AGRICULTURAL ARCHITECTURE:
In the region bounded by Berkeley in the north, Shellharbour in the south, the ocean and the escarpment.
—Meredith Hutton, 1983.
(A summary of a paper presented to the Illawarra Historical Society, Sept., 1983)

The first structures were built 160 years ago by stockmen who brought cattle to the “District of Five Islands” in order to escape the drought, the caterpillar plague and pasture shortage in the hitherto settled districts. Such men found themselves in virgin bush without shelter. Needed immediately the shelter had to be simple and quick to assemble using easily obtained materials. The “Bark Hut” was eminently suitable. Because haste rather than durability was the chief objective in such structures none survive. Therefore it is from written records that we learn that the bark was peeled from trees and dried beside a fire. The sheets were tied using greenhide to a framework constructed from stripped logs sunk in the ground, and rafters supported by central posts and a ridge-pole. Furniture for inside the hut was also often made from bark. Doors and window shutters were either of bark or a cloth such as canvas. Predictably, when the bark dried out completely, it warped, resulting in the virtual self destruction of such structures. The decay of others was facilitated by zealous cooking fires and bushfires.

As the land was granted or sold, permanent settlers arrived and “Slab” structures were built. Many examples of slab buildings survive, the earliest survivor dates to 1830. However the number of extant slab structures is but a small percentage of those built, especially mid last century during the “clearing-lease farmer” stage, most of whom lived in slab homes. The slab structure most likely to survive seems to be the barn, which has not changed dramatically in design or function. Structures such as separate kitchens, servants’ or labourers’ quarters, dairies for separating the milk, separate feed stalls and pig pens, were common to most farms and frequently built from slabs. However, they became redundant due to changes in the milk industry, home design and the landuse within the region and therefore few survive. Those that do, illustrate four methods of vertical slab construction used locally:

1. The base of the slabs are sunk into the ground while the tops fit into a chiselled out groove in the Top Plate.

2. The most time-consuming method, the slabs are fitted into grooves chiselled out of both a Top Plate and Bottom Plate.

3. The slabs were held in place by nailed on strips of timber, which formed a channel.

4. The slabs were nailed directly onto the building frame. This became popular when wire cut nails became cheap and abundant during the 1870s. Slabs were frequently reused from earlier, tumbled down or useless buildings.

Weatherboard construction was employed for most farm houses and milking machine dairies. Weatherboards themselves became
inexpensive and quick to procure by the 1880s when they were being accurately dressed and cut by machine. It is worth noting here that there are houses preceding this time built from pit-sawn weatherboards.

Most of the pre-WWI farm houses and outbuildings share characteristics, examples of which are: The rooms are entered from a central corridor, French doors open from the living room onto a verandah, the latter being supported by chamfered wooden posts. The verandah extends along the front of the house and usually down each side and across the back. This has subsequently been built in to increase the internal space. The roof is generally corrugated iron and steeply pitched to allow the hot air to rise clear of the house. Some have attic rooms lit by dormer windows. The dairy buildings are usually within 200m, either to one side or behind the house. The brick homes share these characteristics, though their roofs are slate and most have cement rendered walls.

The similarities arose because:

1. The houses and farm buildings were designed by the owners and the builders. They referred to recommended plans, printed in "pattern" books and numerous "handbooks" published to inform the intending settler.

2. Ideas were "borrowed" from existing farms.

3. The same builders were employed by different owners.

4. The farms concentrated on dairy activities, therefore requiring the same basic set of buildings, complying with the same regulations and using the same resources.

The homogeneity of pre-war farms in this region has been superseded by the current multifarious nature resulting from the decrease in active dairyfarms to 28. These are surrounded by heavy industrial and suburban development; noxious industries such as rendering down works and abattoirs; large tracts of land owned by A.I.S. for the mines and future industrial development; retired dairy-farmers who have subdivided their land for their children to live on, or to sell in order to make enough money to retire; so-called hobby farmers; and families who choose to live in the less populated "Rural 1b" zone, but derive their income from city employment. The area supports horse breeding, dog kennels, market gardens, chook farms, piggeries and beef cattle grazing. In addition to which the area is intersected by a network of electricity lines, pylons and easements, connecting Tallawarra into the State electricity grid.

Clearly, this farming region has changed. The buildings that relate to the dairy industry of last century are the living past and they offer us the opportunity to observe, record and discern how our predecessors perceived and treated this region. Presumably, these buildings will go the way of the bark hut!

I would like to express my hearty thanks to all those people who gave me access to their farms and information, enabling me to conduct my research.