From Dream to Reality: A study of British migration to Western Australia in the 1960s, with special emphasis on those who travelled on the SS Castel Felice

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The British migrants who came to Australia in the 1960s were accustomed to a wide range of social services and benefits. Under the British National Health Scheme pharmaceuticals, visits to doctors, dentists and hospitals were all free. There were sickness benefits, old age pensions, social security payments for the unemployed and maternity allowances paid to mothers of new babies. Many employers gave new mothers paid maternity leave.\textsuperscript{1} There had been an expansive post-war reconstruction effort during the 1950s. Much of the substandard housing had been demolished and new estates created where homes had modern conveniences including indoor toilets, double glazing and electric heating systems. Food rationing and other shortages had been alleviated and the shops were full of the latest gadgets and fashions. The free education system was being overhauled. New schools at all levels were built; grammar and high schools were replaced by a comprehensive system of education.\textsuperscript{2} People were travelling to the continent for holidays—no longer bound to the seaside holiday camp or guest house and the inclement English weather.

\textit{Another world}

In coming to Australia many British migrants assumed that because people in Australia spoke the English language and observed English law they were coming to a ‘Britain in the South Pacific’,\textsuperscript{3} or as Wentworth said ‘a new Britannia in another world’.\textsuperscript{4} This was surely a

\textsuperscript{2}Marwick, \textit{The Sixties}, p. 369.
country where the weather was better and there was a ‘society not constrained by class or status’.  

   There is a land where honey flows,  
   Where laughing corn luxuriant grows,  
   Land of the myrtle and the rose,  
   On hill and plain the clust’ring vine  
   Is gushing with the purple wine,  
   And cups are quaffed to thee and thine—Australia.

But they found conservative attitudes, sexism and a country at war in Vietnam. Far from being a classless society, Australia had its own class system—just one which was different to that in Britain. Money and property were important. When my family moved to Medina, a suburb developed to house workers from the burgeoning industries in Kwinana, in the late 1960s it was clear that houses had been allocated to employees on basis of their work status.

   Most of the rented houses were weatherboard, some had entrance halls, some not. Foremen were given larger houses with entrance halls and the executives had brick houses in a separate area. Social activities within the industry were strictly divided by class; even at the morning teas in private houses the wives of workers and the wives of foremen or higher executives did not mix. Social confusion arose when people outside the industries came to live in the area, especially when they bought a brick house. Sexism was evident in the all male society of the 1960s; I found, like Hammerton, that women were discriminated against in employment and could not obtain loans to buy property.

Charlie Fox writes that the 1960s was one of the most important decades in Australian history. Change was everywhere. For some it was a ‘golden age’, but for others

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7 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 140.
an ‘unmitigated calamity’. Hudson suggests that Australia’s connection to the United Kingdom was still important in the 1960s but that Britain’s attempts to enter the European Common Market and the withdrawal of its troops east of Suez signalled the end of the relationship. The manner in which it was done provoked Malouf to suggest that Britain was ‘selling Australia down the sewer’. Australian foreign policy became more focussed on North America and Asia. Trade changed to such a degree that Gough Whitlam suggested that Australia ‘had ceased to be an English farm and was now a Japanese quarry’.

The involvement of Australia in the war with Vietnam was part of this gradual breakdown of the relationship with Britain. Australia had become more reliant on the strength of the United States and needed to show its solidarity by supporting the fight against communism. With that came an increase in American cultural influence on Australia. Gerster speaks of a ‘cargo cult for all things American’. In 1966 the Australian currency was changed from pounds to the decimal dollar.

One of my respondents, after overcoming the initial shock of arriving at Fremantle’s corrugated iron sheds, described her first impression of Australia as ‘Americanised’. Hammerton says some of his respondents had expressed a similar surprise, describing Fremantle as ‘like stepping into a Wild West film expecting to see a ‘Posse’. The British migrants were perturbed to see policemen with guns and thought it was ‘how they imagined America to be’. Peters, on the other hand, says many European refugees and displaced persons expected a primitive place with kangaroos and dingoes in the street. She also says

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8 Charlie Fox, ‘The Times They Were A-changing: The sixties was a time of transformation for Australia as a culture of slow moving, unified, Anglo-centrism became one of diversity and shifting boundaries’, West Australian, 12 August 2006, p. 62.


16 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 132.
Britons thought they were supposed to be the most welcome of all immigrants, so one family was surprised to be greeted by a wharfie who cried ‘another boatload of bloody Poms’.  

Authorities assumed that the British migrant would be easily assimilated into the Australian way of life, because ‘the major institutions, government, law, trade union movement, health and education were all modelled on the British institutions’. However, as Thomson notes, it was a struggle for the migrants to make sense of their new life and understand the differences in the world around them. In reality most of the newcomers found things to be not as they had expected. They were not impressed by ‘the excessive familiarity and informal social contacts’. Methods of work were different and many were dissatisfied with the standard of housing. Those who went to stay in the government hostels experienced a great cultural shock. Peters says, ‘A number of migrants expressed the opinion that if they had known the conditions [in Point Walter] they would never have come to Australia’. A majority of the participants in my study were most unhappy with life in the migrant hostels. Perhaps it is true, as Lack feels, that the British migrants were ‘psychologically unprepared for the tremendous transition to the Australian way of life’. 

