

### **MOLONGLO & RUSSELL HILL**

Molonglo Internment Camp was constructed in around 6 weeks in mid 1918 and was used for a short period of time to intern civilians (German). Following the end of the war around half the barrack buildings were sold off and the remaining buildings converted into 120 cottages for married men (3 or 6 rooms) with shared bathing, laundry and lavatory facilities. Accommodation was also made available for 150 single tradesmen. The Mess Caterer in the early 1920s was Bill Convine and his wife Alice. During their tenure they had the misfortune to lose two children in accidents in the kitchen of the Mess. Below is a photograph of Frankie Convine who died a few weeks after this photograph was taken. (Photograph courtesy of Bill Convine Jr who also provided the photograph on the next page.) In the background of the photograph are the barracks of Molonglo Internment Camp. The site today is modern Fyshwick.



The next photograph shows Mrs Convine with children at Molonglo.



A reference to the internment camp is found in pages 27-28 - Narelle O'Rourke's book *A Country Nurse and Midwife The life, career and times of MARY O'ROURKE/BOWERS MBE in the Queanbeyan District of New South Wales 1889-1973*. Chapter 3 1917-1918 *DIARIES QUEANBEYAN AND CANBERRA DISTRICT DURING THE GREAT WAR* page 40.

*DAIRIES OF ANN O'ROURKE...*

*27.5.1918*

*The first one hundred internees arrived at the camp this morning, quite a lot of people went up to the railway to see them.*

Narelle then goes on to give the history of the internees - from Bourke etc. She also mentions

*In the Minutes book of Membership, Queanbeyan Political Labor League, June 5<sup>th</sup> 1916, one item of correspondence dealt with was as follows: 'A communication from the Waterloo War Service Committee asking co-operation in requesting that all enemy born males of 18 years and upwards be interned irrespective of circumstances or position irrespective of circumstances or position'. Moved by Mr White, seconded by Mr Wilde 'that we co-operate.' A simple word 'Lost" after 'co-operate' showed that the motion in the particular town of Queanbeyan was not carried.*

The conversion of the Molonglo Internment Camp into cottages and single men's accommodation occurred in 1921-1922 and one of the buildings was converted into

a school for the children. Following Molonglo, small unlined two bedroom timber portable cottages designed by HM Rolland were erected first at Westlake (62 cottages – 1924 & 1926), Acton (15 cottages 1924) and Causeway (1925-1926). These were insufficient for the needs of the construction workers and in 1925 the FCC (Federal Capital Commission – headed by the First Commissioner, John Butters) allowed 80 sites for men to built their own humpies at Riverbourne (on the south side of the Molonglo River in the area roughly opposite Harman Naval Base) and in 1926 one hundred & twenty sites at Russell Hill (near the present site of the Campbell Shops). Riverbourne officially closed in 1927. Russell Hill survived into the 1950s and in 1926 the Masonic Hall at Acton was moved to Russell Hill where it was used as a school until 1929. The building was then moved to Ainslie where it became and still is the Ainslie Hall in Corroboree Crescent.

John Butters – later Sir John – attempted to close Russell Hill where there was no sewerage or electricity and move the people to Molonglo. Following are some of the documents relating to these settlements and John Butters’ attempt to close one.



**Above: Sir John Butters, First Commissioner of Federal Capital Advisory Commission. He is the person responsible for the information in this chapter.**

### **RUSSELL HILL & MOLONGLO SETTLEMENTS BACKGROUND**

The Federal Capital Advisory Committee was in charge of building works from 1920 to the beginning of 1925 when the Federal Capital Commission (FCC 1925-March 1930) under the direction of John Butters, First Commissioner, took over. Molonglo was converted into accommodation for workmen under the auspices of FCAC and Russell Hill under the FCC. In one way Russell Hill like Riverbourne (1925-1927) before it was an admittance of defeat by the FCC who were unable to provide decent accommodation for workmen.

