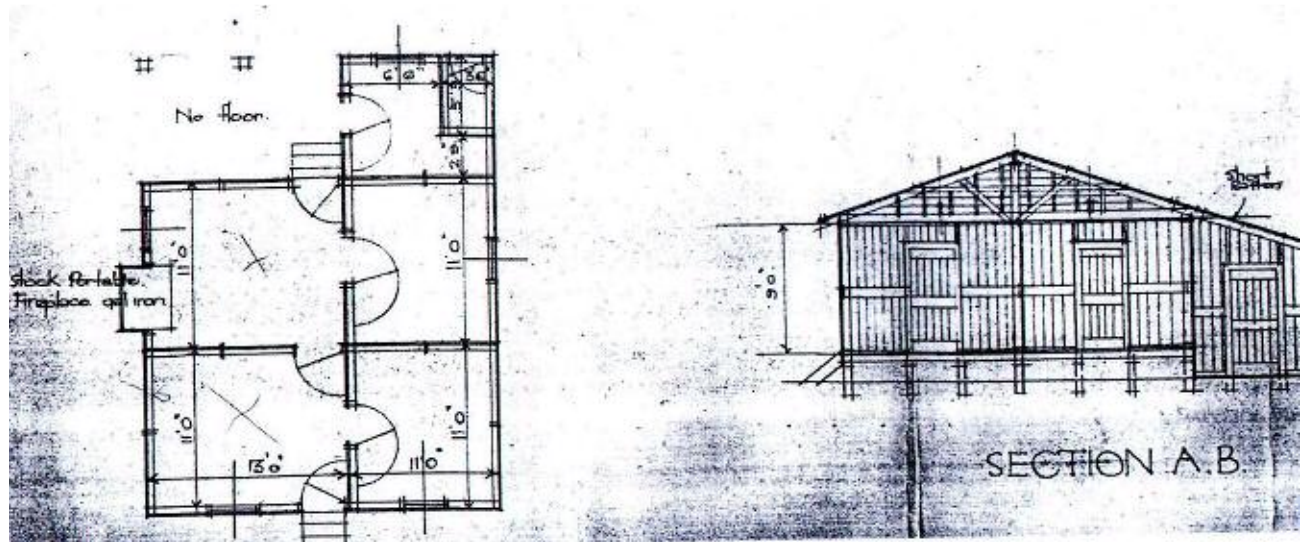


## WESTLAKE COTTAGES IN *THE GAP*

In 1923 the FCT Works Director and architect, HM Rolland, visited Contractor John Howie's settlement at Westlake. There he inspected the two and three bedroom timber cottages built by the contractor's carpenters for Howie's married tradesmen. Following this visit Rolland designed a basic small portable timber cottage which could be produced relatively cheaply, erected near major worksites and moved to new sites as required.



The houses stood on concrete piers that were around six inches square. The height of each was determined by the slope on which the house was built. They were connected to electricity, water and sewerage.

The plan of the cottages shows the basic shape of the house - a square divided into four with another small area at the rear that contained the laundry (wood fired copper & concrete tubs), tin bath that fitted into the 2ft wide area behind the lavatory area. The lavatory entrance was on the outside of the house. In our house – 27 Westlake – a door was cut by a previous tenant out of the corrugated iron wall to allow entrance to the lavatory from the laundry bathroom. A curtain hung over the hole to provide privacy. Initially there was only one tin backed fire place in the kitchen used to direct smoke away from the fuel stove. The living area was supplied with a small cast iron stove that was later changed to an open fire with a tin backed fire place.

One of the young plumbers on the Westlake job was Tom Robertson of Oaks Estate. He recalled that the lavatory cisterns were seconds and many broke down with regularity. From complaints made by householders in the 1940s it is also noted that many of the cold water taps in the bathroom that should have been placed over the baths didn't quite make it to the right area.

Cold water for clothes washing and filling the tub for bathing was heated in the copper and carried to tubs and bath. A small cast iron stove provided heat in the front lounge room. This was later replaced with an open fireplace with a tin backed chimney that allowed heat to bleed from the room. Cooking was carried out on a wood fired stove. At least one

electric power point was available for use in the kitchen. It was placed in the kitchen near the back door.

Cold water pipes were on the outside of the buildings and I recall that my mother wrapped the pipes in rags to prevent freezing in the colder months. It was always wise to fill the kettle before going to bed of a night to make sure that a cup of tea could be made in the morning.

The cottages were unlined. In the 1950s the interiors of the cottages were repainted and I recall that I chose blue for my bedroom. Unfortunately my mental choice of blue was quite different to that of the painters and after a chalk line was made across each wall at the height of a picture rail the lower half of the room was painted a dark blue and the upper half and ceiling a white colour.

The exterior of the cottages were painted green. According to Tom Robertson of Oaks Estate the choice of colour was to help the cottages blend in with their surroundings.

Like most of the locals at Westlake, our backyard had an excellent vegetable garden. Flowers were planted in the front yard. In the back top corner of our yard (diamond shape because it was on a corner) an air-raid shelter had been dug. In front of the house on the open land now in the grounds of the Mexican Embassy a series of trenches were dug just in case of an air raid. We moved into our cottage in 1942.

Many people built a room off the back of their cottages. In the case of large families this became a necessity. In the post World War 2 period the government provided some families with a large cubicle to take the overflow of family members. However, these were not always a success because a number leaked during wet weather.