Australia in the mid-1960s had a booming economy, due in the main to the development of its vast mineral resources, but it lacked the cultural sophistication of Britain and Europe. Western Australia was in the forefront of Australia’s economic resurgence, with the mining of large deposits of bauxite in the Darling Ranges, nickel in Kambalda and oil in the north-west of the state. As the state joined the rush to supply overseas markets,

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22 Lack and Templeton, p. 88.
processing plants for these minerals were set up in the Rockingham/Kwinana region, increasing the need there for skilled workers.\textsuperscript{23} The male basic wage (in dollar terms) in Western Australia in 1966 was $32.80 per week, while the average weekly wage was $47.20.\textsuperscript{24} The basic wage for women was not mentioned in the yearbook, reflecting their place in the workforce. At the time, notes Eveline, women could expect 75\% of the male basic wage for doing the same work. Often their careers, particularly in the public service, were terminated on marriage. Protective legislation restricted the employment opportunities for women into the 1990s.\textsuperscript{25}

In the early and mid-1960s, Australia had not yet caught up with the social changes of North America and Europe. Knightley says that at this time Australia was ‘hedonistic’ with economic stability, growing prosperity, low unemployment and strengthening ties with the United States.\textsuperscript{26} Jenkins seems to agree suggesting that Australians in the 1960s spent ‘a lot of time enjoying themselves’.\textsuperscript{27} The White Australia policy was still in existence and strongly defended despite pressure from the United Nations and the United States for the recognition of the rights of the Aborigine. To be an Australian was to be a white male, while Australian women were generally valued mostly for their place in the home and were not welcome in hotels or clubs.\textsuperscript{28} Lange proposes that the experience of women before they migrated affected their acceptance of conditions in Australia. The Italian women would find little difference in the expectations here of women, but the Yugoslav women, who had been used to legal abortions and equal pay for equal work before they migrated, were not impressed by the lowly status of women in Australia.\textsuperscript{29} Many of my female participants had

\begin{footnotes}
\item[23] Geoffrey Blainey, \textit{A Shorter History of Australia}, Heinemann, Port Melbourne, 1994 p. 204.
\item[27] Thomas Jenkins, \textit{We Came to Australia}, Constable, London, 1969, p. 166.
\item[29] Lange, p. 205.
\end{footnotes}
pursued professional public service careers as women in Britain. They found continuing their careers in Australia practically impossible. The plight of the migrant displaced person, male or female, was even more difficult than that of the British migrant. As Peters points out, ‘the non-Anglophile’ work force was perceived to be inferior to the rest of the community.\textsuperscript{30}

The Australian involvement in the Vietnam War saw young Australian men, including children of migrants, being conscripted by ballot and called up for overseas service in the armed forces. The conscription was in force from 1964 to 1972. Twenty year old men were chosen at random using their date of birth; yet people at the time had to be 21 years of age in Australia before being allowed to vote. There was a chance of deferment of military service, for instance if you were a student at a university completing your first degree, but men who refused to enter the armed forces could be fined or imprisoned.\textsuperscript{31} British migrants were sometimes unaware of Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War. One of my participants, Mrs Collyer, says her family returned to England because they feared their sons might be called up to fight.\textsuperscript{32}

Jenkins says that, like other new migrants, he ‘blandly assumed Australia wanted us’.\textsuperscript{33} This assumption was not always true: in many cases the new migrants were confronted by open hostility. Remarks such as ‘the only good Pom is a dead Pom’, ‘Pommy Bastard’, ‘Pommy Pig’ and ‘you lot only bath once a week’, were common.\textsuperscript{34} Zamoyska writes that migrants were regarded as outsiders and that there was a general ‘anti-British feeling’.\textsuperscript{35} Appleyard agrees, adding that, ‘some experiences were quite nasty’.\textsuperscript{36} In 1966 one British migrant family, who went to the forestry town of Tone River in the south west of Western Australia, had stones thrown through their windows and received a letter saying ‘Go home

\begin{itemize}
\item Peters, \textit{Milk and Honey}, p. 176.
\item M. Collyer, arr. Nov. 1965, Survey 105.
\item Jenkins, p. 67.
\item Betka Zamoyska, \textit{The Ten Pound Fare: Experiences of British people who emigrated to Australia in the 1950s}, Viking, London, 1988, p. 92.
\item Zamoyska, p. 31.
\end{itemize}
crawler Pommy. We don’t want you low crawlers’. 37

There were problems in Australia for the immigrant housewife. Jenkins, writing in 1969, commented that in Australia the food and cleaning products in the shops were not the same as the British women had been used to; there were different cuts of meat and different fruits. 38 In 1966 butter cost 50 cents a pound, and eggs 60 cents a dozen. Pork was the most expensive meat at 56 cents a pound for pork chops and 76 cents a pound for bacon. Lamb was much cheaper and mutton the cheapest of all. My own experience was that the Australian furniture seemed to be of very poor quality by comparison with what was available in Britain. Jenkins writes that in 1969 he found that there was less variety in the shops than he had known in Britain and the prices were about one third higher. 39 The electrical goods were not as sophisticated: to most British housewives the Australian electric jug seemed to be inferior to the English electric kettle. Modern appliances brought from Britain were not compatible with the local electricity supply, although some smaller appliances could be adapted by replacing the power plug. Licences were required for radio and television services ($5.50 for radio and $12 for a TV) and British telecommunication appliances that the migrants may have brought with them were also found to be not compatible. 40

One of the major differences was the disposal of waste-water and sewage— in the 1960s almost the whole of England had deep sewerage, but much of Western Australia relied on a septic tank system. In some outer metropolitan suburbs and country towns there was the ‘dunny’ (earth or pan toilet) at the end of the garden with the human waste being collected at night by the ‘night-soil men’. There was also the grease traps installed outside the kitchen window so that the grease from the kitchen effluent would not contaminate the septic tanks. The traps became very smelly, attracted flies, and needed cleaning regularly. The Western

38 Jenkins, p. 42.
39 Jenkins, p. 46.
Australian Metropolitan Water Supply, Sewerage and Drainage Board only came into being in 1964. Most migrants had been told of the glorious weather—an average of eight hours of sunshine a day, but few knew about the flies, the mosquitos, the bush fires, the danger of sunburn and the septic systems that were such a surprise to many. Jenkins listed other differences he encountered:

The moon hangs upside down; Traffic lights ‘Walk’—‘Don’t Walk’, lay-by for Christmas, light bulbs called globes, Aussie Rules football, counter lunches and drive in bottle shops and cinemas, strange illnesses, school sores and sudden, severe diarrhoea and vomiting.

