African craftsmen.



Sunday Morning photograph.

Left to right: Neil, Patricia, Roisin and Terry

Note the view of the Office end of the Veranda with a Clinic window visible behind Roisin and Terry. The Roof of the Dairy is visible behind Neil and Patricia.

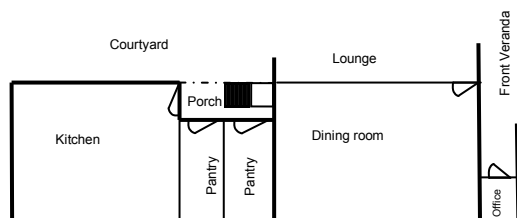
A generous fireplace with a broad mantelpiece was the main feature of the wall shared with the dining room and above it evidence that something had once hung there. A tall glass fronted bookcase stood in the space between the mantelpiece and the dining room door. This housed the main reference books of the previous occupants – including various texts on animal husbandry, veterinary and farming practice generally as well as government gazettes and a set of encyclopedias. The latter intrigued my father, they were the first general reference books he had ever been able to browse. There were more books on two long low bookcases arranged between the windows on the wall overlooking the courtyard. He called them his library.

Dining Room

The dining room seemed enormous. Sited above the barn with solid polished wood floors it had the best natural lighting of all the rooms and was perhaps my favorite. Two French windows opened on to the veranda and three windows on the East wall overlooked the gorge road that ran beside the house. From those windows one could see part of the orchard, the vegetable garden, the dairy and milking shed. Best of all, past that building, the lush greenery that grew down beside the stream. Several of the trees in the vale before and beyond that hidden watercourse as it began its rise to the East were very different to the scrubby specimens higher up the slope. They were tall and healthy with great leafy branches. Only the glimpse of the native worker huts beside the thorn branch cattle kraals on that hillside past the stream claimed the view as particularly African.

Designed perhaps to seat large dinner parties, the main feature of the room was the long, very solid, custom made dining table. Certainly there were enough straight-backed dining room chairs scattered throughout the house to support that use. Apart from chairs the only other large piece of furniture in the room was a breakfast bar; a long polished serving table with cupboards and drawers below set against lounge room wall. It seemed to begin near the lounge room door and ended near the kitchen stairs door at the north corner. The cupboards and drawers stored the cutlery and crockery and a number of candlesticks, both plain and posh.

East Wing



Kitchen Passage and Courtyard

The next part of this eastern side of the building housed the kitchen and its two pantries. This was, in effect, a separate building from the main house level with the barn and clinic. Although it shared a common wall with the end of the dining room, the kitchen had its own roof. The slope of the land could have accounted for the design but an additional consideration was no doubt the need to protect the building as a whole against fire. It was a common precaution in years gone by to site a kitchen with a wood fired stove away from the main building.

A door at the far end of the dining-lounge wall opened onto a small landing some two metres or more above the ground with a fairly steep wooden staircase which we descended to a paved gallery that led directly to the kitchen.

Left of this there were two pantries and the right was open to the courtyard. The roof over the walkway was supported by two evenly spaced wooden posts. A meat safe, taller and wider than the one we had left behind had been placed on the gallery wall between the two storage rooms.

The courtyard was just a patch of bare ground that sloped rather sharply down West to East over the twelve or so metres between the western side walkway and the kitchen complex. Some attempts had been made over the years to plant shrubs around the verges of the yard but only scrubby remnants remained and that was a situation that never changed while we were there. A rough path of flat rocks had been laid, like stepping stones in a stream, from the edge of the kitchen to the foot of the west passage steps because of the slippery nature of the wet courtyard.

Kitchen

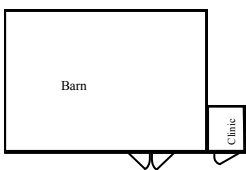
The kitchen, which always loomed large in the interests of two small boys with big appetites, had windows on both its East and West walls and a large black wood stove set into a chimney recess on the south wall.

Two concrete laundry tubs were fixed to the west wall below the window overlooking the courtyard. Shelves had been mounted on the north wall along with a number of planks with hooks for hanging kitchen utensils. A big heavy table occupied the middle of the room and closer to the east wall stood a chopping block made from a section of tree trunk.

Later an almost permanent feature of the table, when it wasn't being washed was the meat mincing machine. A lot of the fresh red meat we ate was minced. While it was true that the game meat was generally tough the real reason for mincing the meat was that chewing was a problem for some of us. At first it was a difficulty for just Neil and me because we were still replacing the teeth removed prior to our departure but soon it concerned both my parents as well as they lost more of their teeth.

