



## **ABERMAIN NSW**



**Name: Abermain School of Arts**

**Address: 209 Cessnock Road, Abermain NSW 2326**

### **The Town:**

Abermain is a small town in the Hunter region of New South Wales. It is located 7.9 km ENE of Cessnock, 42.0 km NW of Newcastle and 153 km N of Sydney. Abermain is adjacent to Werakata National Park, created in 2007. The current town population is approximately 2,300. (Census 2016)

The town of Abermain was established in 1903 and the Post Office was officially opened on 1 June 1904. It was formally proclaimed as a village on 19 June 1907.

In the time before the establishment of “The School of Arts” at Abermain it is important to understand the town’s beginnings and how it subsequently developed.

Abermain was settled by colonists of English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish origin who came to Australia to work in gold and coal mines throughout NSW and Victoria. Those who stayed in this region of NSW were instrumental in developing one of the most prestigious townships on the South Maitland coalfields - called Abermain.

The first mention of an Abermain township occurred in October 1903 when a private subdivision of the late John Callaghan’s 32 acre estate was surveyed and laid out.



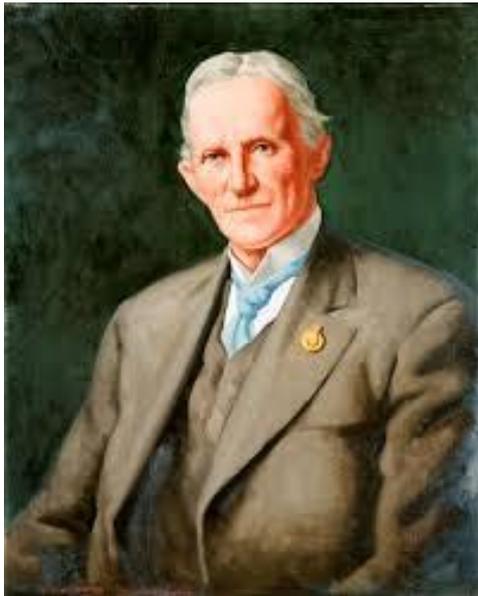
### Some History of the Town

It is important to recognize the significant contribution to development in this region made by Professor Sir Tannatt William Edgeworth David who was born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1858.

Known as Edgeworth David he was recruited in England for the post of assistant geological surveyor and in 1882 at the age of 24, he accepted an appointment in the NSW Department of Mines. He was requested to undertake a thorough survey of an area where a farmer named Tester reported to government authorities that he had found coal.

Edgeworth David proved the existence of the Greta coal seam at a place called Deep Creek. He then went on to discover and map the outcrop all the way back to Maitland and beyond Cessnock. That was in 1886, a highly significant year on the coalfields since the existence of this important discovery was identified by means of a formal geological survey, a systematic scientific investigation of all of the Lower Hunter region, rather than by simple accidental prospecting. The Department of Mines then reserved in the interests of coal mining, 23,700 acres in the region. (*Abermain the beginning* compiled by Janice Norden) David published his account of this work in 1907 as *The Geology of the Lower Hunter Coal Measures*.

### Sir Tannatt William Edgeworth David (1858-1934)



A biographer, David Branagan, referred to Edgeworth David as a ‘statesman of science’ since he exercised significant influence with both governments and industry:

*“Edgeworth David was a celebrated Geologist, Antarctic Pioneer, co-founder of the Australian Tunnelling Corps in World War One, tireless campaigner for Australian and International Science. He went on to become a Professor of Geology at Sydney University. He is celebrated as a magnificent Australian. The book tells the tumultuous life story of this remarkable ‘knight errant of science’ who was once a household name, and whose achievements remain with us today.”*

Among his many and varied enterprises, Edgeworth David went on the first Antarctic exploration that Ernest Shackleton led. In 1907, together with two of his former students, Mawson and Cotton, David joined Shackleton in NZ. As a result of his other achievements during the expedition, Shackleton gave David the task of leading Mawson and the Scottish doctor, Forbes Mackay, in an attempt to reach the South Magnetic Pole. They accomplished this feat which has “...passed into the annals of polar exploration as an epic of courage and endurance”. (*Australian Dictionary of Biography*)

The Australian Tunnelling Corps recruited many miners to use their skills to create tunnel systems under German positions and to lay explosives that destroyed enemy strongholds.



The Tunnelling Companies made a significant contribution to some of the great battles of the war, notably in 1916 at Hill 60 (Ypres) and in 1917 at Messines.