**We see the land**

Hammerton described the arrival as a ‘frenetic process’, with people expressing a mixture of anxiety and excitement. As the migrants in the 1960s neared the shores of Western Australia their thoughts were probably the same as those of the early settlers. Some would have been relieved to see the long stretches of coastline that meant the end of their voyage, while others were perhaps worried about losing the security of the ship. Some may well have felt doubt concerning their decision to emigrate. All had been on the ships for a number of weeks and many had not enjoyed the experience at all. Some, who had made friends on the voyage, would be regretting the end of the friendships, while others, for whom the passage had been stressful, would be rejoicing at the prospect of land. Peters says many migrants formed a close community on the ship and found ‘getting off was not as appealing as they originally imagined’. Hammerton says that one of his respondents felt sad at the end of the voyage and ‘he dreaded leaving the safety of the ship’. Although none of my respondents expressed a similar emotion, Jim Yeomans said that when he ‘realised my family was now committed to a different regime I felt a little exposed’.

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41 *Western Australian Yearbook, no. 6, 1967*, p. 247.  
42 Jenkins, p. 246; Note: and to my amazement the perambulators were hung on the back of buses.  
43 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 125.  
45 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 117.  
route to other Australian cities, but for all them the first sight of Australia was the Western Australian coastline. Often it was the beaches of Rottnest. Christopher Moore described the scene:

When we arrived off the coast of Western Australia all we could see was this coast with a strip of sand—nothing else, no buildings nobody. Then somebody said it was Rottnest Island. We then came round the island from the north and then we saw the coast again. In the heat haze we saw a long strip of sand, as we got close we saw houses, someone from Yorkshire said that suburb there is Scarborough. The next thing we saw was the pine trees and the Dingo Flour Mill. Then the harbour, a big cheer went up when we went past the end of a groyne.

Other people also remembered the pine trees and Dingo on the flour mill in North Fremantle. One respondent said she felt happy when she saw ‘children and families fishing and waving from the mole’. Jeanette Geurds, however, was not so pleased when she saw ‘many signs saying go home’. While some respondents reported a general excitement on the ship, others were more circumspect. David Roberts remembered thinking, ‘What the hell have I let myself in for?’ Another, who was a young girl at the time, recalled her parents saying ‘God what have we come to?’ Hazel Jackson was sure ‘every passenger on the vessel was up at dawn lining the rails from every vantage point to look at Fremantle and their newly adopted land’.

**Disembarking**

Peters says many migrants expected a band, flowers and ‘even a handshake’, while European displaced persons were often shocked to find that the immigration officials expected them to understand English. Immigration officials and Australian doctors boarded the boat in Gage Roads and for some it was the ‘first Australian accents we

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Another boatload of bloody Poms’

Tom Rollo was surprised when immigration officials ‘tried to convince us to move to Adelaide as quote—there was no work or accommodation here’. There was general confusion among the passengers who were required:

To queue up in the ship’s lounge to have health and quarantine checks prior to landing. The checks were something of a joke; I was obviously ill but allowed to disembark with no query as to the cause of my weakened state.

But the Savilles remembered ‘Much movement on board and the crew very busy as we were processed, every one polite and pleasant’. Most respondents were greeted by the sunshine they had been promised. Peter Norris remembers the temperature being ‘35 degrees’. Another wrote, ‘The heat was awful I remember I laughed at seeing business men in shorts carting brief cases’. Unfortunately some arrived in Fremantle during very bad weather, so did not get a first sight of land from the sea. One participant’s memory of the time was that it was ‘like being on a cattle ship, lots of cases and last minute packing’. Marilyn Fonte recalled: ‘The sky was grey and the rain fell lightly, I think I can remember a large welcome sign’. Another had to smile: ‘a sign at Fremantle said “Welcome to Sunny Australia”; it was pouring with rain at the time’. Landing in Western Australia in January 1968, Rosemary Howarth, upon seeing the rain wondered ‘were the stories about 8 hours of sunshine true?’ Christine Scambler, too, was greeted by rain:

My Dad had told us stories as he had been here when he was in the Merchant Navy. I thought it would be hot but it was raining when we docked at Fremantle. I remember thinking how huge the wharf was and seeing the ‘Welcome’ sign on the wall of the terminal.

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55 Tom Rollo, arr. Apr. 1963, Survey 44.  
64 Christine Scambler, arr. Nov. 1962, Survey 91.
So contrary to the findings of Hammerton and Thomson, many of the participants in my survey did not immediately find Fremantle sunny and hot, or even clean. One wrote, ‘I remember the rain and the dirty old Fremantle sheds, a bit of a shock not having any sun’. Perhaps it was this kind of weather that left some passengers with such a poor first impression. ‘Fremantle and environs most unimpressive’. Patricia Reed remembered being surprised that after:

Being told what a new land this was it was a bit of a shock to see dirty old Fremantle. The buildings were old with tin roofs and I thought it looked like a cowboy town.

While another described her first impression as ‘Sandy, Americanised like the “Wild West”’. Not everyone was dismayed. One participant commented on the blue water and wrote ‘How great the weather, how many trees there were and how green the land looked, not an emerald green, a grey green’. Another who had served in the Royal Navy remembered, ‘From a distance Fremantle was most attractive’. And Chris Moore recorded that:

The sky was blue and it was a hot day, the boat listed badly when everyone crammed the starboard side and the Captain put over a message across the speakers asking for people to move to the port side to stabilise the ship.

