

COUNCIL CHAMBERS.

The first meeting of the Armidale Borough Council was held on Monday 4 January 1864 in the Court House. At the second meeting held three days later, Aldermen Trim and Moore were authorised to arrange the hire of central rooms for the use of council. The premises of George Cooper, publican of the Wellington Hotel, Armidale was accepted in the following week because it was 'on the ground floor' and 'had a convenient entrance'.¹ That November, Aldermen Fitzgerald and Schmidt were appointed as a committee 'to enquire into the expediency of renting more suitable premises'.² Ald. Moore reported in December that the committee of the School of Arts would let council use one big room, but not smaller ones. Ald. Schmidt thought one would be enough with the use of a large screen.

Council called tenders for suitable premises as council chambers but by January 1865 no applications had been received. Mr Cooper agreed to reduce the rent to £20 'provided he received 3 months notice if the Council did not require the chambers beyond 12 months'.³

By March 1866 the finances of the council were an issue and Ald. Schmidt felt they could save at least £8 per year if they left the present chambers. At that stage, council paid £20 a year rent and £10 to a Mr Turner, the caretaker. Approaches were to be made to the School of Arts who were 'prepared to give the hall ... with Mr Turner's duties added, for £16 in all'.⁴ The town clerk informed the council meeting on 29 October that he had written to the secretary of the School of Arts seeking terms for the use of that building as a council chambers. In November information was received from the secretary telling of terms on which council could have the 'hall and library' as chambers. Cooper offered to let his premises as council chambers for £14 per annum and they were again rented for 12 months in December.

A letter from the secretary of the School of Arts informed council in October 1867 that it could have the hall and library for £10 per annum. Council decided to give three months notice of its intention to vacate its present chambers and one week later agreed that the offer of the School of Arts should be accepted and to vacate Mr Cooper's premises on 11 January 1868. However at the council meeting on 22 July 1868 detailed discussion took place on the unsuitability of the School of Arts because of the damage to furniture and the public functions held there. Next month 'several tenders ... offering premises as Council Chambers'⁵ were referred to the council committee. The committee found that none were

¹ *Armidale Express*, 16 January 1864, p.2.

² *Armidale Express*, 3 December 1864, p.2.

³ *Armidale Express*, 7 January 1865, p.2.

⁴ *Armidale Express*, 31 March 1866, p.3.

⁵ *Armidale Express*, 22 August 1868, p.2.

suitable and reported it would be advisable to retain the present premises for another six months. Apart from considering various accommodation options, the committee also canvassed the idea of building on the town hall site.

A formal motion was adopted in February 1869 to report on obtaining the School of Arts land and building for council and the best way of going about this. In August the committee recommended the purchase of the School of Arts land and building. Letters were to be sent to the trustees asking if they would consider transferring the property to council for the 'purpose of establishing a free library and other Municipal purposes'.⁶

At the council meeting on 6 September 1869, the town clerk read a letter to the School of Arts trustees, messrs Bradshaw, Jackes and Crouch seeking thier consent. That month J. Crouch expressed his support for the proposal. In October 1869 Ald. Pilcher moved that a council sub-committee meet with a sub-committee of the School of Arts to decide the terms on which the land and buildings could be transferred to council. At the council meeting on 19 October 1869, the mayor reported that an answer about the transfer of the School of Arts was proposed to be given after a general meeting of members'. Despite the request by council, the School of Arts declined to transfer the property to council in November.

By August 1871 the situation had changed and council decided to make another approach to the School of Arts regarding the transfer of the building to council. The position was supported by the *Armidale Telegraph* which commented 'the Municipal council is not only better entitled, but better qualified to govern the Institution (the School of Arts) than committees of young clerks'.⁷ At the council meeting on 3 October 1871 it was reported that a deputation of the mayor and Aldermen Drew and Frederick had met the School of Arts members and found trustees and members unanimous in wishing a transfer. Life member H.A. Thomas of 'Saumarez' as well as Mr Jackes the only resident trustee, had also given his approval. A letter was also received from Richard Hargrave, a former state government MP (1856-1857) of 'Hillgrove' that month supporting the move for the School of Arts transfer and he hoped 'that the Institution would have increased usefulness under the management of the Council'.⁸

A public meeting convened by the mayor, was held on Thursday 19 October 1871 in the town hall. The meeting agreed to transfer the School of Arts to the council to establish a free library as permitted under the 1867 Municipalities Act. Following the public meeting, a petition was forwarded to Sydney from Armidale. Disappointed at the lack of response, aldermen recommended in December 1871 that parliamentary representatives Mr Turry and Mr Forster be

⁶ Council minutes, 24 August 1869.

