



MURRUMBURRAH NSW



Name: School of Arts

Address: 298 Albury Street Murrumburrah

The Town:

Murrumburrah lies approximately 350 kilometres south west of Sydney in the region of the South West Slopes of New South Wales, adjacent to Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory; and the Riverina. The population recorded at the 2006 census was 952. The region is considered to be among the best wheat-growing areas in Australia with good conditions of soil and climate producing top quality grain with high yields.

The name Murrumburrah is from the Wiradjuri, the indigenous people of the region, and derives from 'murrimboola' which means 'two waterholes'.

The area was among the earliest rural settlements in New South Wales, first settled in the 1820s, with land taken up by squatters following Hamilton Hume's discovery of the Yass Plains. James Kennedy, pioneer of the region and the first superintendent of the 'Murrumburra' run, established an inn on the town site in the late 1840s.



Murrumburrah was considered to be the best site for a village because of its water supply and its location at the intersection of the main roads to other settlements in the region. By 1879, all the big runs had been broken up, being replaced by small freehold properties with security of tenure. Sheep replaced cattle and agriculture followed. The area produced top quality wheat and a flour mill, still standing but no longer in use, was established in 1868.

Gold was discovered first by 1854 with the last find, in 1894, generating another gold rush which brought nearly 1200 diggers within three weeks. By the end of 1895, almost all gold was worked out and the population fell to 200. The reefs were abandoned in 1901. The gold rushes with their mass migration caused businesses to be set up at strategic points to cater to the passing trade, with the Surveyor General instructing staff to lay out a village to allow proper settlement to develop. The first land sale was in December 1858. But it was not until 28 February 1890 that the Borough of Murrumburrah was proclaimed, in response to a petition by local residents. Three wards were designated: Murrumburrah, Harden and Demondrille, following the first Council meeting on 19 May 1890. On 3 March 1892 the village of Murrumburrah was officially gazetted a town.

The Main South Line of the railway came to Murrumburrah in 1877. But it soon became evident that the grade on the line there posed difficulties for the trains stopping at the station. As a result, in 1878 a new station, North Murrumburrah, was established one mile east of the town where the line crossed flat land, thus eliminating the problem. In 1880 the new station was re-named Harden, after the ward of the town where it was located. It became the main station and the station at Murrumburrah no longer exists.

The manner of the growth of the town, together with the influence of the railway and the numbers of people needed to service what was then an important junction with its railway workshops, saw burgeoning growth in the Harden locality. It soon outstripped the neighbouring area. Eventually, Harden became the main focus of business, becoming a town in its own right.

Today we have the twin towns of Harden - Murrumburrah. As well as the traditional rural industries, there are moves to develop tourism potential in an area of scenic and peaceful countryside.

The beginning: first, the Mechanics' Institute.....

The original village of Murrumburrah, being the first settled, was home to all the important facilities. Churches and civic offices and the major businesses were established there before the railway came to the town.

There was interest in establishing a Mechanics' Institute as early as 1874 and it was formally set up in 1879. Its stated objects were to provide 'a library and reading room, educational lectures, and later, a billiard room'. The institution served a useful purpose for many years but the aim to provide and enhance educational opportunities was never really successful, probably because these 'improving' activities were not especially popular. Meetings of the Institute were held first in a building which became known as Reid's Garage. Later Watson's Assembly Hall was built near the Railway Station and meetings took place there.

The Institute attracted good community support and there were moves for a building to provide the desirable facilities. The first building was erected in 1879 at a cost of £500 which was raised by public subscription. It was reported later that

The late Mr DH Campbell, then manager of the Cunningham Estate, was a prime mover and principal collector in connection with the movement.....



The Australian Town and Country Journal reported on Saturday 20 February 1886 on the operation of the institution at that date: that the building was free from debt and....*Several improvements have been made lately, rendering the place far more attractive; consequently the roll of members is being added to and the committee will soon be able to invest in a fresh supply of books. A fine piano, value £50 has been bought lately; and the services of a properly qualified secretary and librarian secured in the person of Mr E Champ.* By the following year, there were 107 members on the roll.

On Wednesday 17 May 1905, The Australian Town and Country Journal ran a comprehensive article on the town of Murrumburrah-Harden, as it was referred to, including reference to the Mechanics' Institute:

....it is now in a flourishing condition, with a substantial credit balance. Several additions have been made to the original building, notably a reading room, a library, and the extension of the main hall a distance of 30 feet in width. It is hoped that at no very distant date the committee will be able to remove the old building, which has many disadvantages, and erect a good large and convenient hall.