Setting foot in Australia was often accompanied by drama and chaos. A respondent told the story of the passenger who wanted to be ‘the first one on Australian soil, dashing down the ramp straight into a glass door, which made him the first one in hospital’. Some had vivid memories:

An unforgettable incident in the Customs Hall at the Fremantle Terminal occurred shortly after docking with the arrival of a young man who asked for us by name. As we were 12,000 miles from England in a country where

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65 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 125.
69 Anon, arr. Feb/Mar. 1968, Survey 80.
70 Name withheld, arr. Jan/Feb 1967, Survey 60.
71 Name withheld, arr. Dec/Jan1967/68, Survey 64.
we knew nobody this is an amazing happening. This is a true story—the manager of the ANZ Bank at 237 Murray Street, Perth (now Target) to which we had transferred our money prior to departure had sent this young man. He had been directed to meet us at the ship and welcome us to Australia and offer any assistance we required. When we tell this story to the disillusioned and mainly ex-bank customers it is greeted by jaw-dropping disbelief. However we were so impressed with this service we remained ANZ customers for more than 20 years. After clearing customs this young man helped us to secure accommodation at a hotel (no longer there) in Mount Street, Perth for a few nights.74

Isabella Mitchell had a wonderful welcome:

My husband rushed in and said, ‘come quickly we are nearly in dock’. We went out to see this huge mound of rocks which was the approach to Gage Roads. [?] Soon we heard a brass band playing ’76 Trombones’. It was the RAAF band to meet us, it was thrilling. We got off the ship as soon as we could and met our new friends; they made us feel very welcome. There was a bouquet of Australian wildflowers for Nell and I and we were told a party had been arranged for us that night.75

Many of my participants had friends or relatives waiting for them on the dockside.76

Margaret Bolton, who was returning with her new husband after working in England for a few years, was met by ‘family and friends’ as were several other passenger.77 Kenneth Ward recognised his ‘Grandfather and Uncle who I had not seen for 20 years’.78 Others were welcomed by their future employers.79 Religious organisations were often waiting to welcome the new migrants.80 But Moyna Harland who was coming to Western Australia to join the fiancé she had not seen for 6 months became worried, thinking:

What if either of us had changed our minds? I hid behind a pillar in the arrivals hall for ages watching him looking for me. Eventually as the crowds thinned I stepped out to face him and Australia.81

Chris Davies ‘walked down the gangplank with suitcase in one hand and a toolbox in the other with about £20 in my pocket’.82 There was no one to meet the Rollos either—nor had

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77 Margaret Bolton, arr. Dec. 1963, Survey 76.
78 Kenneth Ward, arr. 1947, Survey 75.
82 Arthur Christopher Davies, arr. Feb/Mar. 1968, Survey 35.
they pre-booked accommodation. Tom Rollo said:

Had to use Traveller’s Aid to recommend a guest house and how to get there. We went to Perth and stayed at the Cloisters Boarding House in St George’s Terrace.\(^{83}\)

The participants who were going interstate often left the boat for a short time in Fremantle. They toured Fremantle and Perth or went to the beach. Some travelled by taxi and Alan Huckins reports going to Perth on a ‘very old-fashioned looking train’.\(^{84}\) Another couple who were headed for Sydney were greeted by a couple of Western Australians at the dock and taken to ‘Perth and Kings Park’. The Watkins became good friends with these strangers who were later influential in the family’s decision to settle in Western Australia.\(^{85}\) David Roberts, on his way to Sydney, was given a tour by the CWA.\(^{86}\) Many of those who were to sail on from Fremantle took the opportunity, like Iris Wilson, en route to Melbourne, to go for a decent meal’.\(^{87}\) Lesley Ross, also going to Melbourne, remembered that; ‘After eating Italian versions of English cooking for the past four weeks and five days all I wanted was some good old bangers and mash’.\(^{88}\)

Those who were to settle in Western Australia had mixed emotions. The Baldwins remember the feelings of ‘relief, fright and chaos’.\(^{89}\) Others expressed the sense of disempowerment as they were ‘herded out like cattle’.\(^{90}\) Lillian Clarke also wrote of her helplessness: ‘we were rounded up, loaded on buses and taken to the hostel’.\(^{91}\) Migrants were often confronted by big queues when disembarking.\(^{92}\) Sometimes the port was so busy with passenger ships the migrants were off loaded at the cargo shed, ‘hot dirty—with no

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\(^{83}\) Rollo, arr. Apr. 1962, Survey 44.
\(^{84}\) Alan Huckins, arr. Apr/May 1967, Survey 61.
\(^{87}\) Wilson, arr. July 1964, Survey 11.
\(^{89}\) John and Joan Baldwin, arr. May 1966, Survey 57.
\(^{91}\) Lillian Clarke, arr. July 1966, Survey 2.
facilities’.\(^93\) Having been advised by a ship’s officer to change into light clothing Frank Plummer remembered standing ‘shivering in a cold south westerly wind’.\(^94\) Being processed by the customs officers was the next issue to cause dismay. Peter Thomson remembered the confusion as to ‘where their baggage was’,\(^95\) while Marilyn Fonte was embarrassed when her suitcase was opened and her clothes checked.\(^96\) Peggy Parkin was surprised when her husband’s pistol was impounded.\(^97\) Peter Norris had a very interesting tale to tell of his first experience on the shores of Western Australia:

We were greeted by a customs official; I happened to be carrying a book I had been reading called the *Caine Mutiny* so I gave a brief resume of the story. Much to the amusement of the bystanders he took the book and flicked through a few pages saying, ‘we are trying to stop pornography entering this country and we have to be careful’. He returned the book to me. So much for my “Welcome to Australia”. Whilst waiting on the dockside I noticed men, all of them wearing shorts and blue singlets, carrying Gladstone bags. Was this some kind of cult or perhaps a sports team? On enquiring I was told they were ‘wharfies’ which left me still pondering for I had not caught up with Australian colloquialisms.\(^98\)

