



UPPER COOMERA QLD



Upper Coomera School of Arts. Photograph: Naomi Wright, 2015

Name: Upper Coomera School of Arts

Address: Jemima Place (Reserve Road), Upper Coomera, Queensland.

The Town:

Upper Coomera is a northern residential suburb of the Gold Coast, Queensland, immediately west of Coomera and 52 km south-east of central Brisbane. It is on the western side of the M1 Pacific Motorway running from Brisbane, borders Willow Vale and rural Pimpama in the north, and the Coomera River to the south, which separates it from Oxenford.

It had a population of 21,136 at the 2011 census.

Coomera (Yugambah) refers to a species of wattle tree, the bark of which was used to stun fish.¹ Another interpretation of the name Coomera is from an aboriginal word for a fern growing in the area. The old aboriginal name was 'Kumera'.²

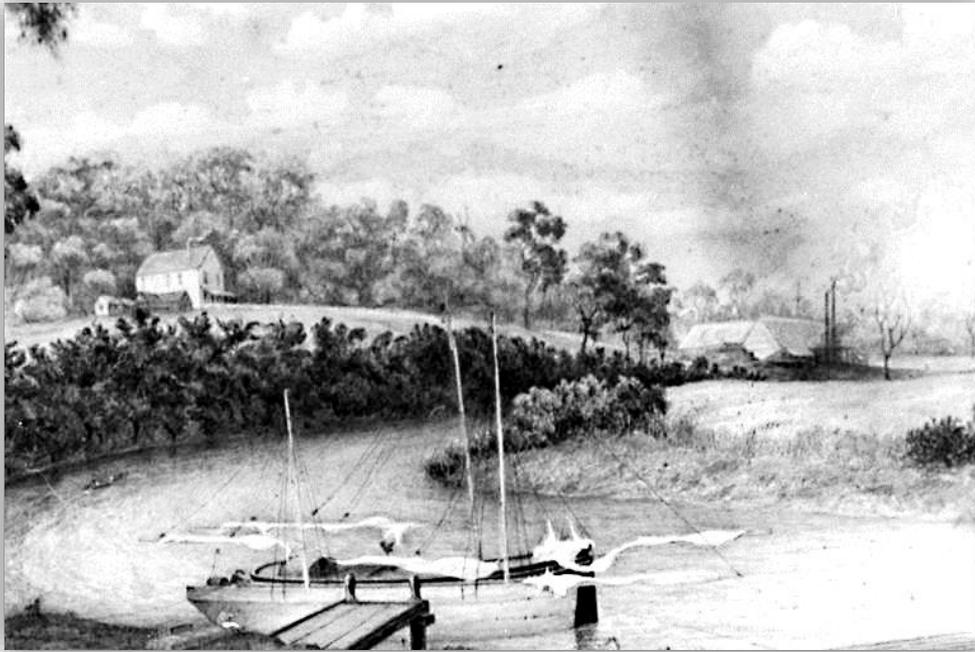
The Coomera River runs as fresh water for almost 40kms from the Lamington Plateau in the McPherson Ranges on the Queensland - New South Wales border, until it reaches the tidal waters near Coomera. The first exploration of the river was by Captain Patrick Logan in 1827.

In the early beginnings timber-getting and farming were prominent. The timber industry prospered from a high demand for *cedrela australis*, the red cedar. Sugar and maize were



grown during the 1870-80s. Sugar and arrowroot did well around 1884, helped by steamers superseding sailing craft to transport these products, sent to meet commercial demand elsewhere.

A painting dated 1896 by colonial artist E. Bode shows there were two sugar mills on the bank of the river at Upper Coomera.² Dairying became the main rural industry as sugar growing moved later to north Queensland.



The Coomera River. Gold Coast City Council Local Studies Library. Painting dated 1896 by E. Bode, photographed by the Historical Society, owned by Mrs Dulcie Gooding. It was in her family for several generations. (The South Coast Bulletin)²

In the 1850s John Hollindale, the great grandfather of Ian Hollindale (author of *'Life and Cricket on the Coomera'* and main contributor to this article), set sail from England for Australia. John Hollindale grew up and worked on the Coomera. His son, Will [William Henry] married Daisy Binstead.