Russell Hill was established in 1926 in what is now the modern suburb of Campbell. One hundred & twenty house sites were marked for men to construct cottages for themselves and their families. Molonglo on the other hand was an ex-internment camp hurriedly built in twelve weeks in 1918. In 1920/1921 the remaining buildings not sold off and removed were converted into workmen's cottages (120) and a single Tradesmen's Barracks. The FCC wanted to get rid of Russell Hill and suggested that Russell Hill should be removed by 1929. Molonglo was considered by the FCC to be good and suitable accommodation for workmen. Following is a letter promoting that choice.

Australian Archives: CP464/5 10/15

#### RUSSELL HILL

*The Chief Commissioner to-day made the following statement explaining the Commission's policy and intentions in connection with the Russell Hill Settlement. "In order that the public of Canberra in general and the residents of Russell Hill settlement in particular may understand clearly the history of Russell Hill settlement and the Commission's intentions with regard to the future, I should be glad if the press would publish the following.*

*At a certain point during the peak period of construction there was ample work for unskilled labor in Canberra and a shortage of work in New South Wales generally and one of the results of this was an influx of people, almost destitute, some of whom arrived with a wife and several small children and practically nothing but what they stood up in. The Commission had no accommodation available for these people and no prospects of being able to house them for some considerable time. Possibly the sound thing for the Commission to have done would have been to have refused them work and send them back from whence they came. Instead of this, however, a special effort was made to meet the situation; they were given sites upon which a camp at Russell Hill and elsewhere and found temporary employment, every such individual being warned that he could only be allowed to camp temporarily and could only be given employment until such time as he had accumulated enough money to go and seek employment elsewhere. The number of such families arose to well over 100 and they all eventually congregated at Russell Hill under conditions that permitted of proper supervision from a hygienic point of view. Every tenant had the whole situation thoroughly and clearly explained to him and each signed an undertaking not to erect any buildings on the site without written authority and an acknowledgment of the fact that the Commission might have to ask the tenant to leave the site at a fortnight's notice. As much as two years ago specific instructions were given to commence and carry out the Commission's established policy in connection with this settlement by demolishing completely the hutment immediately a family left the site, but in order to alleviate hardship authority was given by which even although unauthorized structures had been erected they might be sold once to an incoming tenant if the place was reasonably fit for habitation. In August 1927 a letter was sent to the Honorary Secretary of the District Committee of the Social Service Association in which the whole matter was explained and a special reminder was given that the whole settlement would have to be completely demolished at an*

*early date [It lasted into the 1950s]. At about the same time a number of the residents at Russell Hill settlement called at the office with a petition from the residents with regard to certain conditions at the settlement and in replying to them the earlier notifications with regard to tenancy were repeated in writing as the following paragraph in the letter shows:- "It was made perfectly clear to everyone that the settlement was of a very temporary character and might be demolished within the next three years." And in another paragraph it was stated that the Commission "is doing everything reasonable to make the camping conditions there as comfortable and as sanitary as the circumstances will permit, but that it definitely intends to demolish the whole settlement at the very earliest possible moment."*

*Since that date on a number of occasions similar warnings have been given, and the policy of demolishing anything left on a site after a resident has vacated it has been followed up continuously.*

*I hope that this has made clear - (1) How the settlement came to be established in the first place;*  
*(2) That every tenant has known from the beginning that the whole settlement was of a temporary character and was liable to be abolished just as soon as the Commission could conveniently arrange to do so without inflicting any serious hardship. It may be mentioned incidentally that the mere existence of Russell Hill settlement involves the public of Australia in considerable expense. [NB the settlement was not connected to sewer or electricity system - water was connected to the settlement - there was a rough track into the settlement - hard to understand where & how the "considerable expense" came into being!] The Commission maintains a camp supervisor; we have had to establish a sanitary service and a garbage removal system, and in addition a local school. The mere existence of that school is an embarrassment in that the available supply of teachers does not meet the demand and it is obviously unsound and unfair to maintain a school establishment in excess of the requirements and leave a shortage elsewhere. There is ample accommodation for additional pupils at Molonglo and Telopea Park [several miles away across the other side of the Molonglo River - and no buses could get into Russell Hill], whilst the other services could be provided very much more cheaply elsewhere than at Russell Hill.*