The library is well stocked with carefully selected volumes and additions are made to it every second month..... The reading room contains all the principal metropolitan newspapers magazines and periodicals and both library and reading room are well used by members.

.....and then: the School of Arts.

Murrumburrah attained proper recognition as a civic entity only in 1890 and as a town in 1892. But with this formal recognition came the designation of separate areas of the town, with Harden named as one of its divisions. The Sydney Morning Herald on Friday 29 March 1890 reported that

It was decided to hold a public meeting to take into consideration all matters relative to the municipality division, and the naming of the wards.

There was clearly grave concern about the splitting of the municipality and the consequences.

The Mechanics' Institute building stood in the part of the town designated Harden and in practice it was referred to as the Harden Mechanics' Institute. There was a proposal to erect a new building and The Sydney Morning Herald carried a report on Friday 11 September 1908 that a deputation from Murrumburrah had asked that the building, then situated in Neill Street Harden Ward, should be rebuilt on a site near the Public School. The building would then be more centrally located and easily accessible to the whole of the town. A public meeting of Murrumburrah residents was held.

The meeting decided that in consequence of the attitude taken by the committee of the institute, a letter be written to the Minister for Public Instruction asking that an officer be sent up to investigate the circumstances.

All this was to no avail with a new building being constructed in Harden on the existing site and opened in 1909. Although the Harden Mechanics' Institute then housed the only library, Murrumburrah residents were reluctant to use it or contribute to it. There were moves to provide a building in Murrumburrah to offer all the facilities to which they had been formerly accustomed.

The Building:

The Queanbeyan Age of 7 December 1909 reported that a company had been formed at Murrumburrah to build a School of Arts. Guarantors for the sum of £5000 to set up the institution were readily available and included many of the pioneers of the town.



The allotment of land where the building was to be erected had been bought some years earlier by the son of one of the guarantors, Mr John Bourke JP, and despite a recent tempting offer from the Bank of NSW, Mr Bourke had always had it in mind to keep it as a site for this institution, for which it was duly purchased.

There was some earlier consideration given to the idea of applying for a government subsidy to help fund the building. But this idea was rejected on the basis that the application was unlikely to succeed since there was already a building for the same purpose so close by in Harden. As well, there was a reluctance to submit to the resulting government control over the building, with strong preference for exercising local control over its management and use.

The foundation stone for the Murrumburrah School of Arts and Public Hall was laid on 2 March 1912 by the Mayor Dr RD Heggaton. His address to the assembled crowd was reported fully in the edition of 5 March 1912 of *The Murrumburrah Signal* and included a statement of the aspirations for the role of the building in the community:

....a place of amusement, recreation and education for the people of the town and district and one that will be second to none as regards convenience and equipment.

The Mayor continued by saying that

We are not erecting this building in a spirit of rivalry to any other but because we recognise that it is most urgently required.....It is not a place of amusement alone, for in our reading room and library the facilities will be afforded to young men and young women to increase their store of knowledge.

The wish was also expressed *.....that many a young man would go forth from the town and make a name for himself as a result of the facilities afforded by the Murrumburrah School of Arts.*

A bottle was placed under the foundation stone containing a copy of *The Murrumburrah Signal*; a parchment, stating when the hall was erected and containing the names of the Aldermen; and some coins of the realm of this year's coinage [1912] and of the reigns of King Edward [VII] and Queen Victoria.



Laying of the Foundation Stone for the Murrumburrah School of Arts 2 March 1912.

The Mayor, Dr RD Heggaton, is second from left using the silver trowel presented by the contractor for the building, Mr JG Taylor.

Photo: *The Murrumburrah Signal*



The first meeting of subscribers of the School of Arts was held in Watson's Assembly Hall on Tuesday 19 March 1912.

The projected building included the hall with a floor space of 60 ft x 35 ft, to seat about 450 people; a stage 20ft x 35 ft and two dressings rooms 12ft x12ft.on the same level as the stage floor; the Library 16ft x12ft and the reading room 20ft x12ft 6in; above the library and reading room a billiard room 20ft x35ft.

In the basement of the hall, a supper room 35ft x 35ft to seat about 150 persons; a kitchen properly fitted with stove, copper, sink etc; and a servery between the kitchen and supper room.



Side and back view of the building showing all of the planned accommodation. The fall of the land allowed very well for the inclusion of these elements of the building, including the kitchen at the back with its chimney.

The contractor for the building was Mr JG Taylor who is recorded as saying 'they were having a bad time with the bricks which were of different types but they would do their best right through....'