Christine Scambler was disappointed when she had to leave behind ‘a lovely pair of red shoes that came from Aden’.\(^99\)

**Somewhere to go**

Most of the respondents to my study had accommodation waiting for them when they arrived. Peters has completed two works on migrant hostels in Western Australia. In her research she found accommodation was largely determined by the entry category.\(^100\) Some moved in with family and friends who had sponsored them, others were reliant on immigrant centres

\(^93\) Name withheld, arr. Apr. 1963, Survey 6.
\(^100\) Peters et al., *Point Walter Migrant Reception Centre*; Nonja Peters, Fiona Bush and Jenny Gregory, *Graylands and Swanbourne Migrant Reception Centres*, Centre for Western Australian History, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, 1996.(Passim)
especially set up to receive them. While there were many complaints from British migrants about the hostel accommodation they were offered, they were nevertheless fortunate not to have been sent to some of the migrant camps at Cunderdin and Northam where refugees and displaced persons were accommodated in basic dormitories and blankets were strung up as the only form of privacy.

The building companies (such as RDC and Landalls) and other sponsors found apartments for their clients. In Melbourne the Wilson family, who were sponsored by the Baptist Church, ‘moved into a rented flat complete with borrowed furniture’. After being met by a representative of the RSPCA Tom Edwards and his family were taken to the Belmont Hotel. One family arrived very early in the morning and were met by representatives of the Western Australian education department and relatives, and then taken to a hotel, their accommodation paid for by the education department.

Perhaps the saddest stories are told by those passengers who were to go on to government hostels. ‘Wives were separated from husbands as men had to sort out the baggage’. Jeanette Geurds remembers, ‘Women and children were put on buses whilst the men remained to claim luggage’. I personally have memories of that time. On a January day when the temperature was about 104F my two little girls and I (six months pregnant, wearing winter clothing), were crowded onto a hot bus with other mothers and children to be whisked away, leaving our menfolk behind on the dockside. Hot and exhausted and not a little scared, we did not know where we were going or even if we would see our loved ones again.

We did not realise how lucky we were to keep our children with us. Some respondents told of how their children were separated from them. One saw his ‘seven

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Another boatload of bloody Poms’

children taken to Fairbridge Farm’, 107 Pinjarra, and another, then a child, remembered ‘being taken away from my parents with younger brothers and sisters’. 108 One respondent who was only about 14 years old when she arrived recalled how:

Fairbridge Farm was arranged but we were not told we would be separated from our parents. All of the children 15 years and below were taken off on a bus. I remember my parents saying they’ll see us soon. Terrible feeling – God what was going on? 109

Her sister, who was then 18 years old, remembered being left with two older siblings; ‘We were all huddled down the gangplank waiting to go wherever; Mum and Dad and six children were sent Fairbridge’. 110 The Fairbridge Society Migration Scheme was negotiated between the Commonwealth government and the Fairbridge Society in 1958. The idea was to ease the labour shortage by sponsoring large families to become assisted migrants. Central to this agreement was ‘separating children from their parents upon arrival in Australia’. Many parents did not understand that this meant passing over custody and guardianship of their children to Fairbridge and the Australian government. The parents and children over 16 years were housed in migrant hostels in Perth, some 100kms north of Pinjarra. They were expected to work and find suitable accommodation so that the family could be reunited. The period of separation could sometimes be many months because the wage earners had to pay the costs of accommodation at the hostel and maintenance for the child or children at Fairbridge before setting aside monies to find accommodation. Distance, and the sparsity of transport, meant that the children often did not see their parents during this time. By 1969 the Scheme ceased to operate, mainly because of the actions of a group of Irishmen who took their children to Graylands and set up community housing for incoming migrants. But ‘many children remained guardians of the state, even once returned to their families’. 111

Basic, temporary accommodation was available to new migrants at such hostels as Point Walter and Graylands. Here the Commonwealth Bank promised comfortable facilities in its guide book, *Thinking of Australia*? Many considered the hostels to be far worse than promised.

**Hostel life**

Gough Whitlam attacked the Liberal government over the housing situation, employment and social security policies, which he says were the major sources of discontent. The assisted migrants were housed in the two major hostels offering accommodation to newly arriving British migrants who had been assisted by the Commonwealth or Western Australia state agencies during the 1960s. The Point Walter Migrant Reception Centre was open from 1947 to 1969 and Graylands from 1951 to 1986. Point Walter was the focus of most complaints, mainly because of the lack of public transport servicing the camp. Magnificently situated on high ground overlooking the Swan River it was leased from the defence department and converted for basic family accommodation. Hostels were intended to be a temporary

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112 *Thinking of Australia*, pp. 62–63.
113 Appleyard, Ray and Segal, p. 147.
114 Peters et al., *Point Walter Migrant Reception Centre*, p. 10.
resting place while the migrant family found work and suitable housing. However, in Western Australia they seem to have fallen far short of the services said to be provided in the hostels by the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council. These publications promised a ‘community hall, full hospital and outpatient centre, infant health, children’s playgrounds’. Peters says a number of migrants claimed that Point Walter had been ‘glamorised’ in the literature supplied to them and the distance of the hostel from employment centres such as Fremantle and Perth had been underestimated. Used for amphibian training and convalescence during the Second World War, the location of the camp already had a chequered history when it was converted to house 350 families. Peter describes the conditions the migrants faced: there were no fly wires fitted to windows or doors, and where there were barbed wire fences and stop signs at the entrance—surprising many migrants—and where the spraying of DDT was regularly carried out. One participant recalled that she, ‘woke up one morning and all the walls were covered with little white spiders, millions of them, but we had our trusty ‘bug spray’ which we were given when we arrived’. One wonders just how many migrants sprayed DDT around without knowing of its toxicity.

