

14. Town Hall Ruins



The Town Hall Ruins are symbolic of local government and the consolidation of Darwin as a city. The ruins are highly valued for their association with the development of community activities from the 1880s and the destructive force of Cyclone Tracy in 1974.

Following the opening of the hall on 5 March 1883, the building was also used as a court house until the Court House on the Esplanade was completed in 1884. Further, it functioned as the local Institute and Library and, at various times, filled the role of church for several denominations until respective churches were constructed.

The Town Council was abolished in 1937 after which the building deteriorated until the Commonwealth Bank moved in to operate a branch on a short-term basis while its new premises were completed, which was in 1940. The building was next occupied by the Taxation Department. During WWII, the Town Hall functioned as a Navy workshop and storage area. After the war, the hall was used as a museum. In 1974, Cyclone Tracy destroyed the building. The ruins were stabilised and preserved. These ruins are one of the few monuments to Cyclone Tracy in the city.

History

The Palmerston District Council was formed in June of 1874 and for almost a decade, it was homeless. By 1882, the Council was exploring the options for construction of a Town Hall. The reason for the lack of a civic headquarters was because in the original Goyder survey of 1869:

With the exception of areas designated as parklands no provision was made for non-government public buildings, such as a town hall, nor for churches.¹

For someone as meticulous as Goyder, this seems incredulous. However in May 1882, ratepayers authorised the Council to enter into a loan arrangement of £1000 with an interest rate not exceeding eight per cent². At the time, Council had a credit balance of £520 and some £644 in outstanding rates. The land was valued at £489 and the South Australian Government made an undertaking to provide a subsidy of £500 upon a contract for the land being entered into.³

The Town Hall was designed by John George Knight, Government Architect, to hold 600 people. Council adopted Knight's original design but, after receiving tenders, revised the design and called for fresh tenders:

Some alterations have been made in the specifications which should tend considerably towards reducing the cost of the building.⁴

The casualty was the 'front portion' of the building. A foundation stone was laid amid considerable ceremony on 17 August 1882 by Government Resident Edward William Price who described the building in these terms:

The large room will be eighty feet long by thirty-five, and over twenty feet high, and will not be a barn, but a really handsome structure; and the fact that Mr Knight is the architect, will be a sufficient warrant that the Palmerston Town Hall will be an ornament to the town. (Cheers.) The present intention is to build the large room, part of which will be divided off for an Institute, and a room for a Council Chamber; but very shortly the handsome front will be erected, which will for years to come be used as a library and reading room for the Institute.⁵

Under the foundation stone, which had been mortared by the Government Resident, the following information was placed:

The foundation stone of this hall was laid by the Government Resident, Edward William Price, Esquire, on the seventeenth day of August, 1882, in the 46th year of the reign of our Most Gracious Majesty, Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Empress of India.

The Governor-in-Chief of the Province being Sir William Francis Drummond Jervois, CB.
G.C.M.G.

The Architect: John George Knight, Esq., Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

¹ Welke and Wilson, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Study*, 1993; p xii.

² *NT Times and Gazette*, 20 May 1882, p2.

³ *NT Times and Gazette*, 17 June 1882, p2.

⁴ *NT Times and Gazette*, 24 June 1882, p2.

⁵ *NT Times and Gazette*, 19 August 1882, p3.

The Contractors: Messrs. Hughes and Hall.

The Council for the present year consists of five members:

Chairman: Victor Voules Brown, Esq.

Councillors: Messrs. John Corber Hillson, James Pickford, Joseph Skelton, Vaiben Louis Solomon

Auditors: Messrs. Walter Harrison, Thomas Wilshere Morris

Clerk to the Council: John George Kelsey.

The following are the names of the Councillors elected when the first Council was formed in the year 1874:

Chairman: Robert Caldwell, Esq.

Councillors: Moss Judah Solomon, Joshua Jones, William Barlow, Joseph Skelton

Auditors: A. Schmidt, John Rudall

Clerk: William Waitfield

A copy of the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* dated 12 August 1882 was also included.

The ceremony was then adjourned to Pickford's Hotel where there were many speeches and toasts. There, the architect, Knight, said:

...I only hope that the Town Hall may be the commencement of a better class of workmanship and a more creditable style in appearance than we have heretofore been accustomed to...