The Binstead family are descendants of a father and son who had been involved in the farm labourer 'Swing Riots' in England. These involved 'machine breaking' in the Industrial Revolution and the instigators rather than the participants were deported to Australia. The Binsteads fitted this description and arrived as educated convicts who could read and write. One descendant, Arthur Binstead, married Harriet Thomas, with whom he had eleven children, including their daughter, Daisy. Arthur Binstead became Post Master at Upper Coomera and opened a small store. The Binsteads became land owners and also developed traveller accommodation. This was noted as a shelter for the night by a traveller in 1874.

It was about the 1890s that the settlement called Upper Coomera would have a school, a hotel, and the School of Arts. The South Coast Railway (1889) passed five kilometres to the east of Coomera and brought growth and prosperity for the dairy and other industries.²



By 1949 over half the farmers were in dairying, a few were banana and other fruit growers, and three still grew and milled arrowroot. There was a primary school, a hotel, a store and a saw mill.



Arrowroot mill located at Walker's Mill, Upper Coomera, ca. 1939.
Photographer unknown

The 1980s and 1990s saw considerable residential growth west of the Pacific Highway opposite Dreamworld theme park. Five schools were opened between 1996 and 2008. The School of Arts Hall is near the Village Shopping Centre.

Upper Coomera and Coomera have long been the main centres of urban development on the Gold Coast and combined, are considered to be, along with Southport and Robina, one of the Gold Coast's three urban centres. Upper Coomera is heavily suburbanised and consists of many large residential developments and commercial centres. Despite already being well developed and having a large population, Upper Coomera is predicted by both the Queensland Government and Gold Coast City Council to grow and develop at an exponential rate well into the next decade.

Upper Coomera is a popular place of residence for dual-city commuters as it is placed roughly half way between the central commercial districts of Southport and Beenleigh and within reasonable travelling distance to Brisbane CBD.^{3,4}

Establishment:

In 1888, as the Depression years were approaching, the Australian Government provided initial funding to help establish Schools of Arts around the country.



Nevertheless, it was another eight years, in 1896, before the small community of Upper Coomera would raise enough funds to acquire timber cut from the district, have it milled at the nearby Riverside Mill, and employ tradesmen from the commercial centre of Beenleigh to build their School of Arts Hall. At the time, two questions were asked:

Did such a small community have the capacity to fund and support such a hall?

Should this be a School of Arts? - or a Literary and Scientific Institution?

Both questions were answered with a resounding *Yes* and it was a great credit to the small community that at the time of the Great Depression of the 1890s, the hall was built. This community consisted of those folk from the slopes of Wongawallan and Tamborine Mountain - a horse ride to Pimpama, a boat ride to the lower reaches of the river, and across the Old Coach Road to Guanaba.

The Building:

The School of Arts was built overlooking Siganto’s Wharf on the Coomera River. This wharf was the main base for supply to the area.



Upper Coomera School of Arts, 1920. Photograph given by Chris Delanoue



Siganto’s Wharf on the Coomera River



John Siganto Park beside the School of Arts Hall

Photos Naomi Wright



The Siganto family were the traders, shopkeepers and post master of the region and their wharf linked with Tuesley's jetty, the site of which can still be seen today on the foreshore of Marine Parade at Southport, recognizing another pioneering family's long contribution to the district.

Functions were held in the nearby mill to raise funds to build the hall. Records show that a successful evening could raise £1-5-9½ by holding a ball or euchre evenings. Extensive interior renovations were carried out in 1939 as reported in the South Coast Bulletin on Friday 18 August 1939.

UPPER COOMERA

Re-opening School of Arts

The Committee of the Upper Coomera School of Arts have now completed extensive alterations to the hall, and will mark the re-opening with a grand ball on Friday 1st September.

Prizes will be given for fancy costumes, and first class music for the dancing is assured. An excellent supper will be provided.⁵

Uses:

The Upper Coomera School of Arts Hall had served five or six generations when it celebrated its centenary on 18 August 1996. It was a focal point as families celebrated milestones, mourned their losses, and lived their lives in a friendly, involved community.

Over the decades, the hall was used for so many events and purposes. Drama societies from Southport and Beenleigh performed in the Hall. Coming of age parties, golden wedding celebrations, concerts for schools, and general entertainment were all enjoyed there. Fund raising events for the Ambulance, Fire Brigade, and Sporting Clubs were popular uses for the Hall.



Interior of the Upper Coomera School of Arts Hall today, facing the stage.

The Roll of Honour, photographs, and other items shown in the Hall are reproduced elsewhere in this article.



Interior of Upper Coomera School of Arts Hall . Photographs: Moira Lockhart and Naomi Wright.