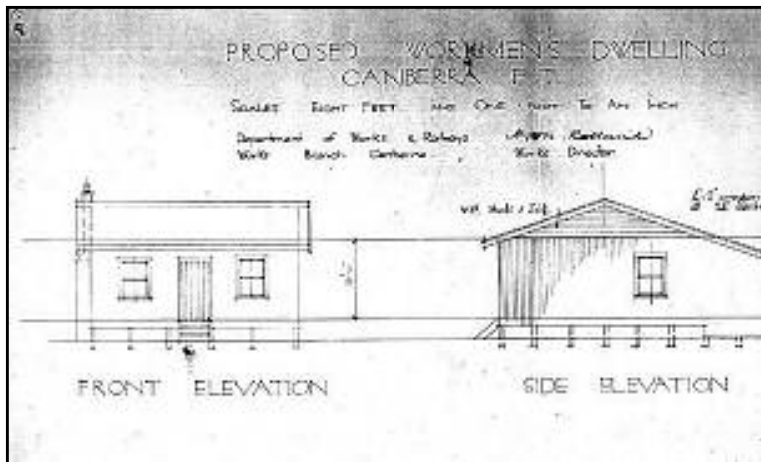
## **ROADS**

The original entrance to the settlement was on a track that entered the Gap from land covered from the early 1940s by the US Embassy building and yard. This track continued down in the area of modern Empire Circuit past the Canberra Mosque. The newer entrance used from the 1940s started at State Circle below the US embassy – bus shelter erected there – thence up Perth Avenue and down Darwin Avenue. These roads were not built at that time but follow relatively closely the old entrance track. Incidentally the original plan for Darwin Avenue was roughly in the area of Block 2, Section 128 Stirling Park, which may explain why that block is owned by the ACT government and not the Commonwealth?

There have been numerous plans for development of Stirling Park. The most recent one that divided the former Section 22 into two sections - 128 and 22. Block 4, Section 128 Stirling Park is a long thin undulating block that cuts through the sites of cottages 29, 43, 48-52. It looks surprisingly like a road joining Empire Circuit where it juts into the park and Marina Place on the other side of the park. A member of the NCA assured me that this is just a long thin block – not a road? Section 128 at time of writing is an area designated for

development – embassies – and Section 22 is set aside as a site for a new Prime Minister’s Lodge.<sup>1</sup>

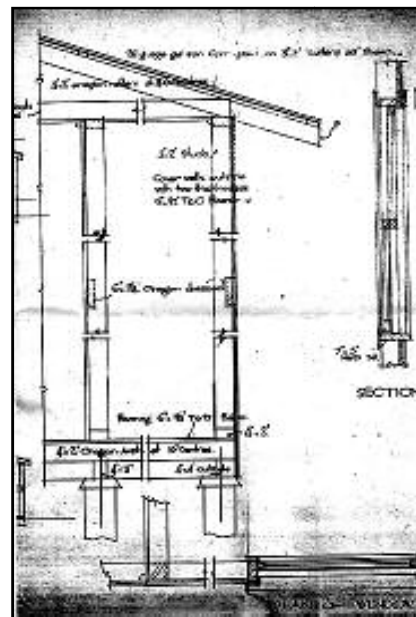
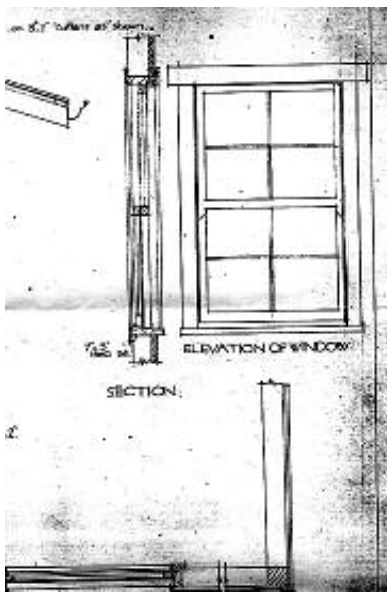
The other major track used by Westlake people connected the settlement with the Hotel Canberra. The vehicle track went along the creek and thence across the flat and continued up the side of the Hotel Canberra land in the area of the modern road that joins Commonwealth Avenue. This dual carriageway was originally, like Wentworth Avenue, a concrete road. It also had roundabouts at the main intersections. The walking track followed a similar path but veered off to the below the Hotel and went down a steep slope, crossed the creek on plank bridge before continuing up the steep slope to the Hotel. Walkers then continued through the grounds of the Hotel near the Croquet greens to the bus stop on Commonwealth Avenue.



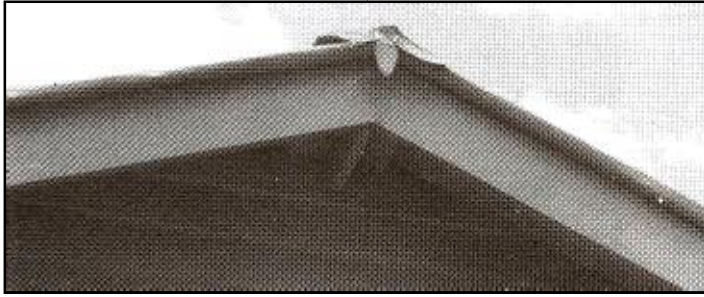
None of the tracks were sealed. Sometime in the early 1950s some tar did find its way on to the surface of the tracks within the settlement and around that time a school bus service came into the settlement. Prior to that time children walked to the State Circle bus stop. Many children rode their bikes across the track near Capital Hill Hostel over to Telopea Park or St

Christopher’s schools.