Sir Douglas Mawson's Tribute to Edgeworth David was offered at his funeral on 28<sup>th</sup> August, 1934 and reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* the following day:

*No one could have held more splendid qualities. He was always deeply involved in research and put himself to unlimited trouble to unravel interesting problems. When in his company in the Antarctic [I] realised not only the wonderful endurance of my friend but the extent to which he would martyr himself to achieve a desired object.*

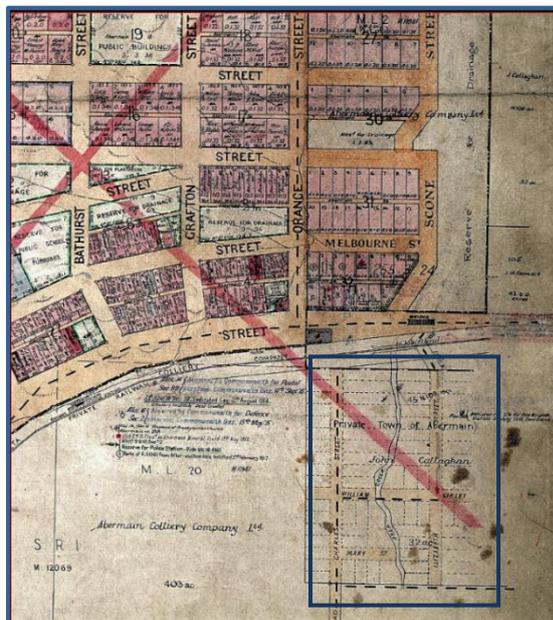
(SMH Wednesday August 29, 1934)

How fortunate for Abermain to have a person such as TW Edgeworth David, brought to our shores to map out the area. He went on to become such an outstanding Australian in all aspects of his personal endeavour and professional life, including as a Professor at Sydney University.

The mapping of the geology of this area was the foundation of the development of the surrounding areas such as East and South Greta, Heddon Greta, Standford Merthyr, Pelaw Main, Hebburn and Abermain. The development of these growing towns occurred over the next few years and provided the basis for considerable economic progress.

In 1903 interest was growing around the Abermain Colliery Company and reporters from the *Maitland Mercury* were commenting on its progress. Once the Aberdare Railway line was completed it provided transportation closer to Cessnock. On the outskirts of the property there was a settlement of hundreds of tents and canvas structures, visible throughout the bush. Workers were becoming unsettled with lack of facilities.

Coal was struck in September 1903. Five months after the first soil was turned at the Abermain Colliery, the first train load of coal left in November 1903 for shipment at Newcastle. November of that year also saw the construction of a large dam commenced on the property holding 200,000,000 gallons of water.



The large estate land grant of the late John Callaghan was bequeathed to his family who auctioned the land for sale in March 1904. The estate comprised five streets named after the Callaghan family – Charles, Elizabeth, John, Mary and William. Within a short time numerous houses were being erected in the 'Private Town' and the township of Abermain was being further developed.

- ◀ **Map of the Town of Abermain 1907**  
The Callaghan Estate, called a 'Private Town' is shown at lower right (outlined in blue)