The real art of building is to make the most of the materials at your command, and to put them in such form as to please the eye. Next to a beautiful woman there is not a more captivating object than a handsome harmoniously designed building.⁶

Work on the Town Hall, by contractors Hughes and Hall under the supervision of JG Knight, commenced in 1882. It was still under construction when calls began for the District Council to invest in a piano. For example:

When the Town Hall is finished a fortnightly concert at cheap fares, say sixpence and one shilling per head, would soon produce sufficient money to purchase a grand instrument, suitable for such a building.⁷

This was met with a contrasting view on what was required for the building:

...we have another and a greater want and that is the "time o' day." I think were you to allow this time question to be thoroughly ventilated through your columns, we should not be long before we had a public clock placed on the front of the Town Hall.⁸

⁶ *NT Times and Gazette*, 19 August 1882, p3.

⁷ Letter to the Editor, *NT Times and Gazette*, 2 September 1882, p3.

⁸ Letter to the Editor, *NT Times and Gazette*, 9 September 1882, p3.

By January 1883, only the finishing touches were required. Lighting, of course, was a major feature and the District Council gave it due consideration:

After some discussion it was decided to have a double row of six-light chandeliers hanging from the roof, provision for which has been made. It was arranged that the lighting and fixturing of the Town Hall be left in the hands of Messrs. V. V. Brown and V. L. Solomon, and they have wired to Mr. P. R. Allen, who is now residing in Sydney, to purchase suitable lamps and chairs.⁹

Prior to completion of the hall, a meeting of interested people resolved to form the Palmerston Dramatic and Musical Society on 28 February 1883 and promptly elected a committee 'so that no time will be lost in making arrangements for an opening entertainment at an early date'¹⁰. That society continued regular activities in the hall until well into the following century.

The Government Resident, EW Price, officially opened the Town Hall on Monday 5 March 1883 at 4pm. This event was the cause of some anxiety because Price and his family were departing permanently for Adelaide on Tuesday 6 March so some pressure was exerted for completion of the building prior to that date. During his speech, the outgoing Government Resident:

...congratulated the Council at having such a fine structure, the equal of which he did not think was possessed by any other District Council in any part of South Australia. And he also congratulated them for the manner in which the town had improved since the Council was formed...Before unlocking the door he would ask those present to give three cheers for the Queen and the District Council.¹¹

The door was duly unlocked and everyone processed inside where members of the District Council took their places at a table heavily laden with champagne. Onlookers from the public were welcome and champagne was distributed to them. There ensued more speeches, more toasts and more cheering for almost any issue raised during the largely self-congratulatory gathering. The occasion doubled as an opportunity for the townsfolk to farewell Price who had been a popular Government Resident. This was done by singing *He's a jolly good fellow* before proceedings were concluded.

This was the town's first 'grand' public building and it proved to be in demand given the absence of other public buildings. As mentioned above, the District Council attracted a £500 subsidy from the South Australian Government which was conditional on a contract to purchase the land *and* that the part of the building be used to accommodate the Palmerston Institute, a gentlemen's library for those 'who wish to spend a quiet hour in intellectual improvement'¹². Before long, it was also the venue of police and local court matters until the new court house was opened in February 1884, a polling booth, a speaking venue for lectures and political candidates, consulting rooms to visiting medical experts, home to the Dramatic and Musical Society, the Literary and Debating Society, the venue of public auctions, shareholder and committee meetings of a range of mining companies, sporting and social clubs. Alas, there had been no progress on the hoary issues of a piano or a clock (and no one had mentioned a bell).

⁹ *NT Times and Gazette*, 20 January 1883, p2.

¹⁰ *NT Times and Gazette*, 3 March 1883, p2.

¹¹ *NT Times and Gazette*, 10 March 1883, p2.

¹² *NT Times and Gazette*, 19 August 1882, p3.