⁷ *Armidale Telegraph*, quoted in the *Armidale Express*, 19 August 1871, p.2.

⁸ *Armidale Express*, 14 October 1871, p.2.

approached to secure their support for the petition. Concerned about protection of the School of Arts, council took action in April 1872 for the mayor and town clerk to 'see the resident trustee, Mr F. Jackes, to consult with him as to the best course to be adopted'.⁹ In June council received a letter from Mr Abbott enclosing the Deed of Grant for the School of Arts premises.

Council took action in December 1872 to call for repairs to the council chambers. Armidale builder, Alex Smith presented a report in January 1873 about necessary repairs to the town hall rooms. He also suggested that a verandah be added as well as a double closet in the yard. A month later, council accepted a proposal to add a porch and a room 20 feet long by 20 feet wide to the western end of the town hall. Builder Smith was asked to prepare a plan of the proposed addition and two weeks later, he was asked to prepare a further plan with extra accommodation. Tenders for extensions to the town hall as per plans and specifications of Smith were called in February 1873.

A tender of Mr Noxon for fencing at 16s per rod and 5s 6d for removing the old fence around the town hall paddock were accepted in April. Additionally tenders were accepted for additions to the town hall; tenders which included Alex Smith for additions and repairs £235; John Barnes for brickwork, gratings and two iron rods £123.10.0; John Grainey for plaster work £79. By August 1873, Smith was not able to carry on repairs and additions to the town hall and William Mason accepted the contract on existing terms. Council decided in November to remove the brick partition between the old and new parts of the town hall building.

Council approved the purchase of a second chandelier in July 1874 as well as two draught and two chess sets for the library and reading rooms. In August the improvement committee recommended that £15 be voted for moving the chimney in the hall and raising the platform.

Council discussed the inadequacy of the meeting place in May 1895 both for aldermen and the public. A sub-committee of three was appointed to investigate some part of the old town hall for a council chambers or any other part of council property. At the council meeting on 11 June 1895, the committee recommended that the present reading rooms and adjoining rooms be resumed as chambers and the large room be used for council meetings. The small rooms were to be used as the council clerk's office and mayor's room. It was also decided that the present library be divided by a partition from the south side of the lobby and to run across the room thus making reading room 24 ft. by 14 ft. 6 inches and library 24 ft. by 11 ft. 6 inches.

Aldermen Wilson, Solomon and Bliss were appointed delegates to represent the council in a conference with the School of Arts in June 1896. That month Ald Wilson moved: 'That this council agrees to hand over the School of Arts ground, buildings and books to the School of Arts Committee on receiving the sum of

⁹ *Armidale Express*, 6 April 1872, p.3.

£600, to enable the Council to erect suitable Council Chambers'.¹⁰ At the annual meeting of the School of Arts held in July details were given of the arrangements made with the council for taking over the institution, and the alterations effected to the building.

The *Armidale Express*, 6 August 1896 announced that the School of Arts have taken possession of premises handed over by council. Workmen were fixing up the library which was also to be used as a reading room. The council clerk was allotted an office in the old reading room which was to be utilised as a council chamber as well as the mayors and town clerk's room.

The *Armidale Express*, 3 December 1897 reported the Minister for Lands 'revoked the deed of trust held by the Council and the land re-invested in the school of Arts body'. The correspondent also commented 'land was vested to the Council as a free public library' and the action was taken because the 'terms of the trust were violated by the erection of municipal offices upon the property'.

Council proposed to build new chambers on the town hall site with the money it received from the School of Arts as compensation for the old building in May 1898. The committee reported to council in August, that temporary offices could not be located 'and therefore consider it injudicious on the part of the council to vacate the present premises until new buildings are erected'.¹¹ Council agreed to borrow money to erect new council chambers on a vote of 5 to 4.

Tenders were called for alterations and additions to the town hall to provide these new chambers on the western side in October 1898. By January 1899 the new chambers were nearing completion and borough officials expected to occupy them in a fortnight. The chambers, constructed by E. Bartlett were occupied in February and on the ground floor were the council clerk's office, inspector's office and a record room. On the top floor was a commodious council chamber, a committee room and the mayor's room.

