

RESEARCH REPORT

FARM HOUSES AND GARDENS IN THE MAZOE VALLEY

MY INTEREST in the Mazoe Valley comes not only from having resided there but also from its actual and potential agricultural production. It was occupied by European farmers at an early date, with the result that there are records of farming endeavour, illustrating the changes which have taken place, since the turn of the century. The following report is one of a series dealing with agricultural land use in the Valley, and was part of a larger study of crop rotations, siting of buildings and water supplies by an agricultural student, M. H. Buttress, who visited each farm and also made a few enquiries about the house and garden.¹

A farm house is unique because in addition to being a home it is the central pivot around which the business of farming is carried out during the day and often well into the night. The siting of the house, its construction, size, maintenance and garden is often a measure of the production of the land and the well-being of the occupants. There are no recent studies of farm houses in the Valley, and in view of the forthcoming political changes that may close an era of three generations of farming, the following report is made for the record.

Early European settlers in Rhodesia were faced with the near certainty of being struck down with malaria, particularly in the Mazoe Valley where deaths from blackwater fever were an all too common occurrence as is revealed in the first Minute Book of the local Farmers' Association.² Government sought to minimize the risk by offering advice on the construction of a suitable dwelling comprising a wood frame clad in galvanized iron erected on wooden blocks with an open stoep on three sides with mosquito screens over the windows. A photograph of such a house surrounded by bare earth and devoid of flowers, shrubs and shade appeared in an early issue of *The Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, together with recommendations on how to avoid malaria.³ Five years later the Director of Agriculture in describing

¹ H. M. Buttress, 'Agricultural land-use in the Mazoe Valley during the period 1966-1971', *The Rhodesia Agricultural Journal* (1973), 70, 105-6; A. G. Davis, 'Agricultural land-use in the Mazoe Valley', *ibid.* (1974), 71, 149-55; 'Agricultural land-use in the Mazoe Valley : Land capability classification', *ibid.* (1976), 73, 65-71; 'Maize production in the Mazoe Valley', *ibid.*, 161-8; A. G. Davis and G. P. Y. Clarke, 'Agricultural land-use in the Mazoe Valley : Spatial distribution and water supplies', *ibid.* (1978), 75, 15-20; see also my forthcoming paper, 'Cotton Production in the Mazoe Valley'.

² National Archives of Rhodesia, Historical Manuscripts Collection, MA4/1/1 (Mazoe Farmers' Association: Minute Books: 16 Oct. 1904 - 11 Aug. 1915).

³ 'The Gravesend Estate' *The Rhodesian Agricultural Journal* (1904-5), 2, facing 118; The Medical Director, 'Malaria', *ibid.*, 131-9.

the farming scene in the Valley contrasted the 'excellent dwelling houses' with the 'huts and ramshackle makeshifts [that] are too prevalent, and [where] the mosquito is often given free play'.⁴ In the late 1920s the situation was little improved, as is vividly described by Hylda Richards.⁵ Even accommodation provided by Government for the doctor in Bindura during that period was minimal with three rooms, separate kitchen, no bathroom and water arriving by donkey cart.⁶ Government found it necessary to issue a further set of three plans, ranging from the simple rondavel with separate kitchen and bathroom, to that of a five-roomed brick house including bathroom, kitchen and pantry all under an iron roof, facing north and with fly screens on the windows.⁷

Old photographs illustrating farming scenes in the early decades confirm that the farm house usually comprised one or more rondavels under thatch, or, more rarely, a single-storey brick structure under iron with an open stoep. Floors were of earth or cement covered with mats while less commonly they were planks or boards raised well above the ground. Damage and destruction of wood including furniture was rife despite the constant inspection and treatment of door and window frames with paraffin. For farmers returning from rare holidays it was not uncommon to find the door handle coming away from the front door, which fell in pieces, or an ant hill in the living room. Hot water was provided from a petrol drum over a wood fire stoked by the garden servant every evening—a method still widely used. Farm houses near a mine might have electricity, but otherwise paraffin lamps and candles served for many years.

Over the years many of the original farm houses have been replaced by larger and more substantial buildings or extensions have been made to the original structures; and owing to subdivision of farms, additional houses have been built. Today's new farm houses built in the Valley are provided with an ant course in the footings of the walls, metal frames for doors and windows, treated timbers in the roof, wood-block floors or tiles on concrete, together with all the fittings of a town house.

In the summer of 1970-1 a survey was made of 100 of the 286 farm houses in the Intensive Conservation Areas of Barwick, Marodzi-Tatagura, Glendale and Bindura;⁸ owing to the absence of 13 ladies of the house, information was obtained on only 87 houses.

In terms of age these houses fall into four groups by date of erection:

- (i) in the early days before the First World War;
- (ii) between the two wars, 1919-39;
- (iii) in the immediate post-war decade, 1945-55;
- (iv) during the following fourteen years, 1956-71.