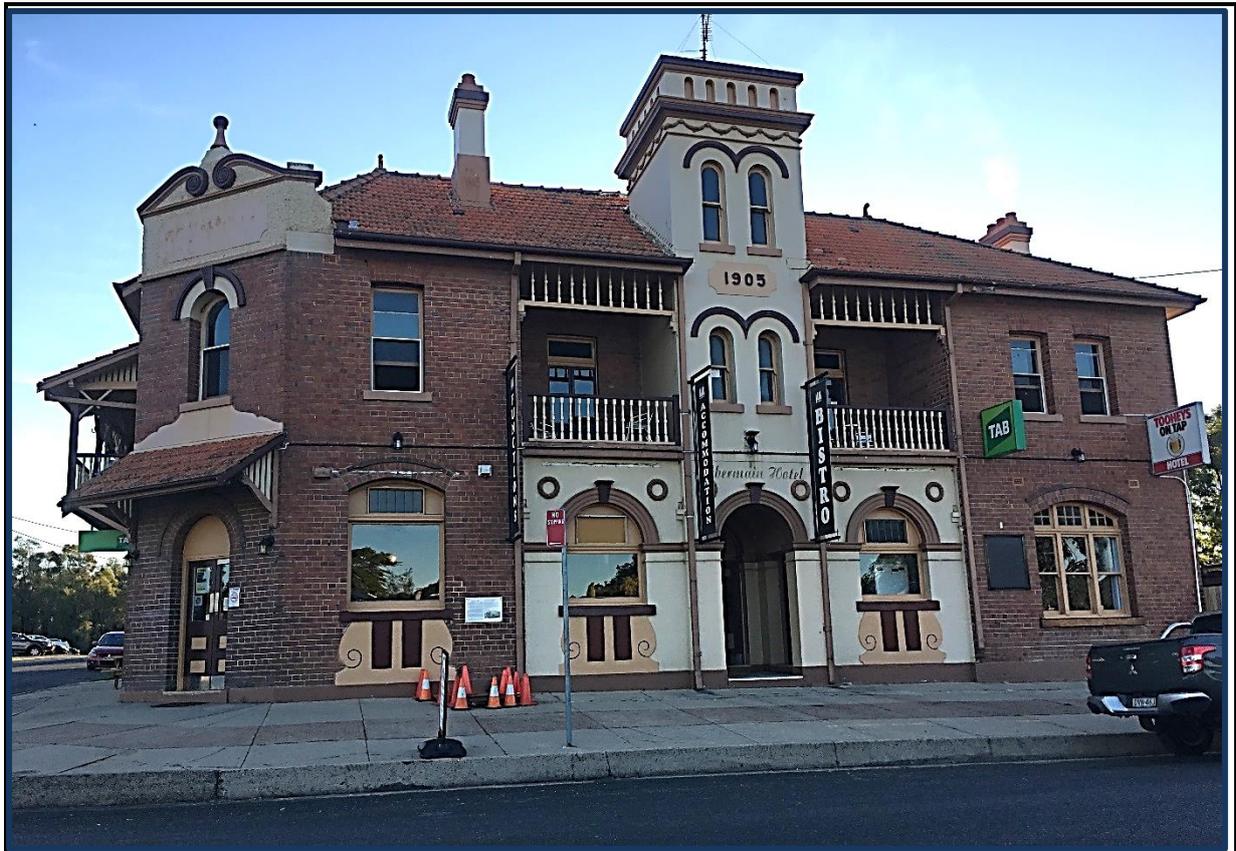


The new Mine Manager, Mr. Blackwell, arrived with his wife and daughter to reside in a newly built residence. At this time a second residence was built to accommodate the Under Manager, Mr. Alex Neilson, a former Deputy at the Duckenfield Colliery.

Hotel licensing was sought and initially refused but finally the application by Henry Hector was accepted and the Abermain Hotel was built in 1905. The development of a Hotel in the township of Abermain was highly significant. Once the Coal Seam was discovered, people had literally poured into the outskirts of the town, often coming from previously closed mines such as Minmi & Newcastle. They also came as immigrants and were mainly the ‘Geordies’ from the northeast of England, and Cardiff in Wales, both traditional mining communities. (Mr Ed Tonks DVD: *The History of Abermain*, 2008)

Hotels provided a much sought after relief at the end of a hard day’s work in the local mines. As was the tradition in other areas, the Hotel proprietors were used to providing credit from one pay fortnight to the next - until the most difficult times.

Hotel Licences were very difficult to achieve in the early days of settlement in Abermain. Licensing rights were granted to local Councils and finally after several attempts the Abermain Hotel Licence was granted and this iconic building was built on the southern side of the railway line in Abermain in 1905.



**The Abermain Hotel**



### Abermain Public School

Provision of a local school was first requested by F Brossman in September 1904. In November 1904 Inspector H D McClelland recommended two acres of land on the east ridge of John Street to be set aside for a school capable of accommodating 80 pupils. It was officially gazetted on 25th October 1905.

Initially the pupils were housed in the Catholic Hall between Weston and Abermain for six months and then for however long it was required. The Catholic Church continued to use the building for church services and other purposes at weekends. The Abermain Public School was completed and officially opened on 27 February 1906.

The school, like the town, grew steadily. By December 1908 there was an increase of just over one hundred pupils in 12 months, making a total of 241 pupils. Some classes had to be conducted in the open air. (*Abermain the beginning* compiled by Janice Norden)



**Photo : NSW State Archives**

Around the same time there was a strong call for a Catholic School to be built as well. Land with a house on it was donated by the Malloy family. The school was opened in 1908 with the two sisters (nuns) coming from Cessnock in a horse drawn bus to teach at the school. A priest, Father F W McAuliffe, was stationed at Cessnock. The school grew considerably in a short period of time.



### **Abermain Mines Rescue Station**

The Mines Rescue Station was constructed in 1926 at a cost of £20,000 and was the first of a chain of four to be erected in the State of New South Wales and the just the second of its kind in Australia, the first being at Ipswich in Queensland.

It is interesting to note that the School of Arts preceded these buildings, such was the emphasis and importance placed on the development of community and personal growth. Many locals considered the erection of a Mines Rescue Station a “white elephant” as it might never be needed.

However, it was considered by leading citizens at the time that even if they saved ‘one life’ in a crisis the station was worth having. It was also considered to be important not only to be prepared for a disaster in the mines but also to highlight the significance of the need for a ‘safety first’ attitude in the workplace.