Once Dumaresq Shire was formed with its headquarters in Armidale, council initially allowed the shire to use the council chambers free for day meetings from April 1906 provided it pay for gas for lighting and heating. In January 1907 council set a charge of 2s 6d for day meetings exclusive of gas and heating costs.

At the council meeting on 28 July 1908 council determined that the mayor's room should to be furnished at cost not to exceed £10 when funds were available.

Initial steps were taken in August 1923 to install electric light in the chambers and negotiations were still underway with the company in October.

¹⁰ *Armidale Express*, 26 June 1896, p.3.

¹¹ *Armidale Express*, 26 August 1898, p.4.

J.A. Ramsay's tender of £43 for re-roofing of the council chambers was awarded in February 1927.

In September 1927 the Mayor Ald. Morgan Stephens released details of the agreement reached with the Dumaresq Shire concerning the new shire offices to be built on the town hall enclosure. Council agreed to land in Faulkner Street being made available and the widening of the lane alongside the proposed building. The mayor informed council 'the Lands Department had told him that the matter of dedicating the land for shire purposes would not be difficult'.¹²

Once the council engineer was appointed, a special committee considered plans for a new council chambers submitted by Mr Botham in August 1936. Delays on a final decision occurred because unemployment relief labour was being reduced. In October, council discussed the recommendation that 'the existing Council Chambers and offices be demolished and the old material, together with new be utilised in reconstruction in accordance with a plan prepared by the city engineer'.¹³ Discussion also took place over whether a two storey building was preferable but the proposal was rejected on cost.

By November 1936 the council chambers were stripped in preparation for the wreckers. The general office and the town clerk's office were to be transferred to the museum building, which was also to be used for meetings of the council while the new premises are being built. One month later the new office for the city engineer was well under way with the brickwork being up to floor level whilst the concrete floor for the strongroom had been poured.

By the end of January 1937, the brickwork and roofing was nearing completion and plasterers were on the job. The chambers was approximately 28 feet long by 22 feet 6 inches wide with 7 feet oak panelling. The ceiling was of bronzed steel with electric light apertures and tallow wood floors with double doors at the entrance. In March council took action to purchase a commemorative tablet 'notifying date of erection, with the name of the Mayor (only) thereon'.¹⁴ The first meeting of council took place in the new building in April. The new horse shoe shaped oak table with a leather top, manufactured by T.F. Mills and Sons of Armidale was installed in June.¹⁵

The new civic offices and council chambers were officially opened by the Minister for Works and Local Government, Mr Spooner on 5 June 1937. At the ceremony he unveiled a brass plate in red and black lettering. Apart from this duty, he turned the first sod of the North Armidale sewerage undertaking, inspected the power station; the new quarry and Drummond Park. There his

¹² *Armidale Express*, 13 September 1927, p.4.

¹³ *Armidale Express*, 14 October 1936, p.3.

¹⁴ *Armidale Express*, 3 March 1937, p.3.

¹⁵ *Armidale Express*, 9 June 1937, p.4.

attention was drawn to 'the drainage of the Butler-street area, the proposed extension of the municipal area, and the contour of the sewerage work'.¹⁶

Council took action in March 1946 to have a photograph of the R.A.N. Corvette, H.M.A.S. Armidale sunk during the war, and her crew with details of service placed in the council chambers.

As part of the interim town plan the town planner reported to the development committee at its meeting held on 22 February 1960 the land recently acquired near the fire station, together with other council properties in Rusden Street could be the site for the future Civic Centre. By September 1964 the Department of Lands was investigating a proposed transfer of land adjoining the fire station in Rusden Street to the city council for a possible civic centre site. This land was formerly owned by the Department of Education.

Council announced their intention in January 1965 to discuss office expansion and plans for a civic centre with the North Sydney firm of Fowell, Mansfield and Maclurcan or Maclorea. It was this firm who planned a development scheme for council in 1946. But in March 1965 Mayor Ald. L.S. Piddington announced 'Armidale was unlikely to get a civic centre before it got a major water augmentation scheme'.¹⁷ In April the town clerk R.A. Browne stated 'the urgency of the need for new Council Chambers could be reduced by a £3500 alteration scheme to the present offices'.¹⁸

Council announced its intentions in May 1965 to modify and extend the chambers but at the same time a Sydney firm of architects was discussing with council re-development of the land occupied by the Council Chambers, the Town Hall, the Folk Museum and the War Memorial Library. The proposals included: demolition of the front of the town hall and extensions at the rear to Cinders Lane with small halls to be built on the western side; a two storey chambers to be built behind the 1938 building, with the present chambers and fire station to be demolished; a public car park to be developed on land owned by Tattersall's Hotel; removal of the folk museum and replacement by an art centre and extension of the present war memorial library. At the same time, council announced its intention to approach the New England County Council to see if it could acquire the work's depot on the Allingham and Rusden streets intersection for a possible folk museum site.