Adults wishing to use the bus service walked either to State Circle or Commonwealth Avenue to use the bus services.



<sup>1</sup> At the time of preparing this document for the web (June 2009) the long thin block has been confirmed as an undeveloped road and the area of Section 128 (eastern side of Stirling Park) is already being developed in the area next to Flynn Drive and the remainder of the section set aside for development.



Westlake was chosen as the area to build the first of the Rolland cottages and in early 1924 fifty-two were ready for occupation. By 1926 it was realized that more cottages were needed in this settlement. The first suggestion



was to bring twenty or so ex-Molonglo buildings to the



settlement. However this idea was scrapped and another 10 Rolland cottages were built on the site of the tents of No 3 Sewer Camp that



had left the area in 1925. These ten cottages had the same basic plan as the original cottage design but differed in that the combined laundry bathroom was built at the back of the kitchen instead of the bedroom. The newer buildings, like the 120 built at Causeway in 1925 and 1926, had the exterior timber planks nailed horizontally instead of vertically.

Top left photograph - Rhona Bourke and one of her brothers outside 1 Westlake. Below on the left is Tom Smith working on his garden 13 Westlake. Note the vertical timbers and the concrete piers. Above right is one of the O'Rourke girls near the green tin chimney of her home - 45 Westlake.



Below is a photograph of Helen & Diane Bates on the gate of 59 Westlake. In the background is 58 Westlake – a 1926 cottage. The structure at the front entrance was not part of the original structure and was probably erected by one of the tenants. Note that the timber cladding is horizontal not vertical. The cottages erected in 1925 (Causeway) and these cottages at Westlake in 1926 by the Federal Capital Commission placed the timbers horizontally. The ones built by the Federal Capital Advisory Committee (1923-24) at Westlake and Acton placed them vertically.



### **The Septic and Sewer System**

The Westlake cottages in *The Gap* were connected to electricity, water and a septic system.

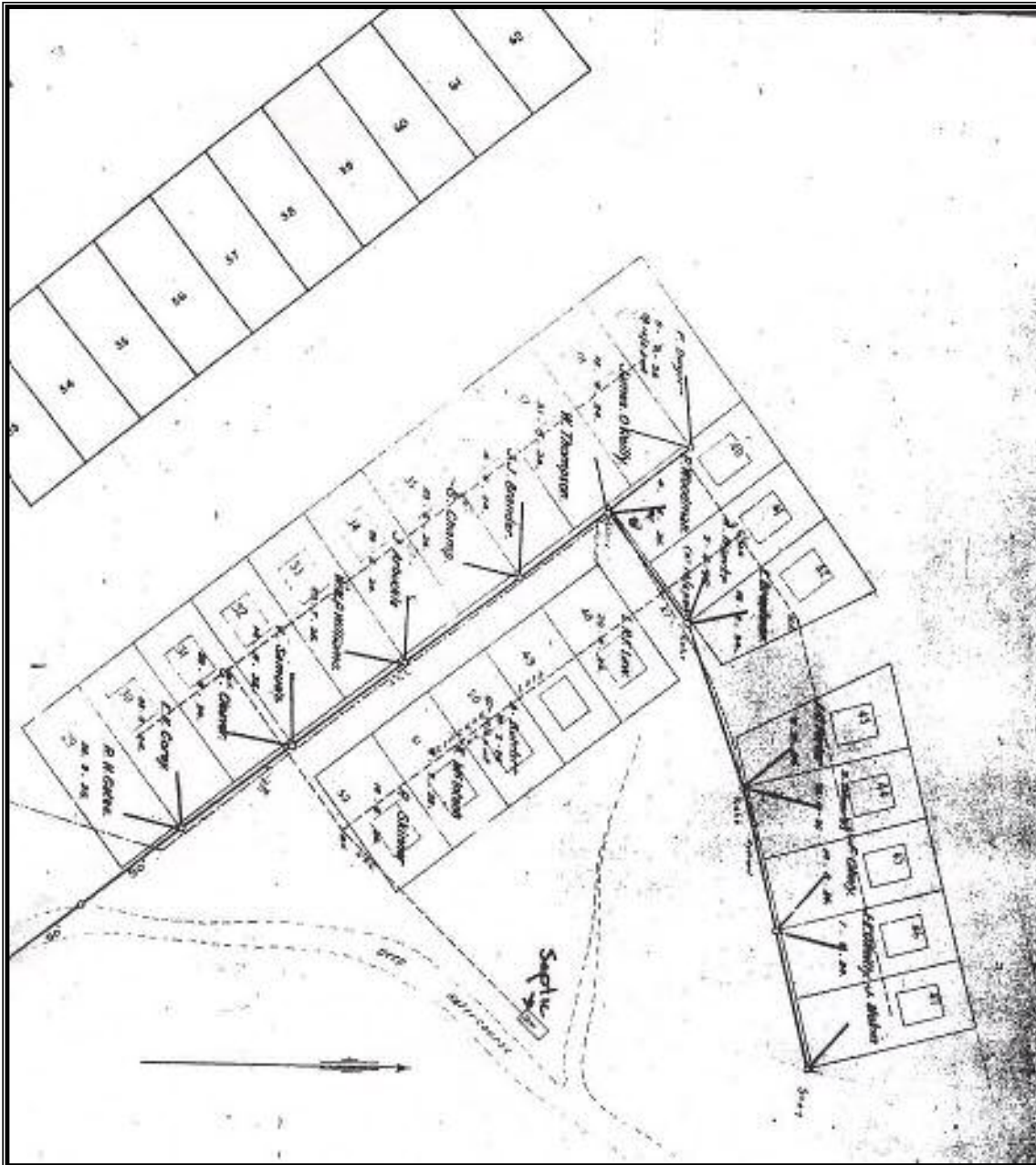
Following the completion of the Main Intercepting Sewer around 1927 the cottages were connected to this system. One of the three tanks in the Westlake settlement was below cottages 43-47 near the creek. A second one was near 29 Westlake and a third in the grounds of 5 Westlake.