The Library was once housed there in what later became the men's dressing room. The Library at the School of Arts was an essential part of the community. Often one of the first things a relieving bank manager, transferred station master, new doctor, or other new resident to the district would do would be to join the library. The Upper Coomera School of Arts is said to have had a junior library *in which the books were old but classic!*

The commercial development of the Coomera district relied on the School of Arts Hall as a meeting place for so many community groups. Records and history indicate a long list of which these are a few: Coomera Divisional Council, Country Women's Association, Returned Servicemen's League, Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade, Queensland Dairymen's Organization, Potato and Arrowroot Growers, Sugar and Cotton Growers, Red Cross. Many of the people involved in these associations went on to represent them at much higher levels within the State.

As the 20th Century began and the Coomera district thrived, families could partake of every activity of importance with so much being offered at the Upper Coomera School of Arts.

Social History:

The social occasions mentioned above were but a few for which this little Hall was the venue. Others included school break-ups and plays and other live performances; card evenings and movie nights; birthday celebrations and anniversaries; debutante balls, and pre-wedding parties to which all the community would be invited and traditionally the bride-to-be would be presented with a dinner service.



Mr Ian M Hollindale notes that in 1914 Grandfather and Grandmother Siganto celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary at the Hall. It was a rather formal affair with the family all dressed in their Sunday best.

The Boer War and World War 1 resulted in many young men from the district leaving to fight for their country. The old Hall saw many a send-off for these brave men. Those remaining behind gathered in the School of Arts Hall to accumulate packages of fruit cake and tinned food to send off to the troops abroad. Much love and care went into the baking with local home grown produce. Those who returned from the wars were welcomed home with great joy, again in the same Hall from which they were farewelled.



The Soldiers' Monument in Upper Coomera. Photograph NW

In the 1920s the first 'moving pictures' began to appear. Penn's pictures came once a year to the School of Arts. A talented local played the piano while another read the script as the 'moving picture' appeared on the screen. They were mainly Cowboy and Indian films.

Mr Ian M Hollindale relates:

Indicative of the era, after that once per year visit, my father, his brother and the neighbours went back to Guanaba and played Cowboys and Indians, and my grandmother always feared they might finish up bushrangers! Compare this with 'R' rated video games of today!



In the 1930s during the Depression the population of the district increased when the Government provided grants for relief schemes for families to move to the country when jobs were scarce in the towns and cities. The Hall welcomed many generations of families who came to milk cows, grow corn, feed pigs and generally live off the land to survive the immense magnitude of the Depression. The need for the Hall to be enlarged seemed obvious at this time, but funding was not available. Sam Walker wrote an article in the local newspaper imploring people to support an extension of the Hall to twice its size. Post - Depression, many of these people moved away to nearby centres and once again the Hall was adequate for the local requirements.

Sam Walker wrote another article in the local newspaper about a night out in the 1920s and 30s at the School of Arts.

If you are a flapper, you have the seats around the room and sit with your pretty silk stockings showing lots of garter. Then the band strikes up and some great gaunt thing with short trousers, hands like an elephant, the shoulders of a flying fox, hair brushed back like an old dad frill lizard, emerges from a 640 acre selection and stands in the vicinity of the doorway of the hall. Then all is confusion and jazz.

If you are a fossil antiquity you stand in the side wings and discuss the weather, cows, pigs, potatoes, pumpkins, parliament, the shortcomings of shire councils, to say nothing of your neighbours, because they are there also. If you are one of the heads, you get up on stage and make speeches, but if you are one of the common herd, you stay on the dance floor. Some take up astronomy and stand under the stars.....²

Cricketing was an important social activity with the early settlers and their families. The passion for the game and a determination to survive in these difficult conditions made for a cohesive community with the Barrs, Barnetts, Bulls, Curreys, Binsteads, Bignells, Foxwells, Hollindales, Howards, Lanes, Matthewsons, Murrays, Nappers, Oxenfords, Birds, Donalds, Sigantos, Shelleys (a relative of Percy Bysshe Shelley), Thams, Walkers, Watts, Welchs, Whittings, Whalleys and Tuesleys.²

In the 1930s cricket was a big social occasion and the ladies baked for this. A favourite was Mrs Hollindale's apple tarts, which were made largely of chokos with few apples! The sandwiches were corned beef. As there was no refrigeration, this was the cured beef remaining from four days in a row of fresh beef. Sometimes crab sandwiches appeared from the river catches. Chooks were killed before a get together. Tea drinking, with water boiled often from a four gallon kerosene tin, rather than alcohol, was the social drink as the milking had to be done early. Most activities were family oriented and young women didn't wait for young men to call for a dance, a ball or euchre night, they always arrived with their entire family.²