Credit for the Mines Rescue Station goes to Mr J M Baddeley who was appointed Minister for Mines in 1924. (*Abermain the beginning* compiled by Janice Norden).

Mr G Emery became the First Superintendent of Abermain Colliery (*Kurri Kurri Times* 1931)



**The Mines Rescue Station**

As the colliery continued to thrive, the population grew and many more businesses and shops opened in the area. In its heyday there were an estimated 40 businesses, including two hotels, a Co-operative Store, and a picture theatre. All these businesses managed to thrive through many strikes, lockouts, and the depression, until the late thirties and forties. The granting of credit to mine workers until end of the regular pay period was an accepted form of provisional payment. However, this practice was to cause problems in the depression of the 1930s.



## The Great Depression 1929

The Coalfield and its workers became severely affected with the onset of the economic depression of this period. There was trouble everywhere with strikes and lockouts, hundreds of older people were refused help by the Government, and small shops were closing down as they could no longer give credit. Miners had become used to living on credit and paid their account at the end of their fortnight of work. Those who had built new homes could not afford to keep up their repayments. Banks could not sell the homes, therefore people lost their properties. Soup kitchens were set up. They provided very important relief as people had to survive any way they could. The men would go to farms in the Maitland area and the markets to bargain for soup and vegetables and to the butchers for bones.

(*Abermain the Beginning* compiled by Janice Norden)

## The Abermain Eisteddfod



There were many other eisteddfods around Australia by 1917 but the earliest known was in Ballarat in 1855. With the influx of miners from Wales and other coal mining regions they were able to initiate an advance movement. They established the development of the Arts and Culture that they had observed in the communities where they had come from. Eisteddfods represented to some, the way people wanted to look to the outside world, to be serious, striving, self-disciplined and civilised. Here the children of mining people could master the symbols of respectability of another class.

(*For Freedom and Dignity*: Andrew W Metcalfe)

The Eisteddfod celebrated its centenary in 2017. It runs two separate competitions, the Public Eisteddfod, open to all, and the School Eisteddfod open only to schools. It has classes of competition for Speech and Drama, Dancing (Tap and Ballet) and Vocal and Instrumental Sections, and included for schools, Choral singing. Prizes include scholarships for successful students. Some of the competition sections have been held over many years in the Plaza Hall.



The Abermain Eisteddfod grew and grew in strength, respect and numbers and outlasted those in many other surrounding towns. This was due mainly to the diligence of a hardworking committee who held the belief that the town must provide this opportunity to local and surrounding residents. By 1965 it was the largest eisteddfod of its kind in NSW.

◀ **Plaza Hall with Members of the Eisteddfod Committee 1965**



The foresight envisioned by the Abermain Community at the time - to strive to develop oneself and family for improvement - resulted in the Abermain Eisteddfod beginning and continuing to this day. Many other communities in surrounding towns failed to achieve this due to economic downturn and industrial change in the workplace. The School of Arts development provided support to the foundation of such a culture in this area.

It is interesting to note how rapidly the town of Abermain developed once coal was discovered and the community leaders soon realised how much the town would benefit from a ” **School of Arts.**”

## **The School of Arts**

### **Establishment:**

The first formal mention of a School of Arts at Abermain is found in a paragraph in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate (NMH)* which reported on p.6 of the edition of Saturday 22 August 1908:

*It is proposed to establish a school of arts at Abermain and for that purpose a public meeting will be held in Sharpe’s hall on Sunday morning at 11 o’clock when all interested in this movement are requested to attend.*

There is no report on the outcome or any further reference to the proposal until more than a year later. Reporting on the opening of the new Public School in Abermain it was stated that “It is proposed to ask the Minister to grant the old school building for use as a school of arts.” (*NMH* 16 October 1909 p.6) The reply stated that “...the old building was needed for school purposes and the request cannot be granted” (*NMH* Friday 17 December 1909 p.6).

In reply to an application for a grant of land to erect a School of Arts, Mr A Teece, Secretary of the Abermain School of Arts Committee, received a letter from the Lands Department to inform the Committee that the matter had been referred to the Surveyor at East Maitland for report. This was urged to be a matter of importance and that the most suitable land for the convenience of residents of the old and new township would be the corner block opposite the local Brigade Fire Station. (*NMH* Wednesday 20 July 1910 p.6).