It is a substantial brick building over two levels at the front, as planned, with the fall of the land from the street frontage accommodating all of the other planned facilities. The contract price was £1997/10/-.

The lighting for the building was notable for its time:

A powerful plant which has been put in by Mr Reid and run direct from the dynamo.... Mr Reid's plant will be quite able to give one of the best and most satisfactory lights to the hall...Clusters of bulbs suspended from the ceiling and by side brackets..... a light of 1900 candle power.....the total lights in the hall are 2508 candle power....one of the best lighted halls on the Southern line. (The Murrumburrah Signal 5 August 1912).

The building was opened with a Grand Ball on 21 August 1912. The Murrumburrah Signal reported:



As anticipated the ball to celebrate the opening of the Murrumburrah School of Arts, which was held last night was a brilliant success. The Mayor performed the opening ceremony at 8 p.m. in the presence of a large gathering estimated at about 150 couples. A juvenile ball is to be held tonight.

Uses:

The building where the Mechanics' Institute first operated was the centre for many of the activities of the settlement and later the town. Meetings, balls and dances, concerts, discussions and lectures, political addresses, flower shows and card parties were among the many uses for the building.

The Australian Town and Country Journal of Saturday 24 April 1886 reported on some activities of the Institute including

A course of lectures by Dr Baldwin on the subject of 'First Aid for the Injured' has been instituted. The duties in connection to ambulance work are also being inculcated in the members of the class, numbering about thirty. The majority are railway employees and the department is affording every assistance for carrying out the programme of instruction.

The same pattern of activity followed the opening of the new School of Arts, with some notable events in its early years: A report in The Sydney Morning Herald of Monday 13 December 1915 notes the progress of The Kangaroos, the great march from Wagga Wagga through this region of southern New South Wales, recruiting troop enlistments for the First World War:

The entertainment provided by the people of Murrumburrah and Harden for the Kangaroos during their stay.....a dinnerin the Murrumburrah School of Arts, presided over by the Mayor. Major Heath said the splendid reception accorded the contingent testified to the appreciation of the people of the motive that had inspired the men to go on the march..... A recruiting meeting was held later in the evening.

In 1916, there was a public reception in the School of Arts for three wounded soldiers: Lt Reid and Privates Brown and Pounsberry. Mr WDH Roberts of Currawong paid all expenses for the function.

Early in 1926 a 'Back to Murrumburrah' week was promoted by the School of Arts to decrease the debt still owed to the guarantors. It was an unprecedented social and financial success and the building debt was reduced from £2210 to £254.

And the end.....

In its early days, the Hall and the School of Arts proved very popular, with regular programs of moving pictures, touring companies of entertainers, together with the activities of the School of Arts, including the library and reading room and billiards. The basement was let to the town band for practice sessions and there was a proposal to form an orchestra. The University Lectures Board was to be asked to invite Lecturers to provide a series of lectures as part of the education program. Membership in November 1912 was 244.

But with the outbreak of war and the decline over the war years in the provision of entertainment, the membership in 1917 fell to 127 and never recovered from this downward trend. Membership fell to as few as 50 in 1949, reflecting the earlier decline after years of war. The growth in public library services also affected the use of the facilities and in 1953, the School of Arts library was transferred to the Council.

Rises and falls in the use of the building continued. Then in 1970, the Harden Murrumburrah Historical Society was formed and in 1971, it made application to rent the hall to set up a Museum. As a result, the Committee decided to propose to the Council that it take over the



building. The NSW Government Gazette of 6 September 1974 carried a notice approving the Murrumburrah Municipal Council as Trustees of the Murrumburrah School of Arts.

Currently (2013):

The building now houses a museum of the district of Harden-Murrumburrah and its development. Exhibits include thematic displays on such topics as gold mining, railways, a chemist shop and a blacksmith's forge; a kitchen and a school room; and displays dealing with the Light Horse, which was first established in Murrumburrah.

As well, the building is the headquarters of the Harden –Murrumburrah Historical Society.

Because Murrumburrah was first one town but subsequently split into two (now twin) towns, the story of the development of their institutions in the School of Arts movement is inevitably intertwined. First there was one but this later became two: one each in Murrumburrah and Harden.

This ADFAS series includes accounts for each building: Murrumburrah and Harden. For a comprehensive story, please refer to both.

Acknowledgements:

Harden-Murrumburrah Historical Society; Robyn Atherton

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References:

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Geographical Names Board New South Wales

Wikipedia

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