⁴ E. A. Nobbs, 'Farms and farming in Rhodesia. The Mazoe District', *ibid.* (1910-11), 8, 46-7.

⁵ H. M. Richards, *Next Year Will Be Better* (Cape Town, Timmins, 1952).

⁶ Mrs R. M. Morris, 'Bindura in the twenties', *Rhodesiana* (March 1977), 36, 66-7.

⁷ H. Roberts, 'Farm homesteads', *The Rhodesian Agricultural Journal* (1927), 24, 671-7, 779-84, 881-5.

⁸ R. C. Hannington, *Mazoe Valley Agricultural Survey* (Salisbury, Govt Printer for Min. of Agriculture, 1972).

We were not able to ascertain which was the oldest house nor the precise date of its construction. This arises out of the fact that stones giving the date of building rarely if ever exist, neither over the door nor in a corner of the foundations. Even now there are no statutory regulations nor records of the plans of new houses in the Valley, with the result that dating of farm houses erected since the Second World War is known only by the present family who actually built their house, of which there were 14 out of 45 in the survey.

In 1904 there were only 18 farms beneficially occupied in the whole valley, and all were in what was recorded as the South Mazoe District in the Agricultural Census of 1905;⁹ of the small number of houses erected before 1914, it was surprising to find that 11 in our survey were reported to have been built in those early days.

Salient features of these houses in their present state are set out in Tables I-IV together with comparable information for houses built in later periods.

Of the 37 houses, only 24 were built by the present occupants, which represent 53 per cent of those erected since 1945. In all groups extensions had been made to the houses, particularly during the period since 1956, and this applies even to houses erected after that date. Apart from one farmer who had just commenced operations and was still living in a pole and dagga rondavel, all houses were of brick, with the oldest ones under iron. From 1919 onwards, and particularly after the Second World War, houses were covered with asbestos or tile roofs while thatch was used on eight of the houses. In total, 63 per cent were under iron.

Of the three forms of ant-proof courses in the walls, metal, bitumen and concrete, the last was the most common, at 64 per cent. Damage by termites was reported in 24 houses of which 18 had a concrete ant-proof course, 2 metal and 4 bitumen.

Table II shows that there was no marked difference in the size of houses built during the four periods if we include the rooms which were added at a later date. There was a wide range in the number of rooms from 6 to 21, with 53 houses possessing from 9 to 12. No record was obtained of the size of rooms, but the impression from observation was that normally they were large.

Forty-one houses possessed one set of modern conveniences in the form of bath with or without shower, hand basin and toilet. Another 41 and 2 sets, while 4 houses had 3; one house, with 16 rooms built after 1945, had 4. All houses possessed a telephone, whereas only 65 possessed a television set.

The stoep is a characteristic feature of farm houses in Rhodesia, particularly of the older houses, either built as part of the original house or added later. However, 7 houses in our survey were without stoeps, while on the other hand 33 houses had 2 stoeps and 14 had 3 or more. There was no apparent relation between the number of rooms and number of stoeps.

⁹ 'The Agricultural Census of April, 1904', *The Rhodesian Agricultural Journal* (1904-5), 2, 148.

Table I.

SHOWING A CLASSIFICATION BY AGE AND CONSTRUCTION OF
EIGHTY-SEVEN FARM HOUSES IN THE MAZOE VALLEY
IN THE SUMMER OF 1970-1

	<i>Period of Building</i>				<i>Totals</i>
	<i>Before the</i> 1914-18 War	1919-39	<i>Post-War</i> 1945-55	1956-70	
Number of Houses	12	30	32	13	87
House Built by Present Occupant	Nil	Nil	14	10	24
Extensions					
Pre-war (1939)	2	—	—	—	2
Post-war	3	6	—	—	9
1956 to 1970	3	18	18	4	42
Roofing					
Iron	12	24	13	6	55
Asbestos	—	5	13	1	19
Slates or Tiles	—	1	2	2	5
Thatch	—	—	4	4	8
Anti-Proof Course in Walls					
Metal	2	6	1	2	11
Bitumen	—	6	8	6	20
Concrete	10	18	23	5	56
Termite damage	4	10	8	2	24

Table II

SHOWING A CLASSIFICATION BY ACCOMMODATION AND
ASPECT OF EIGHTY-SEVEN FARM HOUSES IN THE MAZOE
VALLEY IN THE SUMMER OF 1970-1

	Period of Building				
	Before the		Post-War		
	1914-18 War	1919-39	1945-55	1956-70	Totals
Number of Houses	12	30	32	13	87
Number of Rooms					
5 to 8	3	2	2	1	8
9 to 12	5	21	21	7	54
13 or more	4	7	9	5	25
Modern Conveniences					
One	7	14	16	4	41
Two	5	14	13	9	41
Three or more	—	2	3	—	5
Stoop					
None	—	—	5	2	7
One	3	5	17	8	33
Two	6	15	9	3	33
Three or more	3	10	1	—	14
Screens on					
Windows	7	25	26	6	64
Stoop	5	26	19	5	55
Aspect of House					
North	3	6	7	4	20
South	5	12	7	4	28
East	3	10	14	4	31
West	1	2	4	1	8