Barn

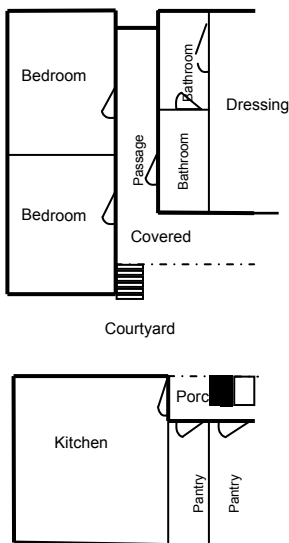
The whole area below the dining room was occupied by the barn—a very big space. In the morning, with both of the huge iron studded wide doors open it seemed mildly welcoming but in the afternoon it turned gloomy and almost threatening. In addition to storage the concrete floor was used for de-husking and bagging the maize and sunflower seeds.



Clinic

Next to the barn was the 'clinic', directly under the corner of the front veranda. It was a long narrow room with two small windows. A narrow bench table with drawers and cupboards ran along much of the window wall and a tall glass fronted cupboard stood on the same wall was just inside the door. Huge syringes in the cupboard indicated that the room had been dedicated to the medical needs of farm animals - and people. Pride of place in that little room was a dentist chair facing the second window and seeming to straddle most of the space between the window wall and the barn wall behind it.

South Wing



South Wing Bedrooms

These were both unused until the McGees came. The South wing bedrooms were not very attractive at all. There were two windows in each. The room overlooking the kitchen had plenty of light but tended to get very hot. The other room looked out onto the cutaway on the western hillside and must have seemed particularly dingy most of the day. It too became uncomfortably warm in the in the hot weather not helped by its proximity to the furnace.

The metal roof and poor ventilation contributed equally to the heat problem but there was another drawback to living in the South wing. The South wall, where windows should have been, had a large over populated pigeon coop attached to it. The result was constant noise from the birds and a persistent foul smell.

Keeping pigeons must have been a hobby for some person living in at Itimbwe. The variety of breeds indicated that. However for us they were a food source. The birds fed themselves and seemed to breed all year round so for a while they provided a convenient and reliable addition to the household menu for meat and eggs.

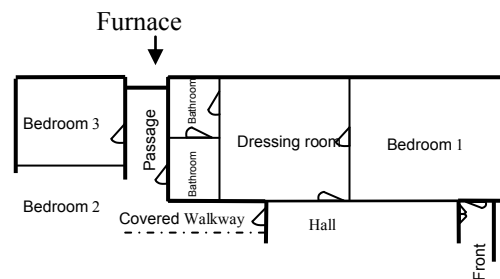
Quite large, the coop consisted of three or four 'floors' of nesting boxes in rows. A sloping wooden roof topped the whole 1.5 metre long structure mounted half way up the external South wall. Rain and dry weather had worked on the wood to warp and rot it in places; the grey colour of the face in stark contrast to the blackened excrement laden shelves running the length of each gallery.

Access to the nesting boxes was provided by a rickety ladder. My brother and I loved nothing better than to climb up and peep in at the hatching eggs and fledgling chicks. These experiences were few and far between. Within days of our arrival at the farm there were at least two sightings of snakes near the coop. We were forbidden to visit it without an adult present. Considering Mum's aversion to the squalor of the place, the servants' fear of snakes and how busy Dad usually was we saw little of the young pigeons and in due course; any pigeon at all!

The birds sealed their own fate when two of them raided the table one day after my mother had left a newly baked loaf of bread there to cool in the deserted dining room. She had only recently learned to bake bread.

That night she taught herself how to make pastry. Her success in this meant we were treated to pigeon pie twice a week for as long as there were still pigeons. They were all gone by the time the McGees arrived as was the smelly coop.

West Wing



Bathrooms

The bathrooms were very modern by the standards of the day. The walls were cement rendered as were all the internal walls of the house and painted white. Each had a large deep enameled bath and porcelain wash stand as well as a pedestal flushing toilet. Both rooms were properly ventilated to the outside passage. Running water was provided from a tank on the roof above the Western end of the courtyard passage. Behind the house, hidden from view behind the passage wall a wood fired furnace provided piping hot water.

Dressing Room

The dressing room we were told was the room where all the clothes were kept. Mum explained that it was also used as a bedroom. It was a room of twos - two windows, two big wardrobes and two single iron beds. A gloomy room; there was never a great deal of natural light. The shrubs and grass of the hillside outside rose from the cutaway within a few of metres of the building. The wardrobes stood darkly together on the wall backing the main bedroom and the beds stood side by side at right angles to them near the door to the hall. There were two slightly sagging lines of cord about two metres apart attached to hooks fixed into the walls stretching across the room to hang mosquito nets from.

Main Bedroom

The main bedroom was the antithesis of the dressing room in terms of light. The two windows on the Northern side lit the room throughout the day. Again the combination of high ceilings, white walls, and sparse furniture – just two single iron-framed beds - and now light, gave an impression of vastness. Apart from the three or four mosquito net cords that traversed the room the only other feature was a door opening on to the veranda.