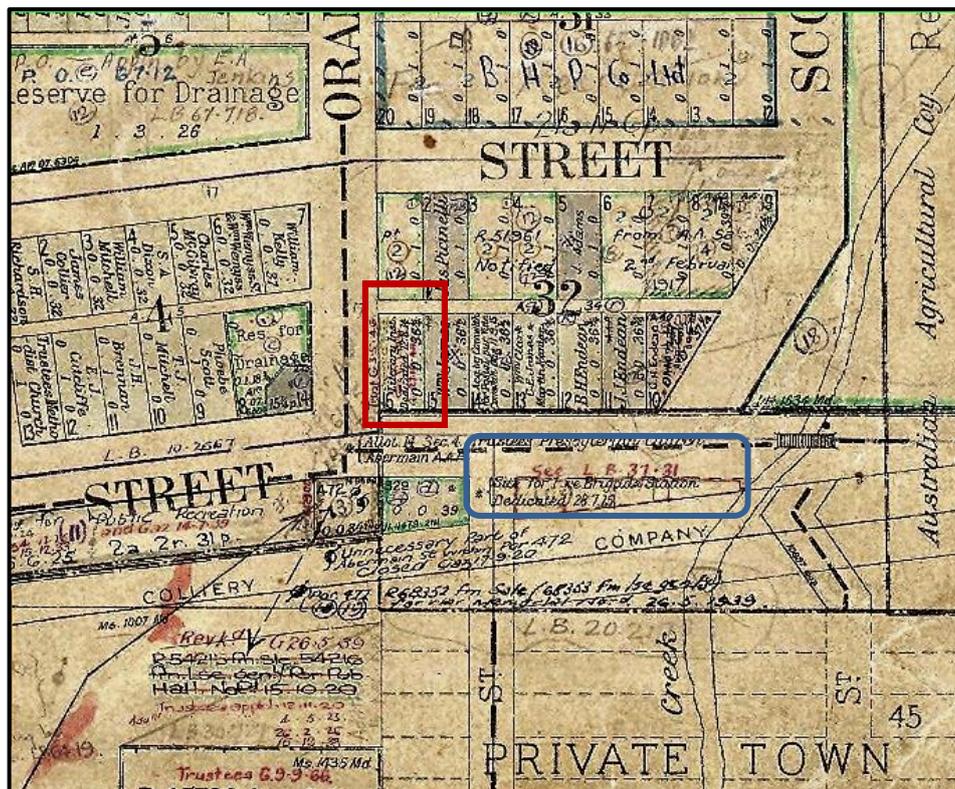
Meanwhile the Department of Public Instruction which had earlier refused the use of the old school building, wrote that under certain conditions, they were prepared to rent that building to the Progress Committee for school of arts purposes for £1 per month. This was rejected as unacceptable and a new committee was formed. They were to follow up the application for a block of land, with a sub-committee formed to find means of erecting a building. (*NMH* Thursday 30 June 1910 p.6).

Another year passed before the Committee received a request to appoint Trustees for a grant of land. Messrs J Parkinson, A Teece, W Clarke, M Manion and R Devon were nominated. (*NMH* 13 June 1911 p.6). Even this produced no obvious result and yet another year later, in 1912, members of the School of Arts Committee met with the Minister during a visit to Abermain.



They requested that they be granted use of the old school building which had remained unoccupied since the new school had opened. They would pull down and re-erect the building on the site granted to them. The Minister was sympathetic to their request but a response from his Department refused it, saying that they proposed to remove the building for use elsewhere. (*Maitland Daily Mercury (MDM)* Saturday 8 June; Tuesday 9 July 1912 p.6).

Finally in May 1913 there was a move towards erecting their own building. The first annual election of officers took place on 28 September 1913, when Mr J Parkinson was elected President. A committee of 13 tradespeople were elected as representative of the workers and continuing efforts were made to increase available funds. The grant of land for a “Literary Institute” was “Dedicated 12. 8. 14.”



This segment of a 1916 town map of Abermain shows the site of the School of Arts granted to the Committee on 12 August 1914 and “dedicated for a Literary Institute.” It was never referred to by that name – it was always discussed as the School of Arts.

The site is exactly the one first requested in 1910: the corner of Abermain Street and Orange Street (red box) opposite the Fire Station (blue box) conveniently located between the town of Abermain and the developing “Private Town” based on the Callaghan Estate. (bottom right)

A grant of £275 pounds was received from the Government and with the cash in hand and a further loan of £400 from the Commonwealth Bank, the committee were able to accept the tender of J C White of Weston to construct the building for £755



*It is reported at the quarterly meeting of the Abermain Miners on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1915 that the trustees and committee of the Abermain School of Arts are diligently working to get the new brick building erected as soon as possible. All the loans were granted with the additional help of trustees who gave security for the amount required. It is expected at an early date the building will be in the course of erection.*

(NMH Friday 24 December 1915 p.6)

On 19 February 1916 the foundation stone was laid by John Parkinson, President of the School of Arts. Getting to this point was a great community effort. Prior to the opening ceremony, processions marched through the town with members of the committee, together with school children accompanied by their Headmaster Mr W J Horne. Mr Joshua Jeffries, Superintendent of the Abermain Collieries presided and amongst others on the platform were officers and members of the School of Arts Committee. Everyone was involved. Funding was provided by the local mining community, bank loans, and individual loans that were guaranteed by the trustees of the fund. (MDM Tuesday 22 February 1916 p.5)

Work had been carried out by an assiduous committee who deserved congratulations for initiating a movement that led to the foundation stone stage of a new building and to construction of a handsome brick building.