*Now with regard to the method which the Commission had in mind and still intends to pursue in abolishing this settlement, I may say that the Commission hoped to have been able to built a considerable number of permanent workmen's cottages during the last twelve months but owing to the reduction of funds available to it this has had to be postponed. The effect of this has been that the rate at which the settlement is being abolished has been less than was hoped for. The first positive step towards the end has been that which was taken recently. Instructions were given that as every cottage at Molonglo, Causeway, Eastlake and Westlake became vacant they were to be reconditioned and after preliminary adjustments of tenancies in order of priority of application the ultimate vacancies were to be filled by transferring Russell Hill residents who were living in bag huts or other tenements of an unsatisfactory character. The residents concerned have been given ample notice and will be*

*required to conform to the instructions which have been laid down. The existing vacancies in the established settlements having been filled, every new vacancy will be similarly used to place a Russell Hill resident who is living under the least satisfactory conditions existing at Russell Hill at the time. How many months will elapse before it is possible to eliminate all unsatisfactory housing at Russell Hill it is impossible to say, but it may be recognised as quite definite that a large proportion of the residences at Russell Hill are considered by the Government and the Commission as most unsatisfactory and that what has been referred to in Parliament and elsewhere as "slums" at Russell Hill must be abolished as soon as we can arrange for it.*

*The Commission throughout has done everything possible to obviate hardship, and as a matter of fact has obviated it, and it will do its best to obviate hardship in the future, and it is unfortunate that the Commission is not being assisted by the local residents and others in this connection. The tenements at Molonglo and Russell Hill have been inspected both by the Territorial Medical Officer for Health and by the Director-General of Health for the Commonwealth and as a result of these inspections the Government and the Commission are satisfied that the Commission's policy is sound and that it should have the co-operation of the public of Canberra in eliminating an undoubted blot on Canberra such as exists in a considerable proportion of the Russell Hill settlement.*

*A careful study of the probable requirements for workmen's housing and money likely to be available during the next few years indicates clearly that it will be some years before the Molonglo Settlement can in turn be abolished and in the meantime, the provisions of the Housing Act are available to Canberra workmen to enable them to build their own homes within the City area. As has already been announced the Commission has experimented with the construction of some further temporary housing to utilize the present surplus of workmen's cubicle material, and if this experiment proves successful a number of cottages of this class will be made available as close as possible to existing City services, schools, and shopping facilities, but not at Molonglo as was suggested by certain individuals recently. The settlement at Molonglo will not be increased in size.*

*So far as good class residences are concerned at Russell Hill, these will be left until the last. The owners of these buildings deliberately ignored the warnings which were given them and the instructions that written approval had to be obtained before the buildings were proceeded with. They must accept full responsibility for any expense involved in removing their cottages elsewhere or selling the material, but even here the Commission will do everything possible to alleviate hardship.*

*Summarising the whole situation I desire to say that this whole matter has been most carefully considered by the Minister and the Commission. It must be admitted that the Russell Hill settlement as it exists today is most undesirable, that quite apart altogether from the merits or demerits of the Molonglo or Westlake settlements, it must go, and that obviously it must go before these two. Many thousands of pounds of public money have been spent in converting the Molonglo settlement from*

*tenements into cottages, and that the situation which has developed as a result of circumstances outside the control of the Commission cannot be cleared up in a day.*

*The Commission, as the administrative authority, could of course adopt the easy course, but the present unsatisfactory conditions cannot be cleaned up in that way, whereas, the pursuance of the Commission's established policy in this matter will clean it up without hardship to anyone.*

**REPORT OF RELATIVE MERITS, FROM A HEALTH POINT OF VIEW  
OF MOLONGLO AND RUSSELL HILL SETTLEMENTS**

**Locality.**

*Molonglo settlement is located on land which slopes from the crest of a low hill, northeasterly, towards the Molonglo River. The slope is uniform and is ample to provide good natural drainage. The surrounding area is treeless and the settlement receives little shelter from the prevailing winds.*

*Russell Hill settlement is situated on the north-western slope of Russell Hill, in lightly timbered country. It is sheltered to the north and north-west by low knolls and is not exposed in any degree to the prevailing winds. The whole settlement is situated on comparatively steep slopes, and the natural drainage is excellent.*