Earl Kintore¹³, Governor of South Australia from 1889 until 1895, visited Palmerston in April 1891, arriving on the steamer *Chingtu* and returning to Adelaide overland to ensure he fully investigated his extensive colony. While the District Council declined to do anything in its local government capacity, each of the members of the Council was elected to a working group to facilitate a public banquet on 2 April in the Governor's honour, which wasn't quite as public as it might otherwise have been:

A resolution was carried excluding Chinese from participation in the banquet.¹⁴

That notwithstanding, the banquet went ahead with the usual speeches, toasts and return speeches, His Excellency addressing those assembled in these terms:

Chairman and gentlemen, your welcome, which was as warm as the climate, has encouraged me to trespass greatly on your patience. I must not tax it further. Let me just say that my satisfaction is marred by but one thing--that I have to leave you so soon, affording us such limited opportunities of improving mutual acquaintanceship, I believe that I am the first Australian Governor who has been amongst you. I trust then, that you will take my coming as proving my warm interest in your future, and my overland journey as marking a wish to learn all I can about the Territory.¹⁵

The visit created great excitement and no doubt generated considerable anxiety for those on the committee. It was, however, deemed an outstanding success and featured this menu, which was prepared by Margaret Hopewell who, with her husband Edward, built the Palmerston Club Hotel:

Soup—Gravy.

Fish—Soused.

Entrees—Sausage Rolls. Oyster Patties. Giblet Pie.

Removes—Sirloin of Beef. Saddle of Mutton and Red Currant Jelly. Sucking Pig and Apple Sauce. Round of Beef.

Poultry—Roast Fowl. Roast Turkey and Currant Jelly. Roast Goose and Apple Sauce. Ox Tongue. York Ham.

Dressed Salad.

Vegetables—Green Peas. Mashed potatoes.

Étremements—Apricot Trifle, Fruit Pie, Swiss Rolls, Fruit and Sponge Cakes, Custard Tarts, Jam Tarts, Fruit and wine Jellies, Blancmange.

Cheese and Olives.

Dessert.

Wines, &c—Champagne, Sherry, Port, White Spanish, Riesling, Ale and Porter.¹⁶

¹³ Algernon Hawkins Thomond Keith-Falconer, Ninth Earl of Kintore.

¹⁴ *NT Times and Gazette*, 13 March 1891, p3.

¹⁵ *NT Times and Gazette*, 3 April 1891, p3.

¹⁶ *NT Times and Gazette*, 10 April 1891, p3.

The Chinese population, however, refused to be excluded and hosted their own banquet for the Governor on Tuesday 7 April at the Town Hall, although on this occasion there was no mutual exclusion of Europeans. The caterer was Mrs Hopewell and the event was reported to have been:

...an exact counterpart of the European treat, allowing, of course, for the racial exception. The plans were just as carefully laid, the expense incurred was probably greater, and there was not a suspicion of irregularity in the whole thing.¹⁷

Arthur Hang Gong, a Mounted Constable and then Court Interpreter, was chairman for the evening, Thomas Chock Tong his deputy. The format of the evening was the same, His Excellency responding to the speeches in the following terms:

Mr. Hang Gong and Chinese merchants of Palmerston, I rise, with great respect, to tell you how touched I am at the honour you have done me. I am proud to say that I have received many marks of respect and allegiance to the Crown of Great Britain all through South, Australia, where I am its officer, yet no attention has been more grateful to me than that which this gathering conveys.¹⁸

Kintore, it seems, was a skilled diplomat. He confronted 'the Chinese problem' head-on during his remarks:

The recent legislation of these [Australian] governments affecting the Chinese cannot in the nature of things be approved by you. The Australian Parliaments in their wisdom have determined to restrict any further addition to your numbers in this country. Let me remind you that the agitation which led to this enactment practically commenced in Palmerston. I can readily believe that this law has brought unavoidable though considerable hardship on you, and in all sincerity I offer you my sympathy. At least you can take pleasure in remembering that there exist no more honourable, law-abiding, and industrious citizens than the Chinese, and that you heard the head of the Government cheerfully own the fact; you may pride yourselves on having had the greatest share in the development of the Northern Territory, so far as it has gone; you can assure your friends that but for you Palmerston would have but few European residents; and you can go forward in the prosecution of your several callings remembering that the assistance of those Chinese who are here is becoming more valued than ever.¹⁹

From this visit, Earl Kintore earned himself the reputation of being genuinely interested in not only the colony of South Australia, but the issue of Australian federation. He did, however, resign as Governor in 1895 to return to service in the Royal Court in London²⁰.