Tom Robertson of Oaks Estate who worked on the cottages in 1924 mentioned that second hand cisterns were installed in the lavatories and these broke down regularly and from lists of complaints in the 1950s I am aware that in a number of cases the cold water tap in the laundry bathroom that should have been above the bath wasn't.

The use of septic tanks prior to the availability of the main sewer in big population areas – both permanent and temporary - was common. In the Westlake area it is known that the Hotel Canberra, Westlake cottages in *The Gap* and No 1 Labourers Camp on Capital Hill had septic tanks. Nearby Westridge had one tank in the area of Mueller Street. The only tank known to have survived is in Stirling Park between the creek and the channel dug across the hill below cottages 43-47.

From oral histories it is known that George Sykes of 29 Westlake during World War 2 used the tank near his house (29) as an air raid shelter and that the one in the grounds of 5 Westlake may have continued in use post the 1920s when the Westlake cottages were connected to the main intercepting sewer. Lynette McKissock who lived at 5 Westlake in the 1940s and 1950s recalled that this tank in her yard was pumped out from time to time.

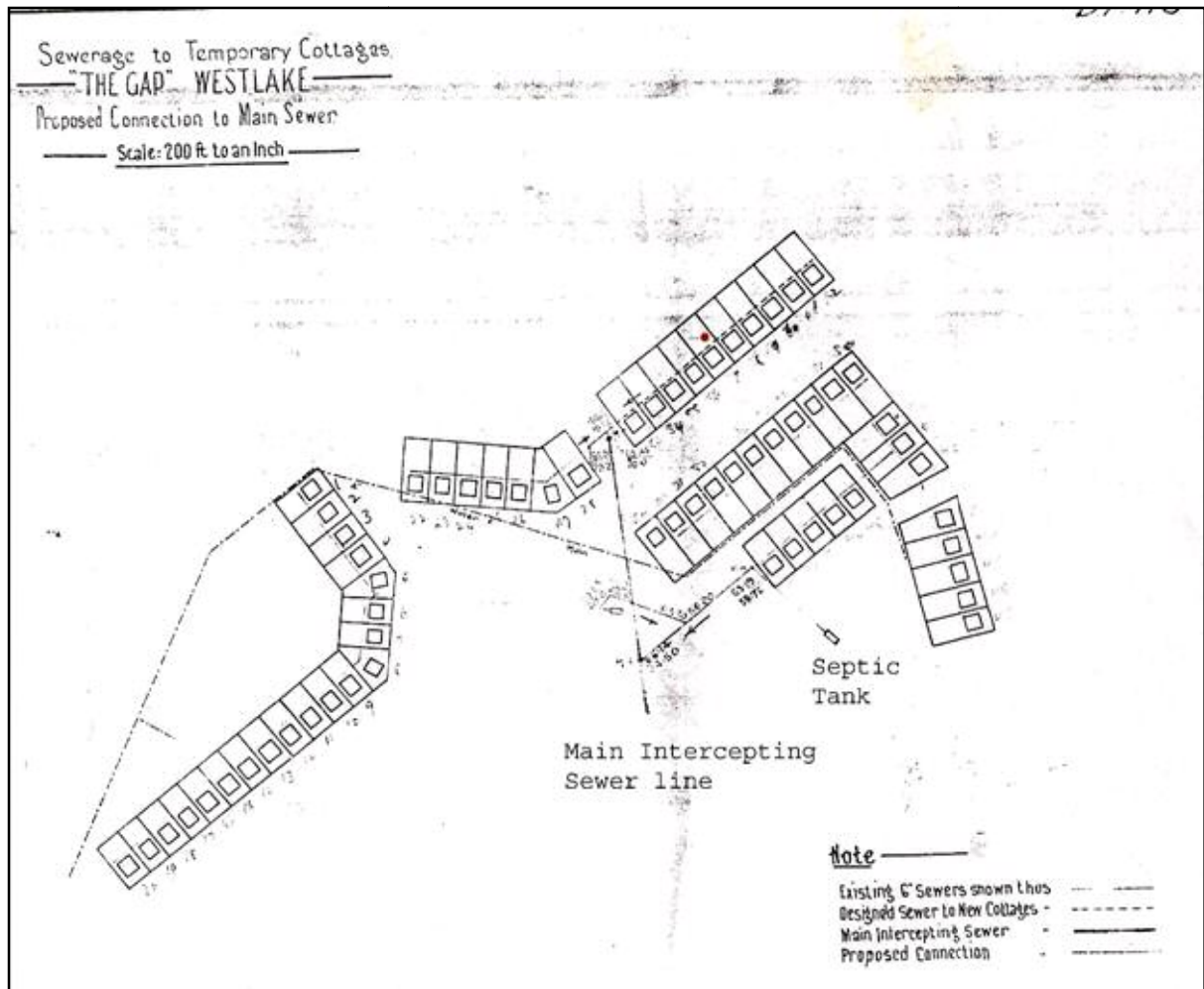
The overflow from the septic tanks was directed into the creek that cuts through *The Gap*. Today the remains of this creek that is referred to on early maps as a deep watercourse, is sluggish and filled with the rubbish of years that included one of the buckets used to bring the soil from the sewer tunnel construction to the surface.