The School of Arts had many traditions such as the Matrons Ball in 1930, where 500 folk would fill the hall all decorated with streamers and Chinese lanterns. The Roman Catholic Ball was a regular event in the 1920s and 1930s. Electric lights were installed in 1934, and Miss Lillian Oxenford won Belle of the Ball at the annual Bachelor and Spinster Ball that year. The first Debutante Ball was in 1936. The young women were prim in frilly chiffon dresses and gloves and carried bouquets. The young men also wore gloves, and bow ties with their dark suits.



Debutantes Ball, 1936. Photo given by Chris Delanoue



The Anglican Debutantes Ball was held in the Hall in 1936 when Gwen O'Reilly and Mavis Oxley (Ian's aunt) were among the debutantes.

It was at this first Debutante Ball that money was raised to build a new church (Holyrood Church), replacing the one, built in 1889, which had been burnt down in 1936.

◀ Mavis Oxley (Ian Hollindale's aunt) and Vera Hession at the 1936 Ball²



▲ The Anglican Holyrood Church. Built in 1889. Burnt down in 1936.
Back (L-R): Walter Hollindale, Stuart Walker.
Middle (L-R): Tom Binstead, Mavis Hollindale, Jean Campbell, Mrs. Binstead.
Front (L-R): Lorene Hollindale, May Binstead.²



◀ Holyrood Church of England, Upper Coomera,
ca. 1925
Photographer unknown
Picture Queensland ~ State Library of
Queensland: digital image collection



Isabelle Daphne Bird-Rubeck, Doris May Bird-Brazier, Violet May Bird-Seeney, Hilda May Bird-Barr.
Photograph hanging on the wall of the Hall, 2015

The Brisbane Courier reported on Thursday 13 March 1930

UPPER COOMERA

Church Benefit - The annual benefit in aid of the Catholic Church took the form of a euchre party and dance on March 7 in the Upper Coomera School of Arts. There was a very good attendance. Music was rendered by Mr Henry Blum's band (Brisbane), and Mr C Whalley supervised the dancing, while Mr Col and Mr Jesse Siganto supervised the euchre tournament. Miss Addie Foxwell won the ladies prize, and Mr Armstrong the men's prize. A chocolate waltz was won by Mr and Miss Dunner.⁶

And on 8 March 1932

UPPER COOMERA

Benefit - The Upper Coomera School of Arts was prettily decorated on February 26 with cream and red, the colours of the Upper Coomera Ladies Cricket Club, when a dance was held in aid of the club. Music was supplied by Mr Chas. Taylor's orchestra (Canungra). Mr H. Benstead was M.C. Novelty waltzes were won by Miss Marg. Bird and Mr G. Bignell, Mr C. Benstead and Miss McGrath.⁷

(‘Benstead’ is probably a mis-spelling of ‘Binstead’)



Debutantes Ball 1939. Photograph hangs in the Hall today, 2015.

The Hall also played a role in the religious life of the community. When the Anglican Church burned down in 1936, it was used instead for services until land was donated by Mr A Hinze (father of Russell Hinze) and surveyed voluntarily by Mr J Muntz (Shire Engineer from Pimpama). The present Holyrood Church was built on that site.

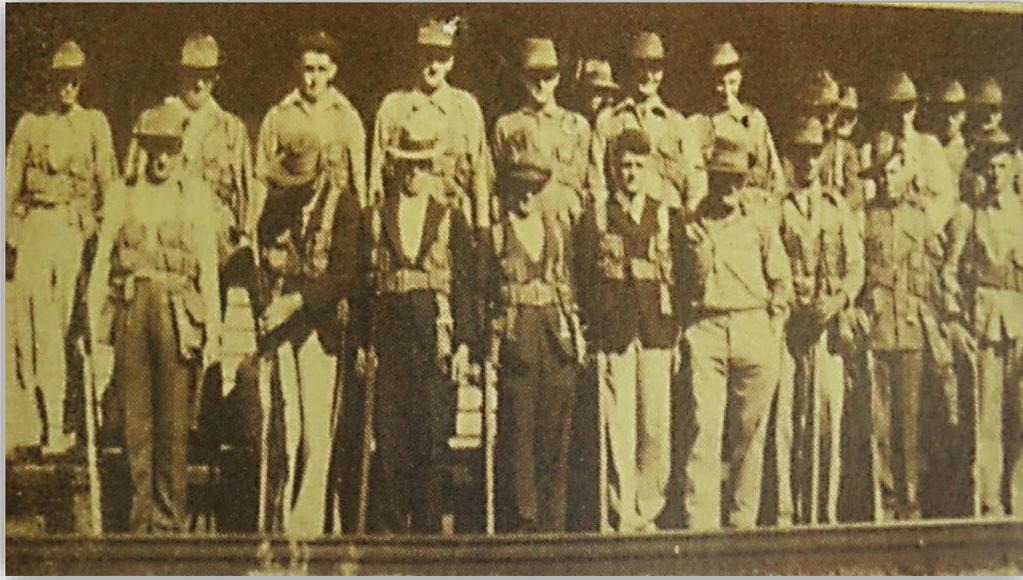
Boxing tournaments were held in the Hall as reported in the South Coast Bulletin on Friday 16 September, 1938.