**Layout.**

*Molonglo settlement, which was originally designed as an internment camp for prisoners of war, is laid out in an orderly manner with streets at right angles to one another. There are 96 cottages situated on blocks with frontages of 30 to 44 feet. The front gardens are of moderate size and the back yards comparatively small.*

*At Russell Hill there are 98 dwellings well grouped on small allotments in well defined streets. The road surfaces in both localities are unmade.*

**Drainage**

*Although there is a satisfactory natural surface slope at Molonglo there are a number of artificial depressions in which water tends to accumulate after rain, forming shallow pools and mud holes. These could readily be drained, however. At Russell Hill, there is no evidence of any accumulations of surface water in the settlement. Below the settlement there is a small gravel pit which contains a small amount of water after rain, but this has no sanitary significance.*

**Population.**

*Molonglo has at present a population of about 655 of whom 113 are under 5 years of age, and 96 between the ages of 5 and 12. The attendance at the local school is 120. The population of Russell Hill is not recorded, but there are 89 homes and the school roll includes 120 names. There would appear to be fewer infants in the settlement than at Molonglo.*

**Housing.**

*All the cottages at Molonglo are of wooden construction and are of two types. The smaller cottages have three rooms, a bathroom and an indoor water closet, while in the larger type there are five rooms. A detached wash-house is provided for each cottage. In most cases the outer walls of the cottages have an air space between the shell and the lining. In some cases, however the lining is in contact with the shell, no air spaces being provided. The partition walls are all constructed of a double thickness of timber, but without an air space. The floors are well above ground level. No fire places are provided, cooking being done on small stoves placed in the kitchens and equipped with iron chimneys. There is no provision for heating apart from these stoves. [NB These improvements of separating the long barracks into individual houses and providing an indoor WC and bathroom occurred in 1927. Prior to that there was no double timber used on the outside walls and the wind used to come through the cracks between the timber - it was still wet when put in situ and as it dried shrank.]*

*The houses at Russell Hill, on the other hand, have been erected entirely according to the enterprise and resources of the occupier. Bagging, kerosene, tin galvanised iron, weather boards, packing cases, malthoid and fibro-cement, have all been used. The dwellings vary from primitive humpies to neat and well built cottages. Even in the case of most of the humpies, however, fire places are built in and windows glazed. The number of rooms seems to range from two to five. The homes, though flimsy in appearance, appear to be well kept, clean and moderately comfortable.*

*It is debatable to what extent the aesthetics of home architecture may effect habits and so health. Molonglo presents a barrack-like orderliness. Russell Hill has a picturesque independence.*

**Sewerage and Nightsoil Disposal.**

*Molonglo is provided with a water carriage sewerage system, the sewage being dealt with in a community septic tank situated well away from habitations. The service appears to be in good order. In Russell Hill there is a free sanitary service, and disposal is affected by dumping into the city sewerage system. In general privies are of a good type and well maintained.*

**Garbage.**

*Both settlements are included in the city garbage removal service.*

**Water.**

*Water is provided to both settlements from the city water supply.*

**Light.**

*Molonglo is provided with electric light; both no lighting service is available at Russell Hill.*



**Fire Protection.**

Hydrants are provided at both settlements, but the dwellings at Russell Hill are of a more fire resisting nature, and are situated at greater distance from one another than is the case at Molonglo, where the fire risk appears to be considerable. No fires, however, have occurred at Molonglo in the past.

**Personal Hygiene.**

In both settlements the inhabitants are a good type of Australian working class, better than a random sample of population from a city industrial suburb. Carelessness in personal habits of hygiene is not noticeably in evidence at either settlement. A relatively high standard of personal hygiene is indicated by the cleanliness and tidiness of children, the house surroundings, gardens and yards and (the inspection being made on washing day) the washing on the line. There is little to choose between the settlements on the grounds of personal habits that might affect community health.