Officers associated with the early effort to establish Abermain School of Arts were Messrs. R Streatfield President, Secretary Mr A Teece, and Mr C E James Treasurer.



**Official photograph of Laying of the Foundation Stone 19<sup>th</sup> February 1916**



Maitland Daily Mercury (NSW : 1894 - 1939), Tuesday 22 February 1916, page 5

## ABERMAIN SCHOOL OF ARTS FOUNDATION STONE LAYING.

(From our Representative).

The foundation stone of a School of Arts building at Abermain was formally laid on Saturday in the presence of a large gathering of townspeople and visitors. The site of the new building is on the main Maitland-Cessnock road, opposite the Abermain Fire Brigade Station. The building will be of brick, with plastered walls and cement dado. The plan shows a lecture hall, committee room, reading room, and library, all of large dimensions, and finished in the best style.

The movement for a School of Arts at Abermain dates back some six or seven years, the officers associated with the early effort being Messrs. R. Streetfield, president; Mr. A. Teece, secretary; and Mr. C. E. James, treasurer. They, with members of the committee, worked assiduously, and they deserve congratulations on initiating a movement that has led to the foundation stone stage of a new building.

Prior to the ceremony on Saturday a procession of pipers, members of the committee, and school children, the latter under the direction of the headmaster (Mr. W. J. Horne) marched from the town boundary to the site where a platform had been erected.

Mr. Joshua Jeffries, superintendent of the Abermain collieries, presided, and amongst others on the platform were Mr. W. Kearsley, M.L.A., Councillor Tulloch, Mr. John Jeffries, officers and members of the School of Arts committee.

The Chairman, after congratulating the people and those who had fathered the School of Arts movement, explained that the new building, with furniture, would cost about £800. There was a sum of about £245 in hand, which had been contributed by colliery employees and townspeople, and £20 from the company. A loan of £400 had been negotiated, and the trustees were guarantors for that amount, which they hoped would be paid off in four years. They expected subsidy to the amount of about £275. After referring to the benefits to be derived from a School of Arts the chairman called upon the president of the committee, Mr. J. J. Parkinson, to lay the foundation stone, and presented him with a silver trowel as a memento of the occasion.

Mr. Parkinson said it was a source of satisfaction, after years of work, to see that the School of Arts had reached that stage. They had worked hard because they realised the benefits to be derived from the institution, and he hoped it would get the support it deserved. He had much pleasure in declaring the stone well and truly laid.

Underneath the stone was placed records embodying a brief history of the district.

Brief addresses were given by Private M. Mannion, Messrs. R. Streetfield, John Jeffries, and A. Teece, who referred to the assistance of Mr. Kearsley in connection with the School of Arts movement.

In the evening the event was further celebrated by a social in Garrett's Hall, at which a toast list was honoured, which was interspersed with music. Supper was provided by

a toast list was honoured, which was interspersed with music. Supper was provided by a committee of ladies, and afterwards the hall was cleared for dancing.

The officers of the School of Arts are:—President, Mr. J. J. Parkinson; vice-president, Mr. R. Horne; treasurer, Mr. J. Garrett; secretary, Mr. D. Coutts; trustees, Messrs. J. J. Parkinson, W. Clarke, A. Teece, M. Mannion, and R. Devon.

The list below names those involved in the early effort to establish the School of Arts Committee:

Mr R Streetfield President

Mr A Teece Treasurer

Mr CE James Secretary

Officers of the School of Arts  
1922:

Mr JJ Parkinson President

Mr R Horne Vice- President

Mr J Garrett Treasurer

Mr D Coutts Secretary

Trustees:

Messrs. JJ Parkinson, W Clarke,  
A Teece, M Mannion, J Devon

*Maitland Daily Mercury (MDM)*

*Tuesday 22 February 1916 p.5*



## The Building:

The School of Arts building was to be erected on the main Maitland-Cessnock road opposite the Abermain Fire Brigade Station. The building was to be constructed in red brick with simple fenestration. It was to have plastered walls and cement dado. The Architect was Mr Wilkins of Newcastle and the builder Mr John C White.