Two large soil dumps from the tunnel construction remained in Westlake. Sometime towards the end of the Westlake settlement the dumps were spread out over nearby land or remove. One of the dumps was near the 1925 heritage listed sewer vent on Stirling Ridge and the other between cottages 28 and 53.

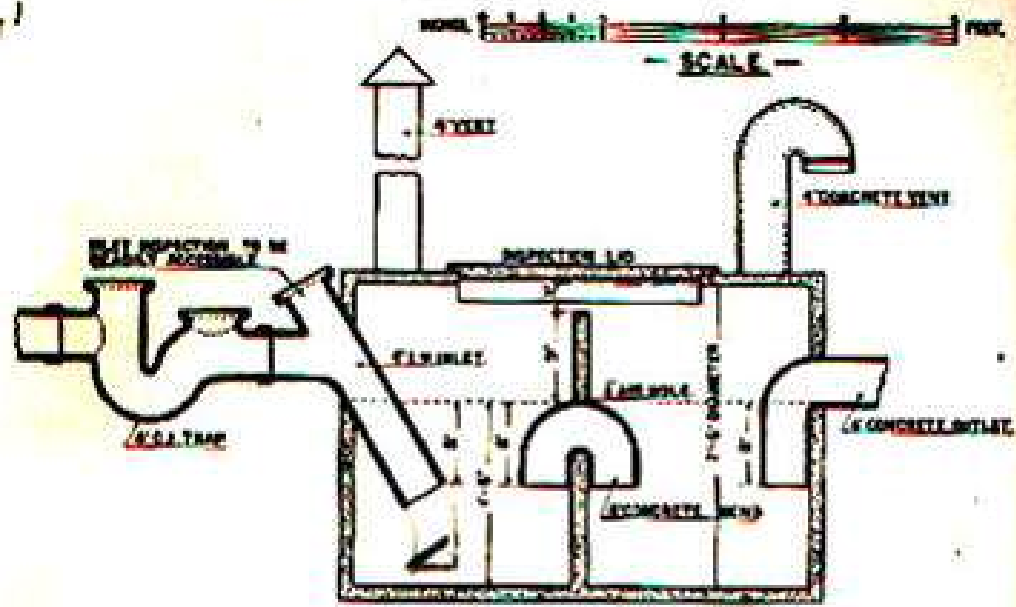
Two ditches across the hillsides were dug at Westlake. The purpose was to prevent storm water from flooding the tents of No 3 Sewer Camp and to direct drainage water into the creek. The latter was below cottages 43-47. Of the former ditch only a small section remains but the latter is still clearly visible. The diagram below shows the creek (left) and the dug channel (right).

Below is another plan that shows the proposed connection to main sewer and the one septic tank that remains in Stirling Park.



The next diagram shows a model of a septic tank found in a 1926 encyclopedia. Whether this design was typical of those built during the twenties is not known. However, superficial examination of the Westlake tank shows some similarities and gives an example of the construction of a 1920s tank. The Westlake tanks were placed near as possible to the creek to allow the overflow to enter it. Local children in the twenties were told not to play in the creek because of the sewerage in it.