**Mortality and Morbidity.**

The sickness records of both settlements are remarkably good. Local medical practitioners have always commented on the general healthiness of all camps in the Territory. Notifications of infectious diseases are few. In the past nine months the only notifications from the settlements have been:-

Molonglo: One Scarlet fever  
One suspected diphtheria (probably negative)  
One mumps (reported. Not notifiable)

Russell Hill:  
One scarlet fever  
One erysipelas

This compares well with notifications for the City as a whole, the records for 1928 being:-

Diphtheria	9	Scarlet fever	13
Erysipelas	2	Tuberculosis	2
Measles	16		

Recent deaths for Molonglo settlement have been extracted from the Register as follows:

Adults: One accident  
One general peritonitis (infected uterus)  
One malignant rheumatic pyoemia  
One lym... [typed over - paper slipped in typewriter]

**Children Under Five:**

12.9.27 Whooping cough  
6.12.27 Cerebral Congestion: intestinal toxemia  
13.3.28 Enteritis  
19.3.28 Gastro-enteritis

18.6.28 Asthenia (Breech birth)

7.9.1928 Broncho pneumonia

Deaths recorded from Russell Hill are not available.

*The Mothercraft Society maintains a branch centre at Molonglo where the nurse attends once a week. There is no centre at Russell Hill, but the nurse visits the settlement. Infant health in both settlements appears to be relatively satisfactory. In this matter, however, the individual factor of the mother is usually of more importance than environment. Considering the number of young children in both settlements, the mortality and morbidity statistics are remarkably good.*

**Conclusion.**

*From the above detailed consideration, it is difficult to express any opinion as to the relative merits of the two settlements from the viewpoint of personal or community health.*

.....oOo.....

---

Australian Archives CP464/5 10/15

NOTES OF DEPUTATION OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITORY CITIZENS LEAGUE WHICH WAITED UPON THE MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS ON THE 4th APRIL, 1929.

PRESENT: Dr Alcorn, Colonel Walker, Mr McInnis

*The Minister referred to the unfulfilled promise mentioned in the Canberra Times of the 4th April, 1929, and asked the particulars of the promise.*

*DR ALCORN stated that the reference was to the fact that the Minister promised them at their last interview that he would communicate with the League before taking definite action.*

*The Commission had issued Orders that the residents of Russell Hill must go to the Molonglo Settlement. Certain of the residents had got written notice that they must leave within a fortnight of the date of the notice.*

*As a medical man he considered Russell Hill a much more suitable place than the site at Molonglo, which was low and unprotected.*

*The Molonglo site had been condemned by the representatives of Germany when it was used as an internment Camp. The houses were rotten and were covered with dust which penetrated through the cracks in the walls. They could not be compared with most of the houses at Russell Hill.*

*A lot of bag structures at Russell Hill are much better than the houses at Molonglo.*

*Russell Hill is sheltered by timber and the houses are built on a virgin site as against a contaminated site at Molonglo.*

*Although the Molonglo site is sewerred, sanitation is not everything. There should be facilities for the protection of people's bodies.*

*He did not agree with the statement by the Health Authorities that the Molonglo site was as healthy as Russell Hill.*

*COLONEL GOODWIN No one considers that Russell Hill should remain indefinitely. Some of the residents have spent between 150 pounds and 200 pounds on their houses. They were told they would be permitted to live there for five years.*

*The Molonglo site is better theoretically, but the locality is nothing like Russell Hill.*

*THE MINISTER Informed the deputation that he had paid a personal visit to both areas. He did not agree that Russell Hill was a better site than Molonglo which was sewerred and had better conveniences.*