The announcement of the civic centre proposal caused concern to the Dumaresq Shire because the plan involved the demolition of the shire offices in Faulkner Street. A number of other organisations including the R.S.L., N.S.W. Board of Fire Commissioners and council's folk museum committee also opposed the

¹⁶ *Armidale Express*, 7 June 1937, p.6.

¹⁷ *Armidale Express*, 10 March 1965, p.6.

¹⁸ *Armidale Express*, 14 April 1965, p.8.

proposals. The shire offered its offices to the council in July but the offer was 'turned down because of Council's financial commitments'.¹⁹

Extension of the chambers by Armidale builder W.A. Humphrey commenced in August 1965. These additions included extension at the back beyond a verandah and alterations to internal walls. Costing £3500, this was to create more space for cost clerks and book keeping operators as well as a staff room. The work was not intended to be permanent because of the possible demolition of the building.

That December the Sydney firm of architects recommended the construction of a new two storey council chambers in stages. The total cost was estimated to be £200 000 not including resumptions. The controversial plan was published in the *Armidale Express*, 3 June 1966. Features included: an art centre to replace the folk museum; a greatly extended War Memorial Library in Faulkner Street; rear extensions to the present town hall and demolition of the front; demolition of the existing council chambers and the building of new chambers behind the fire station.

Council set aside £764 for painting and lighting of the meeting room; window awnings; bitumen sealing and staff car shelter at the rear of the chambers. Plans and reports for the civic centre were completed in 1965 but council decided that the newly elected council should consider the proposal. The firm of architects presented the plans and reports in May 1966 and in June, council decided to investigate the Moore Street parking area for a civic centre. The Land Board Office informed council that an 'investigation would be needed to ensure there would be no variation in the purpose of the site- a Crown reserve set aside for public recreation and parking'.²⁰ Two months later, council deferred a decision on the civic centre project.

A contentious issue arose when council took action to enlarge the council offices by an £11 000 extension scheme with the money to be taken from the Dumaresq Creek channel improvement fund in May 1967. The main intention was to provide for the city engineer staff and extend the office space for the health inspector.

Council's civic centre sub-committee recommended in November 1970 that the existing town hall be extended onto the folk museum site to become a second hall. A large concert hall was to be built on the site of the existing administrative offices and fire station. Council's finance committee averted plans for stage one of a civic centre in a dramatic move to prune its loan allocation in January 1972. Section 5 allotment 15 was resumed for a Civic Centre and gazetted on 1 March 1974.

¹⁹ *Armidale Express*, 28 July 1965, p.10.

²⁰ *Armidale Express*, 15 July 1966, p.2.

Following the opening of the Arts Festival in October 1976, a call arose for the provision of an appropriate theatre and civic centre. The regional administrator for the Arts Council in Armidale, Ms Anna Glover supported the suggestion that a civic centre be built. She claimed 'the town hall was not suitable for any thing'.²¹ Council elected a committee to investigate the feasibility of a civic centre complex in July 1978.

The council had originally made a commitment to construct the building in 1971 but the final decision was delayed until 1979. Council invited the State Government Architect's Office in October of that year to update the 1971 proposal. Proposals were considered at a public meeting, and after approval council invited six architectural firms to undertake feasibility studies and prepare sketch plans. Council approved Wills Denoon Travis and Partners Pty. Ltd., later Travis Partners Pty. Ltd. to complete a detailed design.

Tenders for construction of a Civic Administration building closed in April 1984 and the *Armidale Express*, 2 May announced that the largest building contract ever awarded by council was awarded to Alec Finlayson Pty. Ltd. of Armidale. Construction of the building also involved demolition of the tourist office in Rusden Street. Construction commenced in May 1984 and the \$2.26 million building was officially opened on Saturday 10 August 1985 by the Premier of N.S.W., Mr Neville Wran.

²¹ *Armidale Express*, 22 October 1976, p.1.