5/9/41



NOTE: TOP OF BEAM BETWEEN TANKS TO BE AT LEVEL OF LIQUID

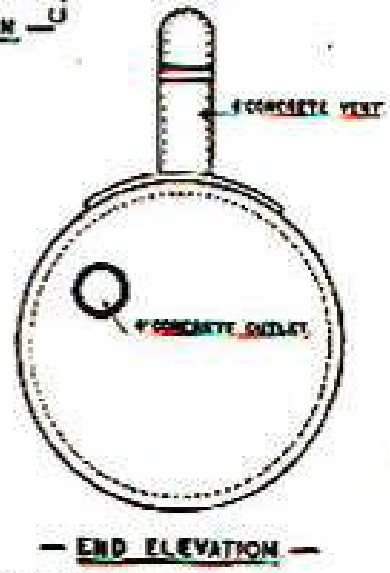
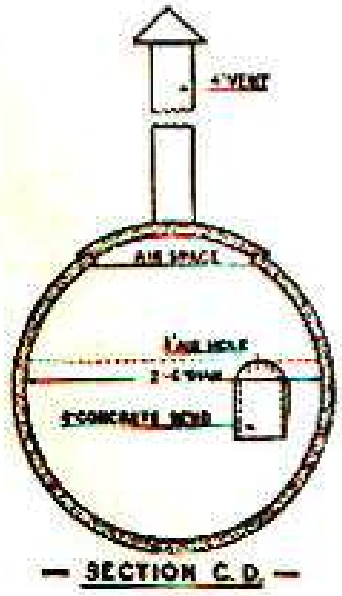
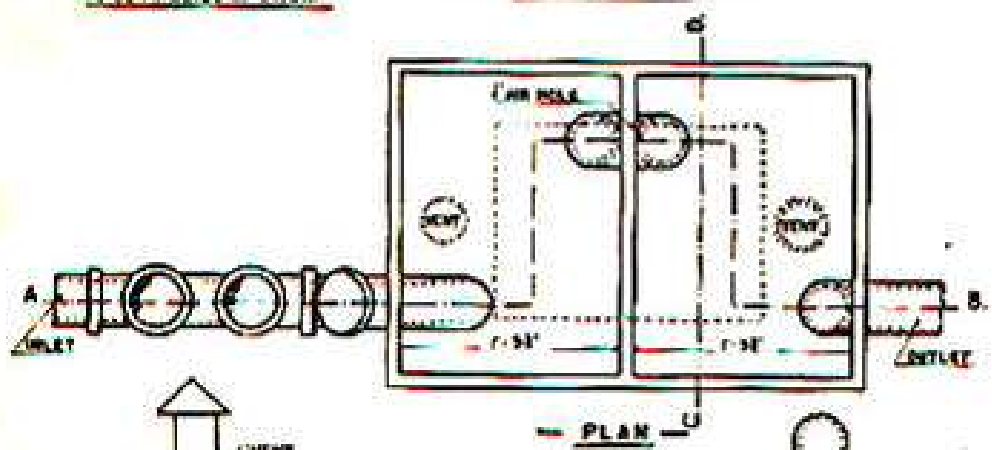


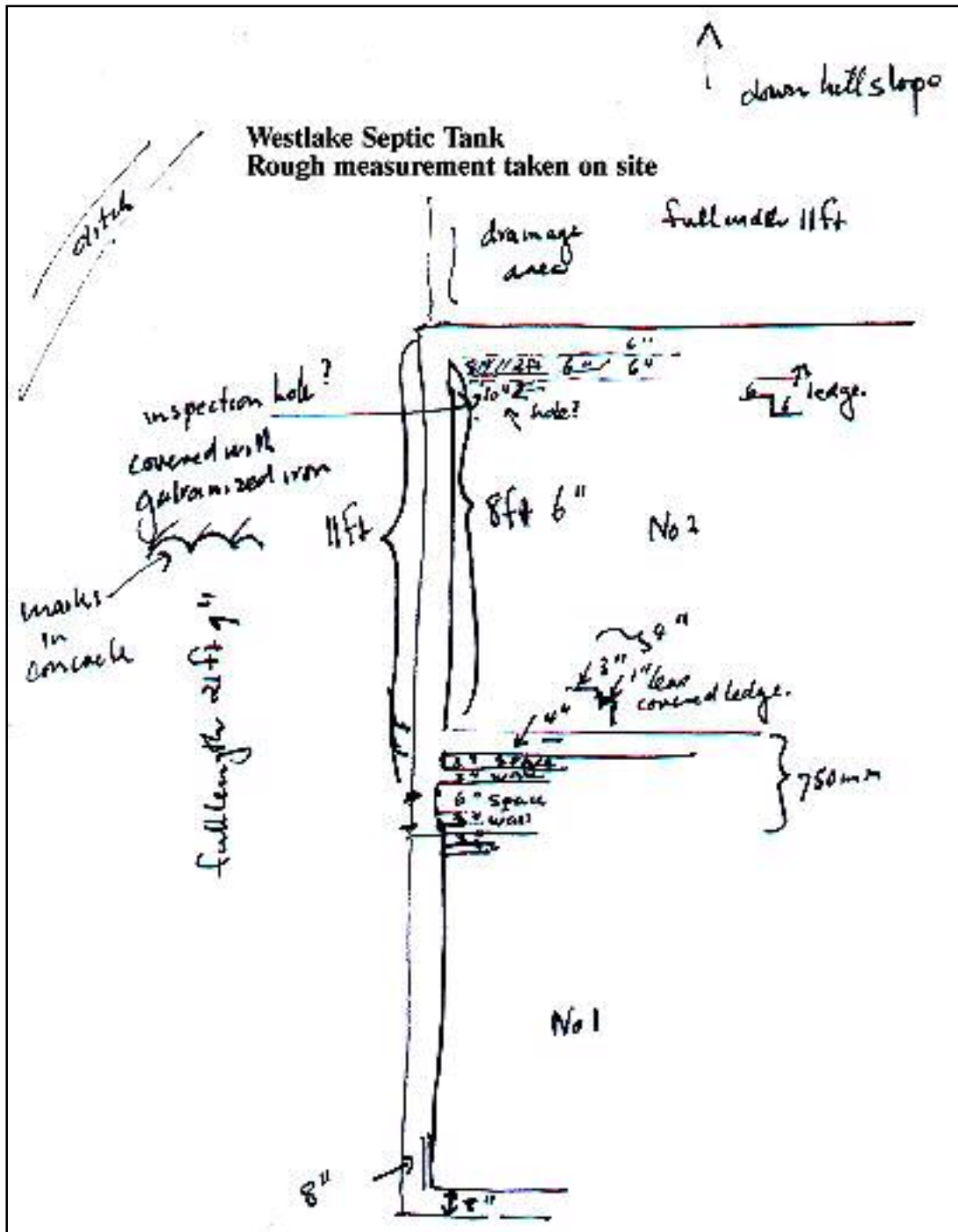
FIG. 2. Cylindrical Siphon Tank.