UPPER COOMERA

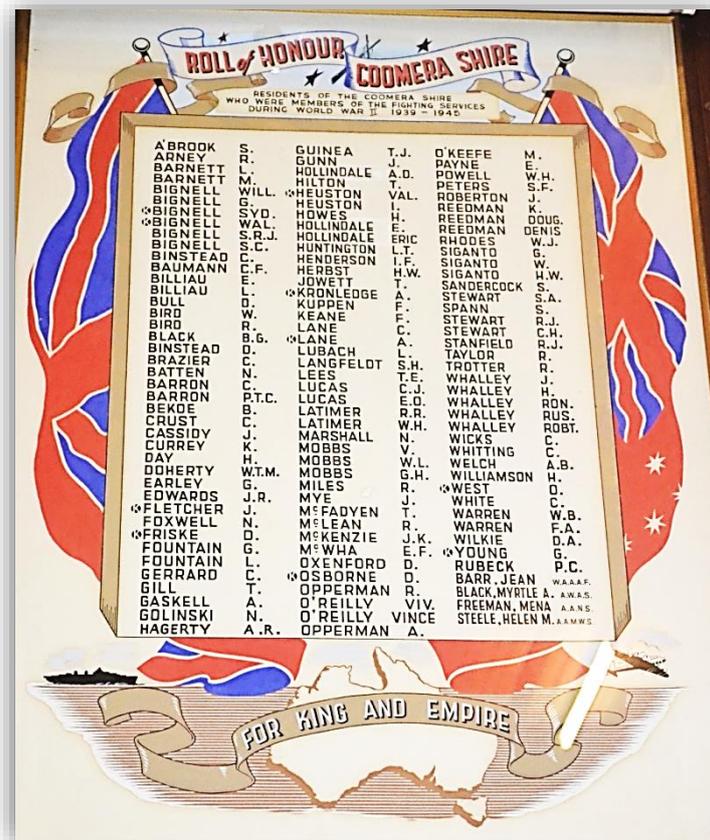
To augment the Upper Coomera School of Arts funds Cr S. F. Walker is organizing a boxing tournament to be held in the School of Arts Upper Coomera on September 24th. Good support has been promised by way of trophies and it is expected that lads from Southport, Ormeau, Cedar Creek, Coomera and Beenleigh will be taking part in the tourney.⁸

When World War Two was declared in 1939, again the young men of Coomera enlisted, many in the Second AIF, and again the Hall saw the soldiers, sailors and airmen farewelled. Committees were formed to play vital roles for the war effort and met at the Hall, such as an evacuation / accommodation committee; a stock dispersion committee which considered the possibility of invasion and how the stock would be dispersed in such circumstances. Another of these committees was 'the home guard'.²

Again food parcels were prepared and the community pulled together to present the servicemen with an inscribed watch and a wallet with £5. An Honour Board was erected in the School of Arts Hall recognizing the service of men and women from Coomera, Upper Coomera and Oxenford.



