Nissen’s, Quonset’s and Elephant Huts
Prefabricated Huts for Post-War Australia

The demands of modern warfare in the twentieth century required large numbers of troops and services in areas where there was little accommodation for either the troops or associated facilities. In 1916, Major Peter Nissen of the 29th Company, Royal Engineers developed the design for a semi-circular prefabricated hut which came in two sizes 16’ wide and 24’ wide and which could be as long as there were pieces. The design – the Nissen hut was put into production both in world wars. A similar design the Quonset Hut was developed at Quonset Point by the U.S. Navy in 1941. The Quonset came in 3 types 16’, 20’ and 24’ wide. A larger version the Quonset Warehouse or Elephant hut was 40ft wide (and was known in Australia as the SAAR hut).

A 16’ wide Nissen Hut (off Bungil’s Cave Road, Stawell Victoria)

After World War II, Australia embarked on a major program of immigration. Some 310,000 persons arrived in Australia in this period. The question of where to put them was solved by using military bases and they were housed in Nissen and Quonset Huts. The Nissen huts were imported from Britain and were sourced from surplus stocks held by the Ministry of supply. The Quonsets both standard and warehouses were obtained from US bases in the Pacific notably the Manus Island base.

More huts than were needed were bought, those surplus to requirements were sold off initially to Commonwealth agencies and later to the public. As the military reoccupied their bases they used the huts for accommodation as well. Eventually these huts were also sold as scrap.

The history and location of surviving huts has been an on-going research project for Dr Iain Stuart of JCIS Consultants. Some results have been published in the journal Historic Environment in 2006. Iain is keen to hear of the location and history of any surviving huts so he can add them to his database of huts which will help in the comparative analysis of surviving huts. He can be contacted at iain@jcis.net.au.