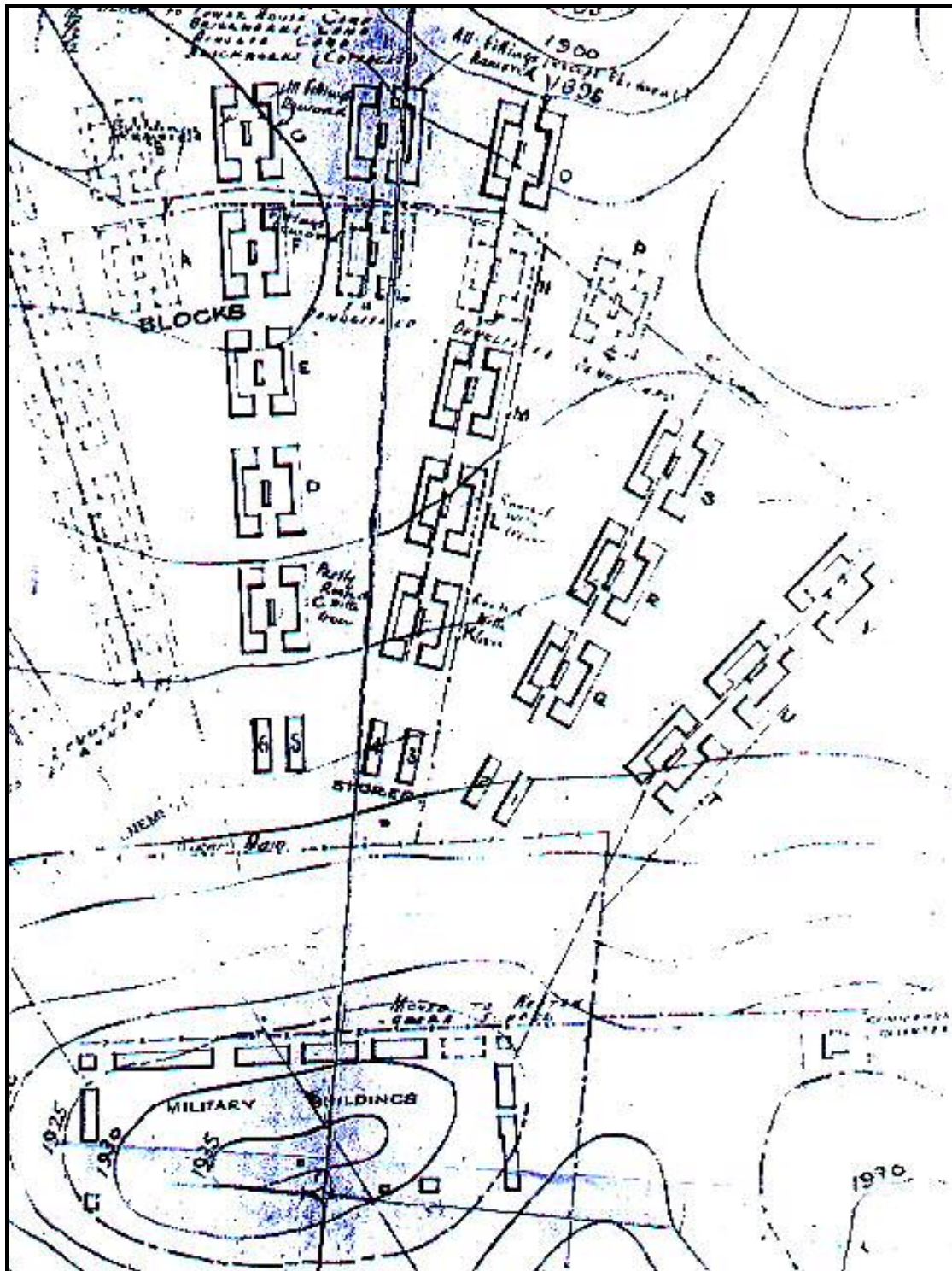
*The position was that the people of Russell Hill were informed quite definitely at the outset that they would be permitted to live there as a purely temporary measure. They had no definite tenure.*

*It was not the policy to remove everybody from Russell Hill to Molonglo. The idea was that Russell Hill should gradually close down.*

*Some of the houses at Russell Hill were satisfactory but others were disgraceful. The area was not sewerred, and if an epidemic broke out both the Government and the Commission would be blamed for permitting such a state of affairs to exist. It would take from eighteen months to two years to eliminate Russell Hill. The movement would be gradual and would be effected with as little hardship as possible to the residents. He had to regard the matter from various angles. It was full of perplexities.*

*On the conclusion of the interview Dr Alcorn mentioned that if the Government persisted in removing people from Russell Hill, his League would have to take up the question of provision of funds to enable the legal aspect of the matter to be considered.*

Plans showing the tenements (barracks) at Molonglo converted into tenements



# One Complete Tenement Block, Molonglo

MS 100  
04/31



PLAN OF  
ONE COMPLETE TENEMENT BLOCK  
AT MOLONGLO  
SCALE 1/4" = 1 FOOT

The six-roomed cottages  
on either end - three  
roomed in centre.



Shared Bath house,  
Lavatories & Laundry  
Facilities