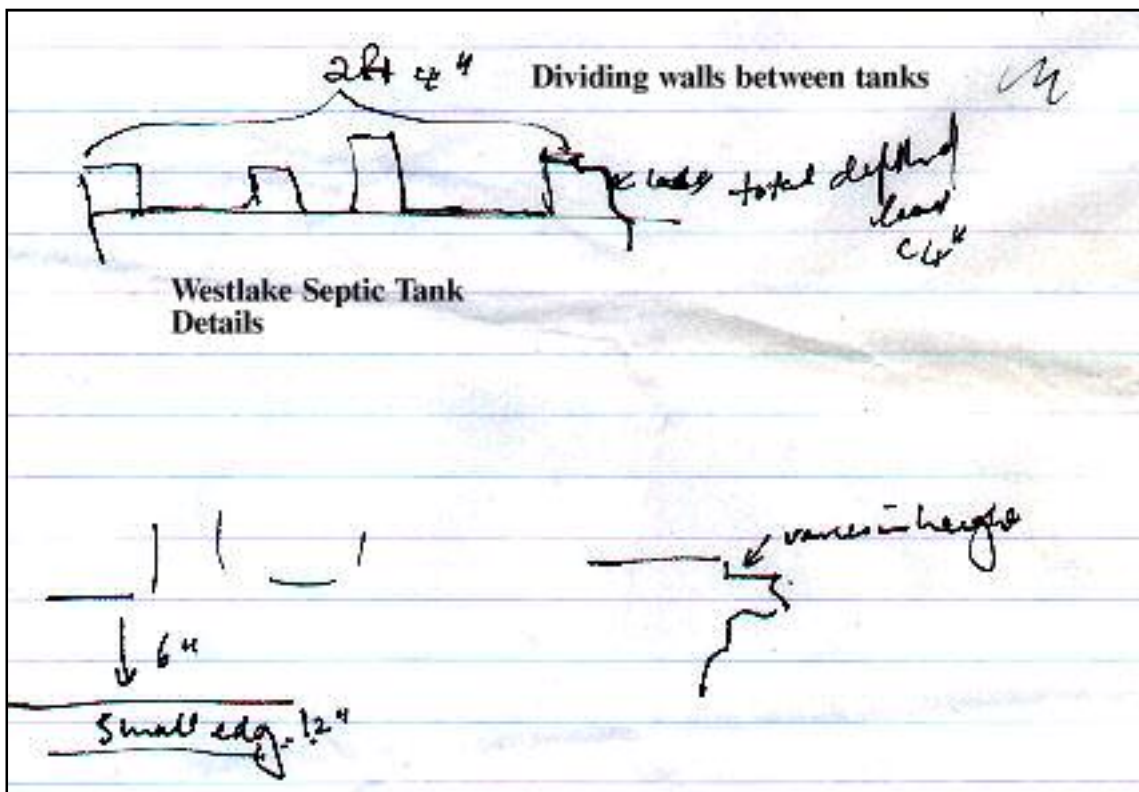
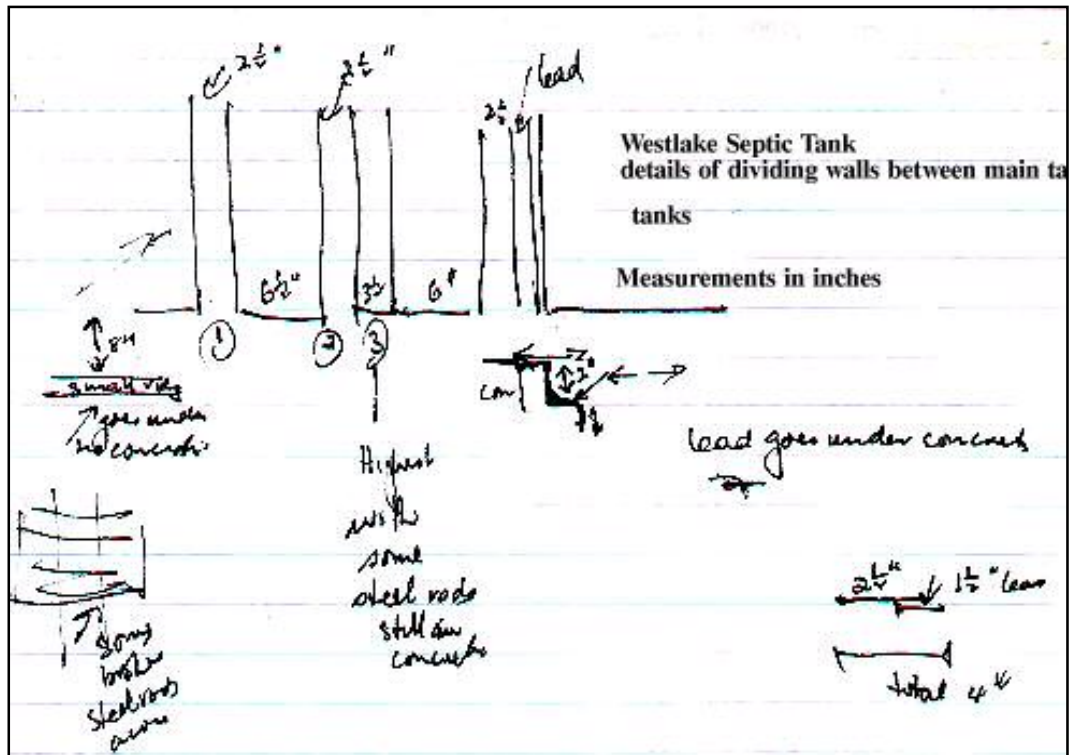