A Christmas Children's Fete was held at the Town Hall annually from 1896 and was very well attended by the townsfolk. Also established around this time was the annual Agricultural and Horticultural show, a precursor to what became the Royal Darwin Show. There was an annual Government Resident's Dance, which began at Government House but moved to the Town Hall because it had a better dancing surface. Officers from the Telegraph Station, who lived at the camp formerly known as Goyder's Camp, hosted an annual dance for the ladies of the town.

¹⁷ *NT Times and Gazette*, 10 April 1891, p3.

¹⁸ *NT Times and Gazette*, 10 April 1891, p3.

¹⁹ *NT Times and Gazette*, 10 April 1891, p3.

²⁰ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

On Wednesday 6 January 1897, a 'terrible hurricane' struck Palmerston, the worst of it unleashing in the early hours of Thursday 7 January. It wreaked havoc across the town and decimated the pearling fleet, killing 28 and causing damage estimated to have exceeded £150,000. It may have been a testament to the architecture and supervision of JG Knight that most of his buildings survived relatively intact, although all buildings sustained damage. The Town Hall remained structurally intact but suffered some damage to its roof. Rundle Brothers, whose retail outlet was flattened, managed to transfer some stock to the Town Hall in an attempt to salvage it:

...but the rain on Thursday leaked through that building and added to the firm's loss by several hundred pounds.²¹



Town Hall, left, looking intact. Centre is the Commercial Bank. Right is the Victoria Hotel, which suffered significant damage. Image: Bleeser Collection, National Library of Australia

Repairs to the Town Hall walls had been completed by July and tenders were called for:

...cleaning and coloring the walls of the Town Hall, which have been recently repaired, necessary owing to the damage sustained in the cyclone...²²

The Town Hall was also the venue for Palmerston's first 'race ball', itself tied to the annual horse racing program, the seventh of which was in July 1889²³. This was the precursor for an annual event in the 'modern' era of horseracing in Darwin (post-1956) that is the premier social event attached to the Darwin Cup Carnival.

Technological change was exhibited at the Town Hall, a case in point being a miraculous machine that recorded sound:

Don't forget to put in an appearance at the Town Hall, Palmerston, on Thursday night1 next, November 9, when Mr. J. Owen Williams, who has recently imported direct from the factory in

²¹ *NT Times and Gazette*, 5 February 1897, p2.

²² *NT Times and Gazette*, 16 July 1897, p3.

²³ *NT Times and Gazette*, 20 July 1889, p3.

America sample models of the wonderful graphophone, will give an entertainment, when the public will have the opportunity of listening to the latest improved and finest talking machine ever brought to the Territory. We can guarantee a very pleasant and amusing evening.²⁴

Williams did demonstrate the machine—for an admission price—and those present were apparently not disappointed:

The graphophone is a truly marvellous machine, and it is hard to realise that one is not sitting in a provincial hall listening to a first class concert. Some of the selections are particularly interesting, whilst others are as amusing as it is possible to make them.²⁵

It was the solemn duty of the *NT Times* to make the following announcement on 25 January 1901:

A NATION'S LOSS.

VICTORIA ALEXANDRINA, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, and Empress of India, is dead, and the British nation mourns its loss. Few people, outside of Her Majesty's physicians and the Ministers of the State, had any idea that the Queen's health or strength was in any way failing, and when, on Monday, January 21, the news was flashed across cables and telegraph wires to all corners of the world that Queen Victoria was seriously ill, the whole world held its breath, and waited, wondering what the next few days would bring forth. The British nation was stunned, and business throughout the Empire temporarily paralysed.²⁶

A funeral service was held at the Town Hall on 2 February, the date of the Queen's burial, at 5.30pm in pouring rain. Members of the Defence Rifle Club and the Palmerston Town Band assembled at Government House and marched to the Town Hall for the ecumenical service, which was conducted by Mr Stephens who:

...gave an address, extolling the virtues of the late Queen, in whose memory the service was being held. Half way through the service, at five minutes to six, a gun boomed out from H.M.S. Ringdove, lying at anchor, and the remainder of the ceremony was carried out to the boom of the minute guns and the dreary patter of the rain upon the roof.²⁷

Moving Pictures came to Palmerston when the Royal Bioscope Company²⁸ arrived in town aboard the ss *Airlie*, providing:

...undoubtedly one of the best shows of its kind ever given here. The animated pictures—representing scenes in the Queen's funeral, the Boer war, etc—were realistic to a high degree, two of the best being that of a wrecked steamer hard and fast on the rocks off the Cornish coast, with the great seas rolling up and breaking over her decks in smoking clouds of spray; and another showing the enormous moving crowds, and a big field of horses racing up the straight, in the English Derby. But there were a score or more of others equally realistic, and the whole show was well worth the low prices charged for admission.²⁹

²⁴ *NT Times and Gazette*, 3 November 1889, p2.

²⁵ *NT Times and Gazette*, 17 November 1899, p2.

²⁶ Page 2.

²⁷ *NT Times and Gazette*, 8 February 1901, p3.

²⁸ The first film production company in West Bengal.

²⁹ *NT Times and Gazette*, 23 August 1901, p3.

As one would probably expect, friction arose between the District Council and the Palmerston Institute as the Institute's book collection grew and began to encroach upon the remainder of the Town Hall. Conversely, the Institute's activities were frequently curtailed because of competing uses to which the hall was put. Remember, though, that when the hall was constructed, the South Australian Government provided £500 so a library and reading rooms could be incorporated. At the Annual General Meeting of the Palmerston Institute on 11 July 1902, two potential resolutions were discussed: the first was to build a stand-alone structure of timber and corrugated iron for exclusive use by the Institute in the vicinity of the Town Hall; the second was to complete construction of the Town Hall in accordance with the original plans. The media was not shy about putting its views:

To the first-named there is the objection that it would be an ugly excrescence, would cost a considerable sum to erect, and when erected would at least be only a temporary makeshift. And to the second it is urged that to complete the Hall on the lines of the original plan, which provided for an imposing two-storey stone front surmounted by a square tower, would involve an expenditure which ratepayers are scarcely likely to sanction in these piping times.³⁰

At the same time, the District Council was discussing the matter and conceded that something must be done. The Council's view was that two rooms should be added to the front of the building with an entrance hallway separating them, one room being dedicated wholly to the Institute and its collection. Irrespective of the preferred option, it would require money and, therefore, the matter had to be put to the ratepayers of Palmerston. Things went awry when, at a meeting of the Council on 19 August, the Town Clerk revealed that 'no traces of the original plans of the Town Hall building could be discovered in the Government offices or elsewhere'.³¹ All was not lost, though. At a meeting on 16 September:

The Chairman produced a rough plan of proposed additions to Town Hall, with approximate estimate of the cost. The plan provides for the addition of two rooms 28 x 28, with 10ft hallway, to the front of the present building, at an estimated cost of £1300, the walls to be of same height and uniform in character with the completed portion of the Hall. After some discussion it was resolved that consideration of the matter be postponed pending further inquiries; that Council's solicitor be consulted as to the District Council's borrowing powers; and that the Palmerston Institute Committee be invited to discuss the matter with the members of the District Council.³²

In October, the Council resolved to confer with the Institute about its preferred option in the event that ratepayers approved the necessary expenditure.³³ The Institute duly responded that it would be happy to pay £20 per annum until such time as the cost of the new accommodation in excess of £500 was paid off—and that they preferred the separate building of timber and iron at a cost of in the order of £350 to £400.³⁴ Absolutely nothing appears to have happened until May 1903 when a meeting was called by the Port Darwin Literary and Debating Society to consider the matter of 'the close of the Institute'³⁵ but that meeting did not proceed because of lack of a quorum.³⁶

³⁰ *NT Times and Gazette*, 25 July 1902, p2.

³¹ *NT Times and Gazette*, 22 August 1902, p3.

³² *NT Times and Gazette*, 19 September 1902, p3.

³³ *NT Times and Gazette*, 3 October 1902, p3.