Table III

SHOWING A CLASSIFICATION BY SITING IN RELATION TO THE ARABLE LANDS AND FARM BUILDINGS OF EIGHTY-SEVEN FARM HOUSES IN THE MAZOE VALLEY IN THE SUMMER OF 1970-1

	<i>Period of Building</i>				<i>Totals</i>
	<i>Before the 1914-18 War</i>	<i>1919-39</i>	<i>Post-War 1945-55</i>	<i>1956-70</i>	
Number of Houses	12	30	32	13	87
View from House					
Commands					
All the Arable Lands	1	3	1	—	5
Over Half the Arable Lands	1	11	6	5	23
Less than Half the Arable Lands	8	14	24	8	54
None	2	2	1	—	5
Distance from House to Main Farm Building					
Under 50 m	2	5	9	—	16
50-100 m	1	7	8	5	21
101-200 m	4	10	8	4	26
Over 200 m	5	8	7	4	24

Table IV

SHOWING A CLASSIFICATION OF THE EIGHTY-SEVEN GARDENS IN THE MAZOE VALLEY IN THE SUMMER OF 1970-1

	<i>Period of Building</i>				<i>Totals</i>
	<i>Before the 1914-18 War</i>	<i>1919-39</i>	<i>Post-War 1945-55</i>	<i>1956-70</i>	
Number of Houses	12	30	32	13	87
Garden Site					
Level	2	14	13	4	33
Terraced	7	6	11	4	28
Sloping	3	10	8	5	26
Approximate Size (ha)					
Under 2/5	6	10	10	4	30
Over 2/5 under 1	4	12	16	8	40
Over 1	2	8	6	1	17
Reservoir in Garden					
None	2	15	5	5	27
One	8	14	23	7	52
Two or more	2	1	4	1	8
Swimming Pool	2	14	15	7	46
Pool Filter	0	2	3	1	6
Gardens with Neither Reservoir nor Swimming Pool	2	11	5	2	20

Mosquito screens covered the windows of only 64 houses leaving 23 families subject to the incursions of flies, mosquitos and other flying insects. Stoops on 55 houses were enclosed by screens. The absence of screens on both windows and stoeps in some of the older houses was unexpected in view of the fact that D.D.T. and other effective insecticides were not available until after the last war. In some instances only one or two bedrooms possessed screens on the windows, but unfortunately no detailed record was made on this point. Normally houses faced north, south or east, rarely west.

The topography of the Valley has lent itself to the siting of farm houses in positions where they command a wide view of the farm, enabling the occupant to more easily supervise the field operations on his farm. Only 5 houses did not overlook the arable land on the farm, while another 5 overlooked all the arable, as shown in Table III. Of the remainder, 23 commanded a view of over half the arable, and the balance of 54 looked out on less than half. Likewise proximity to the main farm building provides for greater ease of supervision of labour, on servicing machinery and feeding of livestock. On the other hand too close proximity will engulf the house with flies and smells from the farm when the wind is in the wrong direction. In our survey there was a wide scatter of distance, with 16 farms where it was less than 50 m and 24 where it exceeded 200 m.

Lovely well-kept gardens form a characteristic feature of many home-steads in the Valley. The majority of the occupants employ at least one person in the garden, supplemented from time to time by additional farm labourers. Water is by no means unlimited, so that the claims of the farm and the vegetable garden will normally take priority over the needs of flowers and shrubs. On the other hand, kraal manure or compost, together with tobacco scrap when available, are supplemented with fertilizers to provide a generous level of fertility for the garden. The combined wealth of species of trees, shrubs and flowers in any one garden cannot be recorded on a single visit so that a few readily recognizable features were noted and these are set out in Table IV. Level gardens were more common than terraced or sloping ground. All were large in area, with 19 per cent being one hectare or more in size. This area, however, does include the vegetable garden.

Water for the gardens was drawn direct from boreholes, from reservoirs in the garden and from swimming pools. Only 13 per cent of the pools had filters so that changing the water in the remainder was desirable if not always carried out. Nevertheless it was surprising to find that 27 per cent of the gardens possessed neither a reservoir nor a swimming pool, which strongly suggests that adequate water was directly available from the borehole in these particular instances.

The ravages of time may destroy most of these houses in the present century. The majority were constructed of bricks made on the farm and are therefore easily damaged. In addition termites readily gain access to wooden frames of doors and windows and particularly timber trusses in the roof. Unless both walls and woodwork are protected by careful and regular inspection, coupled with good repair work, deterioration of both rapidly sets in. The fact that there were 12 houses in the study which had been standing for over half a century is a marked tribute to those who built them and their subsequent owners.

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