Hammerton found there was a universal feeling of ‘shock’ when the migrants were taken to these hostels. My respondents agree. Loretta Thomas wrote that ‘I’m sure Point Walter would be classed as hostel accommodation but it didn’t have the facilities that immigrants enjoy today. I can remember eating our food off tin plates and drinking out of tin mugs’. A respondent, who had come to Australia under the Lonnie Scheme, expected to be housed almost immediately. She was not impressed by the conditions at the Point Walter Migrant Centre:

Accommodation—pretty awful. Facilities even worse. Food OK but monotonous the same weekly menu was used the entire four months we

115 Thinking of Australia, pp.62-63.
117 Peters et al, Point Walter Migrant Reception Centre, pp 16–21.
119 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 130.
120 Loretta Thomas, arr. June 1951, Survey 37.
were there. Transport provided morning and evening for men to get to work, apart from that public transport non-existent. I often walked from Point Walter to Canning Highway to catch a bus to Fremantle or Perth just to get away from the depressing conditions at the hostel.\footnote{122}

Jeanette Geurds also had memories of the Point Walter hostel:

Accommodation—1 small hut with 4 single beds, curtains to secure privacy, 1 small cupboard. Clean food in dining room, well catered for. Transport –

\footnote{121} Peters et al. Graylands and Swanbourne Migrant Reception, Appendix 5.  
\footnote{122} Anon, arr. Nov. 1963, Survey 7.
very isolated needed a car or had a long walk to Canning Highway to catch a bus.\footnote{123}

In an interview her brother Michael recalled that when they arrived at Point Walter they hung around until they were ‘allocated a shack, shed’:

> It was like going back because it was exactly like the Nissen huts we come out of 12 years before; I remember them, so it was like going back to that. I loved it. I went straight in with soccer, so I would spend my time, my free time, would be down Britannia, playing down there, you could walk, or I had a bike I brought from England...There was no Transport at Point Walter. Dad couldn’t drive, Mum couldn’t either she had to learn, she learnt quicker than Dad did so we bought a car.\footnote{124}

Another voiced the same complaint especially with regard to the lack of public transport which he says ‘was practically non-existent, we walked everywhere. He believed the authorities had a ‘hidden agenda not wishing migrants to get too comfortable’.\footnote{125} One respondent summed up the feelings of many of my participants who went to the Point Walter Hostel.

> Camp Hot! Hot! Hot! Temp.104°F heat off the sand made it 140°F. Tin army hut, 2 double bunks, wardrobes—door wouldn’t stay closed, card table, 2 rickety chairs. Food—pretty awful but we ate it. Transport, hardly any, 2 buses a day out of camp. Not to forget the ants, huge things, and spiders!.\footnote{126}

While many complained about conditions at Point Walter,\footnote{127} the Baldwins found the accommodation adequate and spoke of the ‘beautiful views, walks and wonderful weather, only rained at night’, but even they were concerned by the lack of transport.\footnote{128}

> It is obvious from the responses that there was a major problem with the lack of public transport servicing the Point Walter hostel. This should have been recognised when the camp was converted to house incoming families. Perhaps, as Peters says, its distance
from both Perth and Fremantle had been underestimated. The new migrants had a basic need to get out and about to seek work and housing. Mothers needed to go to shops to buy their families clothing suitable to Australia’s climate, and to entertain their children. Most migrants, although they had brought their money to buy a house found they had to buy a car first before they could make any other decisions. Car dealers often took advantage of the situation. One respondent said ‘the local car dealers got in touch with me by telegram, picked me up and took me to buy a car—obtained our name and address from the ship’s manifest’. Patricia Thyer went to Graylands, where there was a large sign at the entrance declaring ‘No Hawkers’. Yet she remembered:

Within 24 hours we were approached by an off duty policeman offering to help us obtain a drivers licence (obviously with the view to purchasing a car). Within a couple of days a car salesman arrived. This person was an emigrant on the same ship—he had a list of new arrivals. I understand there was an arrangement with the management. No Hawkers???

Most migrants who went to Graylands hostel reported better access to public transport. Eunice Woods, who arrived in Western Australia in September 1962, found the accommodation there ‘basic but adequate’. She went on to say, ‘We thought the first meal of pie and chips was wonderful after all the rich food we had been having’. Jeanne Reid and her family, though, were shocked at the conditions at the Graylands hostel in 1966:

I couldn’t believe what I saw. The Nissen hut was filthy. The brown lino was torn and had nails sticking out of it. We went for our Christmas lunch. We were in a large communal area where we were shown cutlery and where to queue for our lunch which was Army style as one walked along. We sat down at a table. Obviously most people had had their Christmas lunch but there were children playing around at the tables. Again I was horrified. Children running around with large sores on their torsos which I later found out were ringworm. Now I really thought I would go mad. The children were touching chairs, tables and all the places other people were to go and no one was stopping them . . . Perth was built on sand. The trouble was that was where the ringworm came from, the cats defecated in it and the children caught it. The ablutions were communal too. The bath, one had to wait your turn and I couldn’t wash them in there, had to buy a bath and carry all

129 Peters et al., *Point Walter Migrant Reception Centre*, p. 24.
the water over to the Nissen hut. When one went to the communal bathing area, parents washed nappies out in the bath and left excreta in the bottom.\textsuperscript{133}

The Savilles went to Noalimba, which was opened in the late 1960s; they say they were housed in a self-contained apartment and that ‘there was ‘transport available when required’.\textsuperscript{134} But the children who went to the Fairbridge Farm School found the conditions there very different from city life they had known in the United Kingdom. They remembered the ‘primitive facilities’ and the lack of affection. They were surprised that they had to work out of school hours tending cattle and collecting wood, as well as cleaning the buildings.\textsuperscript{135}