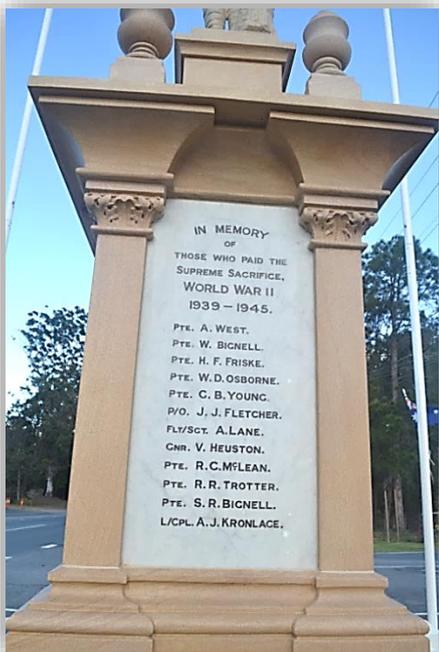
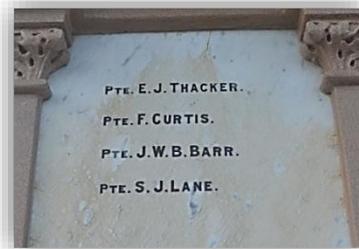
The Coomera contingent of A Company for the 15th Battalion going off to Militia Camp in 1937²



Honour Board erected in the hall. Photographed 2015: NW



The names of the fallen were inscribed on the Soldiers' Monument at Upper Coomera, joining those commemorated as giving their lives in the First World War.



Photographs of Soldiers' Monument at Upper Coomera. NW



There was fun as well at this time, where at a Military Ball in 1940 the Pearl Watts Orchestra played and Warren Hollindale was MC. There was a crowd of 300.²



Fancy Dress Ball, 1946. Photograph given by Chris Delanoue

In 1947, at the School of Arts, a Mock Debutante Ball was organised by the RSL.²



The family names of these committee members of The School of Arts have featured throughout the history of the Upper Coomera area. This photograph is currently hanging on the wall of the Hall today.



Coomera's own Russell Hinze, (1919-1991) whose controversial career in public life spanned almost four decades, first in local government in the 1950s and 1960s, and then in State Government from 1966 to 1988⁹, is recorded as being 'Santa Claus' in 1949 in the Upper Coomera School of Arts Hall and on the night gave out 228 presents.

More recently were the regular Saturday night dances. These were held in the School of Arts Hall and Ian Hollindale remembers the tea being boiled in a square, four gallon kerosene tin, and the cups distributed from an old galvanized iron, round bath tub. The trays of fresh ham sandwiches were memorable. *The larrikins 'ran the cutter' and often had a keg or a bottle in the boot of the car behind the hall.*

Local talent might recite poetry, sing to the band of the night or even perform magic. The Hall reflected the changing times.

The 'Miss Oxenford' Balls were still a great part of the community in the School of Arts in the 60s and 70s, but the spirit of the past was changing forever. These, like the local cricket games and other family and community activities, were no longer central to people's lives. There was the development and selling off of farms to become housing estates and many more things to do. In the 1950s there were 69 farms on the Coomera, now they are almost all gone.²

Currently (2016):

The Upper Coomera School of Arts Hall has been home to so much change in culture and circumstance in the many years since it was completed.

No longer the farewells and welcomes for servicemen going to and from war, but fund raising ventures for a separate RSL (Returned and Services League) Hall are now held.

No longer individual school plays, but the Hall plays host to the 'Grand Concert for the Combined Schools'.

No longer pre-wedding parties and debutante balls, but now silver and golden wedding anniversaries.

Some of the present generation who use the Hall today did their courting in the old Hall.

No longer the Waltz, the Schottische, the Lancers and the Pride of Erin, and later the Jive and the Twist, but more recently Jazz Ballet and Line Dancing. Yvonne Brittain has been teaching dancing at the Upper Coomera School of Arts for thirty eight years and continues there with her classes in classical ballet, jazz, tap and contemporary dance. When Moira and Naomi visited the hall in late 2015, Yvonne Brittain was conducting her dance classes with some delightful little girls who were thoroughly enjoying themselves as their mothers watched on from the wooden benches along the sides of the Hall.

