



CESSNOCK NSW



Name: Cessnock School of Arts

Address: Cnr. Main Street & Vincent Street Cessnock NSW

The Town:

Cessnock is a city in the Hunter Region of New South Wales, Australia. It is situated about 52 km by road west of Newcastle and was named after an 1826 grant of land called Cessnock Estate, which was owned by John Campbell. The Cessnock area was once known as The Coalfields and today it is the gateway to 1800 hectares of vineyards in the Hunter Valley, Australia's oldest wine region. The rich volcanic soils of areas such as Pokolbin, Mount View, Lovedale, Broke, Rothbury and Branxton produce some of the finest wines in the country. The transition to wine service centre from a once prosperous mining town has been a long and at times difficult process, however from this transition, a thriving and growing tourism industry has emerged. The growth in the wine industry has provided considerable employment in the area, which has helped overcome the advent of a declining mining industry.

Cessnock is situated between Australia's earliest European settlements - Sydney, the Hawkesbury River and Newcastle. When the early European settlers arrived in the Cessnock area it was inhabited by indigenous people who had lived in the region for more than 3000 years. The Darkinjung people were the main inhabitants at the time of settlement and many of them either died from European diseases or were killed by the early settlers. A large number



of neighbouring places in the Cessnock area have adopted Aboriginal names. These places include Congewai, Kurri Kurri, Laguna, Nulkaba and Wollombi.

Pastoralists commenced settling the land in the 1820s and the township of Cessnock developed from 1850. During the 1860s, land settlement was extensive in the area with wheat, tobacco and grapes being the principal crops. In 1861, settlement began in the area north of Cessnock and it was here that the Wilkinson family in 1866, using cuttings from the Dalwood Vineyard which was established by Sir John Wyndham in 1828, began growing vineyards. The surveying of the Greta coal seam by Professor Edgeworth David around 1888 also became the impetus for considerable social and economic change in the area with the development of the coal mining industry.

The estimated resident population of Cessnock is 54,979 (as at 30 June 2014).

Establishment:

The Cessnock School of Arts has been housed in three different buildings since its inception in approximately 1903. In August 1898, William Kearsley came from Greta and simultaneously with his arrival, a movement for the establishment of a School of Arts was inaugurated. The population of Cessnock at that time was between 50 and 60 people. In approximately 1903 an unpretentious building was erected near Vincent Street for the first School of Arts building.



The first School of Arts building Cessnock, circa 1903. This is the simple building on the left.

The lower windows of the later extension (circa 1910) are marked Reading Room (L) and Library (R).



The first building, ca 1903:

The official opening of Cessnock's first School of Arts was on October 6, 1904. The new building housing the School of Arts consisted of a library and games room. The latter was a long hall, one of the few in Cessnock at the time. This hall was used as a general meeting place, with concerts, dances and vaudeville shows sometimes being held there as well. The original building served its purpose for six or seven years and was then extended. The old hall was later converted into a billiard room and a reading room and games room were added. This extension brought the building into alignment with Vincent Street. Later, further improvements were needed, attempts were made to reconstruct, but the First World War intervened and very little progress was actually made. Finally the committee succeeded in gaining support for the existing School of Arts building to be demolished and a new building was erected on the same site. Great excitement was created about the "*palatial*" new School of Arts building which was to be built on what was once the site of the first local police station, built in 1871.

The Present School of Arts Building:

In 1924, Cessnock was a flourishing town of 20,000 people and the new building which was to be erected would be situated in a prime position, on the corner of Vincent Street and Main Street. The Shire Council made a special request that a portion of the corner be taken off so as to make a better turn at the corner of the two streets. The architect of the building was the highly respected Walter H. Pender and the builder was E. G. Palmer. The new building was estimated to cost around 8000 pounds and a loan was taken out for this amount for a period of 20 years, the interest rate being five and a half percent. On the 31st May, 1924, as a number of selections were played by the Cessnock City Band, the foundation stones for the building were "*well and truly laid*". The foundation stones were donated by Mr. W. J. Lane and Messrs. Brown and Son, and were laid by J. M. Baddeley, Esq. M.L.A. and the President of the School of Arts, A. E. Kirk, Esq. At the beginning of the Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony special mention was made in regards to the original trustees of the School of Arts, Messrs. Geo. Brown, Doyle, Love, Edwards and Bridge, for their foresight in acquiring the land and securing such a splendid site many years earlier. With great fanfare the new building was opened officially on the 13th December 1924. The Cessnock Eagle newspaper described the new Cessnock School of Arts as a "*palatial two storey building*" to serve as a "*place of advancing the educational interests of workers providing opportunities in the studying the social and economic questions*".

Building Description:

The new building was a structure of bricks and was two storeys. On the ground floor there were four lock up shops. Two of these shops faced Vincent Street, one faced Main Street and the other shop partly faced both streets. The rental from these shops would contribute to the repayments of the loan. At the time of the opening of the School of Arts building, one shop



was occupied by Messiters (merciers) and another shop was occupied by the Niagara Cafe. The entrance to the School of Arts building was thought to be very impressive. The doorway was recessed and the walls of the doorway decorated with blue glazed tiles. The foundation stones which had been laid about 6 months prior were prominently placed either side of the entrance. The door to the building was quite imposing and highlighted with overhead lights either side. A vestibule 10 feet wide contained a staircase with elaborate balustrades and turned handrails which had been proudly manufactured locally. The upper floor which was approached from Vincent Street was divided into a reading room and recreation room each 28 by 24 feet and the billiards room measuring 60 by 42 feet had accommodation for six tables. Most of the rooms on the first floor featured glass double windows giving an *“abundance of air and light”* There was also a hallway and an office 13 by 10 feet and other conveniences, making the building: *“one of the most complete of its kind in this part of the world”*.



The 'palatial' new building 1924

Uses:

When the Cessnock School of Arts was opened in 1924, it had many different functions. The first floor was used as a meeting place for different community organisations such as sporting clubs, political groups, charity groups etc. It contained a special room where six billiard tables were kept for casual players as well as regular competitions groups. There was a games room where card games were conducted, mainly euchre, as well as other board games such as draughts and chess. There was a reading room and a subscription library which was restricted to members. This subscription library eventually made way for Cessnock Municipal Library which was a free library and opened to the public in 1952. The office of the Cessnock Show Association and Turkish Baths were also housed on the first floor.



Since the building was opened in 1924, the shops on the street level have changed hands many times. Some of the businesses that have come and gone over the years include a Boot Repair shop, Funeral Directors, Loans Office, Music store, Restaurant, Dancing Studio, to name a few.

Currently:

In present times it would be difficult to describe the Cessnock School of Arts as a “*palatial two storey building*” as it was described when it was officially opened in 1924. Although it has been quite well maintained, the current sole occupier is the regional Radio Station 2 CHR FM. The first floor of the building, which was once the centre for recreation and community meetings, is now empty, as are the other shops apart from the space leased to the radio station. Like many organisations, the Cessnock School of Arts has experienced many ups and downs during its existence. In particular it suffered financial problems during the periods of World War II and the depression in the 1930s. The reasons for the unfortunate present day situation could be partly attributed to changing times. Recreational interests for contemporary society have dramatically changed since the early twentieth century and continue to do so. The main retail area in Cessnock has also been relocated. Shopping centres have partly taken over from street retail shops and what was once a “prime position” is no longer. It is difficult to predict what the future is for the Cessnock School of Arts but one can only hope that one day it will be given a new life and receive the same amount of enthusiastic applause as it did when it was opened in December 1924.

Acknowledgements: Staff of Cessnock Library

Resident of Cessnock: Elaine Mitchell

References: wikipedia
Cessnock City Council

Newspaper Articles:

The Cessnock Eagle and Maitland Recorder.

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The School of Arts: 28/06/1960



Images:

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Cessnock City Library: *Cessnock School of Arts*. LHP 257

University of Newcastle Australia: *School of Arts Cessnock*.

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