The hostels in the eastern states were also subject to complaint. In Victoria the public transport service was a problem and the ‘Nissen huts hot and cramped’.\textsuperscript{136} The hostel accommodation in New South Wales also described as ‘poor’,\textsuperscript{137} but conditions for British migrants in South Australia in 1966 seem to have been more acceptable.\textsuperscript{138}

\textit{Finding a job}

The employment situation throughout Australia during the 1960s fluctuated according to the country’s economic circumstances. Jupp says the migrant families were ‘financially vulnerable’; they had to find work as soon as possible to pay rent, school and medical bills. He also says the British migrants found that they lost their position and skill status when they took work.\textsuperscript{139} Jenkins reports that when the men could not find the employment they preferred there was a ‘rapid decline in morale’.\textsuperscript{140} According to Knightley, in 1960 to 1961 Australia was in the throes of an economic downturn yet the government saw no problem bringing in immigrants even during periods of high unemployment.\textsuperscript{141} Most of my male

\textsuperscript{138} Anon, arr. June 1966, Survey 21.
\textsuperscript{139} James Jupp, \textit{Immigration}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{140} Jenkins, p. 80.
participants found work within a reasonable time after arriving in Australia. By the mid-1960s, as more mineral resource developments came on line, there was an abundance of jobs in Western Australia. The only problem was that the work available did not always equate with the skills which the migrant possessed. Thomas Atkinson found that the work he had been assured existed was not forthcoming. Because there was a delay between the publication of the informational materials and the migrants’ arrival in Australia, the true employment situation could not be known until the worker tried to find a job. But Jackson says that when in the late 1960s inflation again saw a rise in unemployment the Australian government reduced the number of assisted passages.

In 1973 a survey was carried out by the Australian Population and Immigration Council. From the results it was reported that many migrants did not have proper information on employment before they arrived:

> Because of the importance of employment to the economic welfare of migrants, it is disturbing that family heads who obtained most of their information about employment in Australia from Immigration officials reported that the information they obtained was often wrong.

The situation was exacerbated by what Jupp calls ‘local resentment to “ten pound tourists”’. Johnson found the country towns showed a ‘positive discrimination’. British migrants were not welcomed in the job market and Australians were ‘particularly hostile to British women workers’. In my study more than half of my respondents either had work to go to on arrival or found a position within the first two weeks. However, the work they found was not always what they expected to take up in Australia; some even found the skills they had been told in Britain were needed did not exist in Western Australia. The more fortunate ones were helped to find employment by the realty company with whom they had arranged to

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143 John Jackson, ‘Changing Patterns of migration to Western Australia’, in Ruth Johnson (ed.), *Immigrants in Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1979, p. 21.
146 Ruth Johnson (ed.), *Immigrants in Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1979, pp. 45–47, 83.
According to migrants, much of the information they received regarding conditions in Australia was incorrect.\textsuperscript{147} buy a home before leaving the United Kingdom.

Public transport was an important factor in the ability of the newly arrived migrant to take up employment. The lack of an adequate public transport service to the Point Walter hostel ‘made it difficult to take up a position’.\textsuperscript{148} Initially Tom Rollo had to take two buses to work each day. Later he moved to Bunbury to work on a construction site, working from Monday morning to Saturday afternoon, then hitchhiking to Perth and back again on the Sunday night. He decided ‘a car was an essential commodity after being dropped off at Harvey one night and sleeping in a cemetery’. He told of an incident which gave him an insight to his Australian workmates:

In the lunch shed I was horrified to see a large trail of ants flowing into one of the lunch boxes on a bench. When the box owner arrived I pointed this out and offered him one of my sandwiches. He opened the box, took out his lunch, gave it a shake and wiped it on his shirt. “She’ll be right mate,” he said, “these little buggers don’t eat much.” And promptly ate the lot.\textsuperscript{149}

Describing the reactions of her husband and herself to the difficulty in finding employment, Patricia Thyer wrote:

\textsuperscript{147} A Decade of Migrant Settlement, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{149} Rollo, arr. Apr. 1962, Survey 44.
Very dejected by employment prospects, Robert paid for welding experience with a job guaranteed—this was honoured by one week’s employment. Patricia was told at a job interview ‘You are no good to us where you come from’. We assumed this to refer to the hostel.\(^{150}\)

Thomas Bowles had chosen a particular realty sponsor because of the promise of help in finding employment. Imagine his surprise when he went to their offices:

They got the *West Australian* newspaper out and said ‘have a look through this’. Well I was gob smacked to say the least. Back in the UK I worked for a large contract cleaning company. I had held the position of area manager with 20 years experience. This was in all my references. Eventually the sponsor phoned a cleaning firm had a chat with someone and they came out to the sponsor’s office. The chap was wearing bib and brace overalls, looked at my references etc. and said I was too experienced for him and that I could probably teach him a thing or two.\(^{151}\)

While most of the migrants found work within a short time of landing in Australia, for many it was not the work that satisfied their skill levels. Mr Weber, who was an engineer, found work as a panel beater in a car firm.\(^{152}\) Another wrote ‘I got a job which I had been told would be available but not the one I was led to understand I would get’.\(^{153}\) Kathleen Platts had imagined that her well qualified husband would find work immediately, but that was not to be. He was an instrument fitter, a skill much in demand by the developing industries, but unfortunately he found the authorities ‘had some difficulty in accepting his qualifications, which had been thoroughly checked in the UK’. He found a position himself, though at a lower level than his skills warranted.\(^{154}\) The Gillbards were more fortunate as Bill had been sponsored by Wesfarmers for work on the state ships; he had a ship waiting.\(^{155}\)

The Baldwins found John’s trade was unknown to the authorities here, although he had declared his trade (a die cast operator) on his application form.\(^{156}\) And Jeanne Reid said:

One of the biggest disappointments about all the lies we had been told was that of my husband’s profession (precision engineer). We were told that Western Australia was ‘crying out’ for his profession but they had never