The plans show a lecture hall, committee room, reading room and library all of large dimensions and finished in the best style for the times. The reading room and library were 20 x 15 feet, with the lecture hall 25 x 15 feet and fitted with folding doors, converting it into a games room and a ladies room as required. The tiled entrance porch was 10 x 8 feet and a hall 5 x 45 feet leads through. The floor is of tallowwood, the walls of plaster and the ceilings of steel. Electric light has been installed and there is ample natural light and ventilation. There are fireplaces in both reading-rooms, the furniture fittings and shelving throughout being neat and complete. (NMH Monday 21 August 1916 p.6)

The School of Arts was formally opened on 19 August 1916 by William Kearsley who was presented with a gold key with which he opened the doors and invited inside the assembled guests.

It was reported in 1922: "Although only a township compared with Cessnock it boasts the neatest School of Arts on the coalfields." (Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Observer Friday 28 April 1922 p 7)

By 1925 it was decided that the School of Arts needed considerable improvements. The *Newcastle Sun* reported:

*The building although quite large is nowhere near enough. It is now proposed to build a hall at the rear of the building making a total length of 100 feet. At the far end, a stage is to be built ...with two dressing rooms, one on either side. The library room is to be turned into a reading room and after the alterations all the books will be housed in a room double the size of the present one. An extra card room is to be built on the north side... The Committee intends to run its own picture show. This had proved successful at Weston. The total cost is estimated at £2500.*

(Newcastle Sun Monday 25 May, 1925 p.3)



◀The building after the 1925 extensions.



In 1929 the institution was in a good financial position and there was no debt on the building. There were ideas of further extensions and improvements but the ‘industrial depression’ meant that this idea was postponed to a time of more stability. (NMH 20 July 1929 p.10) This decade of the Great Depression with widespread unemployment meant that the further development of the building did not occur although the institution remained free of debt.

### Roll of Honour - War Memorial

Even before the completion of the building, the Abermain miners decided at a meeting in 1916 to cooperate with the School of Arts in compiling a Roll of Honour in remembrance of the residents of Abermain who had fallen at the front “same to be hung in the school of arts”.

(NMH 15 April 1916) At the first Annual Meeting in 1917 it was reported that

*To provide for the erection of an Honour Roll, Messrs R Howe, EC James, and Patterson were appointed to act on the Committee which was being convoked by the amelioration committee. (Northern Times (Newcastle) Tuesday 31 July 1917 p.3)*

The School of Arts housed photographs of the soldiers from Abermain who had been killed during the war. These were hung in the main room of the building and included those with very significant recognition of their actions:

- Captain Clarence Smith Jefferies VC (son of the Superintendent of the Abermain Collieries)
- Lieutenant Thomas Ridley MC DCM M de St G

The photographs were donated by the Abermain Comforts Fund: Mrs Robertson president, Mrs Hopes treasurer and Miss Endean secretary. (NMH Monday 10 November 1919 p.6)

The town’s War Memorial of the Great War was initially in front of the School of Arts building but later removed to a landscaped parkland opposite the building. The Memorial was constructed as the results of the efforts of the committee, in memory of the men who enlisted from Abermain.to fight in the Great War.



◀ **Memorial Stone honouring those who enlisted in the Great War 1914-1919**

▼ **Detail of plinth**





## Social History/Uses for the building

From the first public meeting called in August 1908 to the opening of the building in August 1916 took almost exactly eight years. This must show the determination of the people of Abermain to establish such an institution in order to gain the benefits they expected for the community.

Already, a couple of weeks before the opening, the by-laws of the institution had been drawn up and passed by a meeting of the subscribers, and the fees had been set: they would be paid quarterly at 3s 3d for a gentleman, 1s 3d for ladies, for those paying through their colliery office. (*NMH Monday 7 August 1916 p.6*)

In building the institution and from the time it was opened, they did have great support. The miners contributed routinely from their pay. These were small sums but the contribution was regular and provided financial support that could be counted on. At the opening of the building this important arrangement was acknowledged, together with other valuable support from the Abermain Colliery Company, business people, the miners' lodge, and others who gave their support.

At the first annual meeting in 1917, the report showed 420 members, 932 books of fiction as well as technical and other works were available, more than £130 had been spent on books and papers, and ten scholarships had been made available to the local schools allowing access to the library facilities in for their pupils. The Committee provided suitable books for the benefit of these young people and in time, as the institution grew, so did the number of scholarships provided to the schools. A suitable library for these pupils was always a priority.

The finances of the institution seemed to be very well managed. Each annual report of the School of Arts Committee acknowledged the continuing support of the colliery company in providing free power for the building. As a result of the contributions from the miners, there was always money to spend on books and periodicals for the library and reading room as well. The debt on the building was paid in a short time and plans to extend the building and improvements to the amenities were able to be delivered.