During a period of woody weed clearance in Stirling Park in the late 1990s parts of the walls of the septic tank were exposed. The old concrete cover of the tank had long gone. In the nearby creek big pieces of concrete that may have been part of this cover have been found.

I cleared the top section of the tank of rubbish and earth, measured and photographed. The depth of the tank is not known but the oral history of Hazel Kennedy (nee Haines) who used to play in the tank with other children in the 1940s and 1950s suggest that it was around 6 to 8 feet.

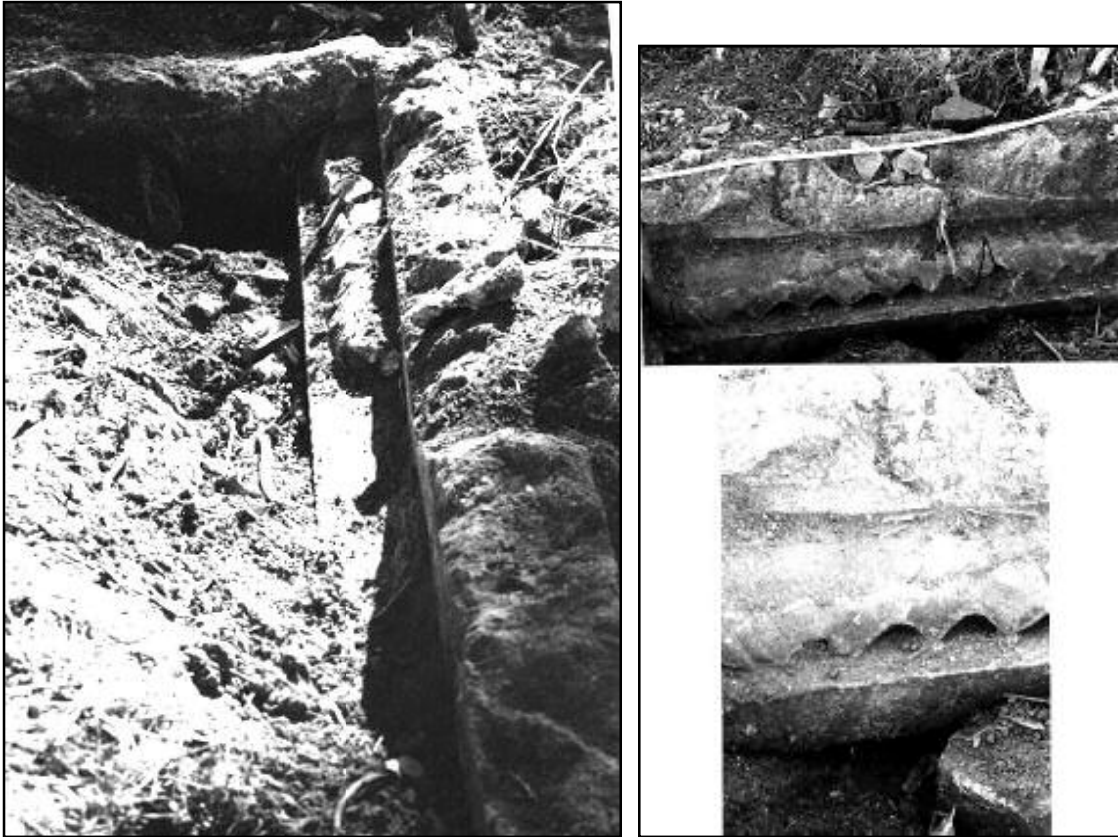
That this structure is a temporary is evidenced by the variations in measurements and the lack of finish. If this tank was permanent one would expect the length to be 12ft not 11. In parts the wall is 7 inches thick instead of 8 and so on. The concrete work has not been finished and in it exposed are large river rocks. In one corner is what may have been an inspection hole where corrugated iron was used as a cover. It left its imprint in the concrete. Still in situ is a lead lining over the middle wall of the tank.





Following are photographs showing details of the septic tank. It is a long rectangular concrete box shape (depth uncertain – not cleared of earth). In the center dividing the tank in two are a series of walls. Still in situ on one edge of the tank wall is lead. An inspection

hole was at one end. Corrugated iron was used and the form is still evident in the cement. The measurements of the tank are not consistent that suggests that it was always considered to be temporary.



Below left detail of concrete wall showing river rocks used in the concrete. On the right is a detail of lead lining still in situ.