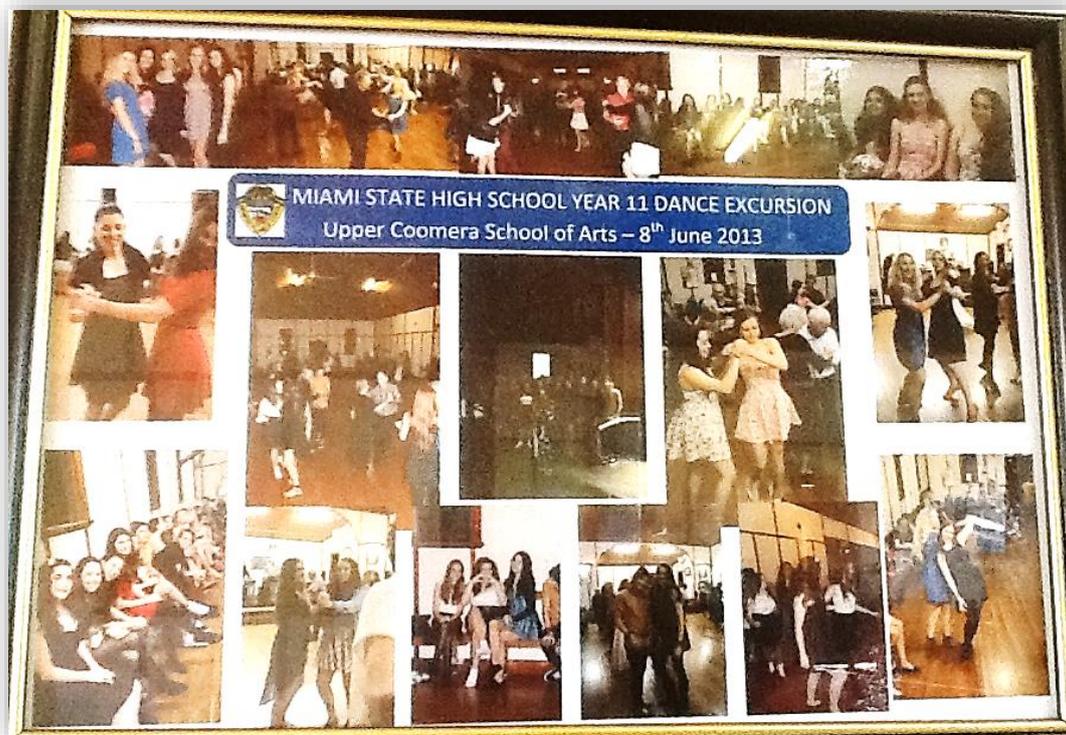
2016 marks 120 years since the hall was opened. Celebrations planned include an Old Time Dance, which should bring back so many memories of how the passing of time is reflected in stories of the events at the School of Arts Hall.



Board announcing next dance seen in the hall, 2015: NW



Notice Board in front of hall, 2015: NW

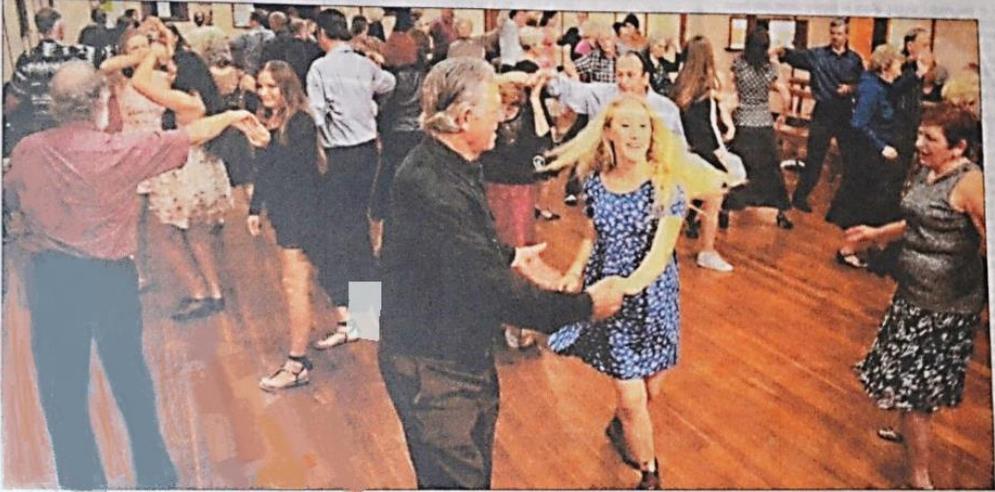


One of the social events that occurred in 2013 – the fun continues.



Gold Coast Bulletin, Sunday 16th July 2013

Stepping back in time



Members of the community and Year 11s dance the Pride of Erin in a get-together at Upper Coomera School of Arts that spanned the generations.

**TEENAGEMENT REPORTERS
THE DODD SMALL & ASHLEY
DANCE DANCE**
19 Year 11s, Miami State High School

HAVE you ever wanted to time travel into a past decade?

Last month, 19 Year 11 dance students from Miami State High School did exactly that. They caught a bus to the Upper Coomera School of Arts for an "old-time" country dance alongside members of the community.

During the night, the students were well involved and needed little encouragement to partake in the

old-time country dances; some being the Pride of Erin, Gypsy Tap and Barn Dance.