A reserve building fund was established in 1922 to insure payments to the bank in the event of the miners being idle and their regular contributions being missed. This would cover loans for any additions that might be planned. (*NMH Tuesday 1 August 1922 p. 6*)

The committee made special arrangements with other institutions nearby to accommodate the miners: on the Maitland coalfield they was a scheme whereby a man could pay his regular small contribution from his pay at the colliery where he worked and attend the School of Arts in the town where he lived.



There was a regular program of lectures, some of broader interest but often with a practical topic. The educational offerings were usually directed to providing important instruction for the miners: ambulance classes were an early offering and became a regular feature with many gaining formal qualifications from these classes. As well, there were lectures on mine safety, and mining classes with technical content which led to professional advancement for those who completed them successfully.

Because the building opened in late 1916, there was an immediate focus by subscribers on support to the war effort and the troops at the front. Weekly newspapers and magazines were sent from the School of Arts to the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the AIF through the YMCA. The workers for the Australian Comforts Fund met in the School of Arts to prepare and pack the parcels sent to Abermain men. One batch sent in July 1917 was listed as including a balaclava cap, two pairs of socks, scarf, mitts, two handkerchiefs, face washer, soap, two pairs of laces, writing pad, pencil, chewing gum, a tin of cigarettes, tobacco, papers, and in some parcels a pair of knee pads. (*Northern Times (NT)* Thursday 26 July 1917 p.4)

The membership swelled to 739 in 1926 and in 1927, 376 books were added and twenty-six school scholarships were offered in that year. The library in the School of Arts building contained more than 3000 volumes. The large hall, reading and recreation rooms were a great asset to the town.

The mine workers saw the establishment of the School of Arts as for “the development of oneself.” They saw this as an opportunity for their families to derive individually great satisfaction and personal development by the establishment of such an institution. (Mr Ed Tonks DVD: *Abermain founded on Coal & Culture - 1903.*) The Miners Lodge assisted in financing the School of Arts building and the miners and other workers paid a levy of 2d a week towards the fund. After completion of the building, the levy was raised to sixpence (6d) per week and has remained since that time. Obviously with the mining and economic downturn the contributions and community involvement became less and less.

During the 1920’s the School of Arts building was used mainly as an Adult Education centre until the arrival of the Great Depression in 1929. This caused a significant change as mines closed. Vandalism by then had become a problem.

*The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Record* Friday 17 July 1931 p.3 . records the following:

*The Annual Report presented by Secretary Mr W H Rice was accepted as most satisfactory. The report showed the membership at 600 with a credit balance of £72. 251 new books had been added to the library while several had been donated. The committee were congratulated on the happy position they were in as far as the financial aspect was concerned.*



This is indicative of how the School of Arts was still very much required and purposeful despite the downturn in economic times. In some ways it was even more important to strive to keep such organizations together in this difficult period. The residents of the township of Abermain would have sought much satisfaction at the School. During these hard times, those unemployed contributed to the institution by doing renovation work on the library books.

(NMH Wednesday 12 July p. 9)

At the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual meeting of the Abermain School of Arts it was reported that

*“...through adverse economic circumstances the assets of the institute had been considerably lessened, but it was gratifying to note that the institution was free from debt.”* (NMH Wednesday 13 July 1932 p.7)

By 1940 the School of Arts reported that the Institution remained ‘free of debt’ which was a remarkable financial position considering the recent industrial trouble experienced in this period of economic downturn. However, it had not been a successful period and the building was being occupied by non-members and used in a variety of different ways. A resolution was adopted to “deal with ‘trespassers’ and they would be dealt with according to rule.” (NMH 3 August 1940 p.9)

The School of Arts was used often for community events including weddings, dances, card parties and meetings. Throughout its existence, local sporting and community groups used the building for their regular meetings as well as their social functions.

After the building had stood vacant for several years it was used by Nova Care as a Community and Aged Care Centre. It had been used as a clothing warehouse for a distribution company for some time but fell into disrepair.

### **Currently (2018):**

Recently the centre has been used by the Abermain Heritage Society for meetings. Community classes were also conducted there but unfortunately today it stands empty whilst the Council consider an ‘expression of interest’ for its use.

Catherine Parsons, Abermain Historical Society:

*“In the main hall at the back of the building there remains the original Council table and chairs used by the Kearsley Shire Council for meetings. It stands covered and alone in what remains to this day the only civic building ever constructed in this town.”*

Owned, fitted out, and controlled by the residents, the Abermain School of Arts stands today as an excellent monument to the great efforts made by the citizens to achieve its establishment and to ensure it survived through difficult times.



### Acknowledgements:

- *Staff of Cessnock City Library*
- *Catherine Parsons (Abermain Historical Society)*

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**July 2018**