\(^{151}\) Thomas Bowles, arr. Sept. 1969, Survey 100.
\(^{153}\) Name withheld, arr. Mar/Apr. 1965, Survey 78.
\(^{156}\) Baldwin, arr. May 1966, Survey 57.
heard of it here. He eventually took the only job closest to what he did and that was ‘inspection’ of combine harvesters at Chamberlains in Welshpool.\(^{157}\)

Then there was the problem of being told you were too old. One respondent said that her ‘Dad was demoralised to be told by the greeting immigration people that he was too old and would have trouble finding a job’.\(^{158}\) The Thyers also found the situation;

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\text{Difficult—quite contrary to the information supplied prior to departure. We felt after arrival that our 30—40 age group was disadvantaged, many returning to the UK after 2 years. Several 14—17 year olds returned—unable to settle, younger and older children did not find it so difficult. Robert whilst in the UK applied and was accepted for a position—the age limit was 40. When he contacted the firm he was told we had taken longer to emigrate and the age limit had been reduced to 35. Patricia was repeatedly told she was too old at 36. A senior position was 21. We had given up what would have been secure and pensionable jobs.}\(^{159}\)
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Before leaving England Eunice Woods and her friends had been assured by the RAAF, their sponsors, that work would be found for them. Her husband George was able to start work almost straight away at Boans, but Cyril their friend who was over 40, could not find a position. Eunice wrote of Cyril and herself:

\[
\text{Was out of work for a long time eventually getting work as a school caretaker. I could not get a job either, at first, as nurses had come from all over the world for working holidays to see the Empire Games.}\(^{160}\)
\]

However, most of my respondents who were in this age group do not report any particular prejudice against older people.

Men found employment of some sort eventually, but it was a different situation for those women who wanted to work. Kathleen Platts realised, when she had difficulty in finding work, that at the interview in England her skills had not been asked for—only her husband’s. She said:

\[
\text{It never occurred to me, and perhaps I didn’t ask, I assumed things were the same here because it was presented as a modern go ahead country. My husband was able to find work quickly and with not too much trouble. As a}
\]

married woman I was not so lucky. I had left a well paid, responsible job in the Public Service in the UK. Australia House neglected to tell me that female public servants, and that included teachers, nurses, bank officers etc. were required to resign on marriage—quite a shock to the system.\textsuperscript{161}

One was surprised that her qualifications were queried when she applied for a position. ‘As far as I was concerned the West Australian training was way out of date compared to mine’\textsuperscript{162}

Migrant women in the eastern states seemed to have found work more easily; Penelope Lennon’s mother became ‘head chef/cook at the hostel’.\textsuperscript{163} The ladies who went to Sydney\textsuperscript{164} and Melbourne\textsuperscript{165} say there was plenty of work there. Yet even in the eastern states people had to take up work that was available, not necessarily the job they would have preferred. David Roberts was sent to work on a dairy farm when he really wanted to work on a sheep station.\textsuperscript{166}

The participants had vastly different experiences during those first few days after leaving the ship. Some were disappointed at their reception when they landed, while others were overwhelmed by the kindness given to them by the Australians they met. Those who had been sponsored for a particular position or by an organisation such as the Baptist Church were the most pleased, and those who had been sponsored by realty companies had mixed feelings. But there was a general expression of dissatisfaction on the conditions the assisted British migrants found in the hostels. Yet, in fairness, it might have been expected. The Commonwealth Bank, for example, advised potential migrants of the accommodation they would receive on arrival including the fact that it would be in a Nissen hut and that toilet, bathing and laundry facilities would be communal.\textsuperscript{167} Perhaps, like me, most did not know what a Nissen hut was and were not aware of just how inconvenient communal facilities could be. Perhaps the negative aspects of hostel living may have been overlooked when migrants

\textsuperscript{162} Anon, arr. Jan/Feb. 1969, Survey 83.  
\textsuperscript{163} Penelope Lennon, arr. Jan. 1962, Survey 3.  
\textsuperscript{164} Name withheld, arr. Sep/Oct. 1960, Survey 86.  
\textsuperscript{165} Name withheld, arr. Dec/Jan. 1960, Survey 77.  
\textsuperscript{167} Thinking of Australia, pp. 62-63.
were promised adequate furnished accommodation and the child-minding centres that were featured in the Commonwealth Bank of Australia’s publication—but these were not provided at the Western Australian hostels. Our accommodation at Point Walter was a shed with two sets of bunk beds and a small table with two folding chairs. There was a curtain which could be drawn between the beds and the table, but there was only a one central light which served both areas. To use the communal facilities we had to cross an area of sand infested with fleas. There were no children’s playgrounds, only a small area of grass overlooking the river which seemed to be constantly watered preventing the children from playing even there. But the major problem for migrants at the Point Walter hostel was the lack of transport, and the distance from work and other amenities; factors which were not mentioned in the literature for prospective migrants.

The problem of finding work commensurate with the skills and experience of the individual caused many complaints. This was exacerbated by what were thought to be unsafe work practices and the sometimes hostile reception by other workers. At the time, says Hammerton, jobs were plentiful in England and the British migrant was unlikely to have been unemployed when they left.  

Peters thinks that in Australia the need to work overshadowed most other priorities. So for some the promise of work was met but for others the reality was more harsh: a loss of status, inability to find work satisfying their skill level, and even for some the inability to find regular work at all.

Did the ‘Poms’ whinge’ without cause? It appears that the promise of a better life was not met immediately for many of my respondents on their arrival in Australia. Rather, my respondents often faced inadequate and poor accommodation, job dissatisfaction and a lack of public transport. As we shall see in the next chapter, for most of the participants to my study, life in Western Australia did improve over time.

168 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 130.
169 Peters, Milk and Honey, p. 189.