These dances were taught and practised beforehand in class as part of their social dance unit.

Miranda van't Hof, Miami High's resident dance teacher, explained: "I saw the excursion as a wonderful opportunity to enable students to connect their classroom learning experiences with the community and transform their learning into action, whilst taking the students back to an era of social etiquette and good, wholesome fun."

Peter Sigmato, the MC for the

night, stated: "I personally, on behalf of the committee, am very, very happy for you attending, for a number of reasons –

- 1) introducing them to the old-time dancing,
- 2) introducing them to an old building, and
- 3) gaining a country experience."

Each student had so much fun and it was such a sensational experience (particularly when it came to supper!)

The Upper Coomera School of Arts was built in 1896 and has been a central part of the area for more than 116 years.

With the small number of committee members getting older, there is the fear these dances will become non-existent and so the need to encourage younger members of the community to such events becomes vital to sustain this wonderful piece of local history.

The spirits of the elderly members soared as soon as the fresh-faced teenagers walked through the double doors, flabbergasted at the idea of the teenagers dancing the night away to old-time social dance.

All the members were more than happy to give their time and expertise to the students – lending them a

helping hand (or a foot) and teaching them the country dance steps.

A highlight of the night was the Monte Carlo where each and every couple in the building danced along to the Gypsy Tap – yet there was a catch.

After each section a card was drawn, and groups were gradually eliminated from the game until finally there was one couple remaining.

The trip to the Upper Coomera School of Arts was more than worth it, as the students gained a sense of respect for the elderly and the urge to time-travel back to 1953.

Members of the Community and Year 11s dance the Pride of Erin in a get-together at the Upper Coomera School of Arts that spanned the generations. Gold Coast Bulletin, Tuesday 16th July, 2013. This hangs in the Hall today.

Much has changed in the community but it is to be hoped that the same spirit that has seen it through all the diversity of highs and lows over the years will continue and withstand what changes may come, just as this little Hall has stood for so many years as an integral part of the Upper Coomera Community.

References:

- 1 South East Queensland Placenames (State Library of Queensland)
- 2 *Life and Cricket on the Coomera River*. Ian Hollindale, 2008
- 3 Queensland Places, Centre for the Government of Queensland, 2015. University of Queensland.
- 4 Upper Coomera, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia
- 5 South Coast Bulletin (Southport, Qld. : 1929 – 1949), Friday 18 August 1939, Page 1
- 6 The Brisbane Courier (Qld. : 1864 – 1933), Thursday 13 March 1930, Page 10
- 7 The Brisbane Courier (Qld. : 1864 – 1933), Tuesday 8 March 1932, Page 15
- 8 South Coast Bulletin (Southport, Qld. : 1929 – 1949), Friday 16 September, 1938, Page 1
- 9 Russ Hinze, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia

Photographs (2015): Naomi Wright (NW) and Moira Lockhart (ML)

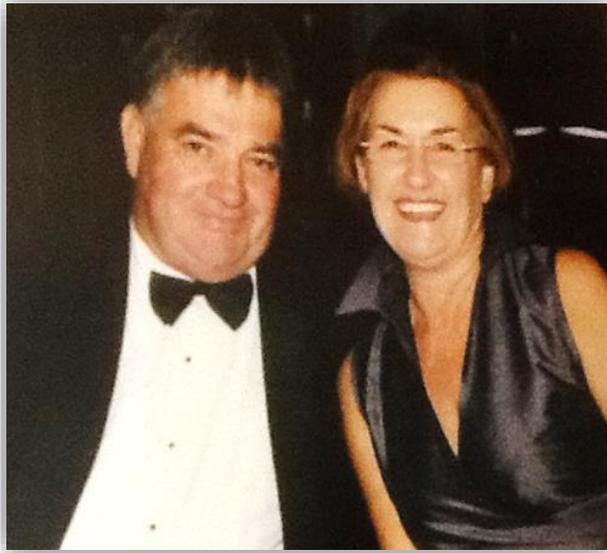


Acknowledgements

Much of the information in this work is taken from an address by Mr Ian M Hollindale at the Upper Coomera School of Arts 1896-1996 Centenary Celebrations, 18 August 1996. Mr Hollindale has very generously given permission for his extensive research to be used for this project.

Mr Hollindale gave his book *Life and Cricket on the Coomera River, A journey through 140 years of cricket, life and history along Queensland's Coomera River*, with his very best wishes for use on this project.

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