³⁴ *NT Times and Gazette*, 31 October 1902, p2.

³⁵ *NT Times and Gazette*, 22 May 1903, p3.

³⁶ *NT Times and Gazette*, 29 May 1903, p3.

Also in 1902, Council was considering upgrading the lighting in the Town Hall to acetylene gas, which would require minor modifications to burners and no adjustments to the chandeliers.³⁷ The prospect was exciting but expensive:

... the cost of providing generator and making necessary connections with existing chandeliers, etc. would be between £50 and £60. This would include about 3 cwt. of carbides and provision of a 90-candle power street lamp in front of the Hall. After some discussion it was resolved that the matter be allowed to stand over for the present.³⁸

No immediate action appears to have been taken and, in the interim, the Palmerston Institute remained open because advice of its closure one evening because of a conflicting booking of the Town Hall was advised in September 1903.³⁹ Meanwhile, the District Council resolved to spend £300 to £350 on the erection of a separate reading room and library for the Palmerston Institute on the south-west boundary of the Town Hall block and that two members of the Institute consult with the Chairman and Clerk of the Council in respect of design.⁴⁰ Finally, on 4 November 1903, the Palmerston Institute accepted the proposal of its General Committee to proceed along the lines proposed by the Council.⁴¹ Later in the month, tenders would be called and the *NT Times* speculated that the building:

...will probably be mainly constructed of angle iron with concrete flooring, as being more economical and durable than any other form of building. The plans and specifications are now being prepared.⁴²

A year later, November 1904, the separate building for the Palmerston Institute was completed and handed over, although the District Council had granted use of the rooms to the Pickwick Club and the Agricultural and Horticultural Society on certain evenings for their committee meetings. The Institute wanted to install acetylene gas lighting so the Council agreed to explore the cost of lighting both the Town Hall and the new Institute building.⁴³

Life continued as usual, the addition of the Institute building no doubt resolving some friction with competing interests for use of the hall. Passing shipping contained troupes of entertainers, variously described as excellent to 'third rate merit'⁴⁴ but no doubt providing something different for the townsfolk.

A farewell function at the Town Hall for Justice Dashwood—a judge and then the Government Resident—was described as 'one of the most enjoyable and successful public functions ever held in that building'⁴⁵ and a welcome function for the His Excellency the Governor of South Australia in the form of the Government Resident's dance on 5 May 1905 among a very busy schedule of other commitments⁴⁶. This, too, was described as one of the 'best attended functions ever held in the Town Hall'.⁴⁷

³⁷ *NT Times and Gazette*, 25 July 1902, p3.

³⁸ *NT Times and Gazette*, 19 September 1902, p3.

³⁹ *NT Times and Gazette*, 25 September 1903, p3.

⁴⁰ *NT Times and Gazette*, 2 October 1903, p3.

⁴¹ *NT Times and Gazette*, 6 November 1903, p3.

⁴² *NT Times and Gazette*, 13 November 1903, p3.

⁴³ *NT Times and Gazette*, 2 December 1904, p2.

⁴⁴ *NT Times and Gazette*, 24 February 1905, p3.

⁴⁵ *NT Times and Gazette*, 31 March 1905, p3.

⁴⁶ *NT Times and Gazette*, 28 April 1905, p3.

⁴⁷ *NT Times and Gazette*, 12 May 1905, p2.

Vabien Louis Solomon, by now the Member for Northern Territory in the South Australian Parliament, became alive to the importance of the female vote (perhaps because his defeat in the Federal electorate of Boothby in 1903 indicated he had not addressed the women's vote):

Mr. Solomon is inaugurating a new departure in election meetings, so far as the Territory is concerned, by issuing invitations to the women electors of the district to attend a political lecture at the Town Hall on Thursday afternoon next. As he states in his advertisement, the women of the State having been granted the privilege of voting for members of both the State and Federal Parliaments, have also a duty cast upon them and a grave responsibility to make themselves acquainted with those principal political questions which affect the happiness and prosperity of the whole community as well as of each individual. Sentiment and personal friendship will, of course, influence the way in which many votes are recorded, but the responsibility of returning representatives capable of legislating for the benefit of the whole body politic, and with statesmanlike ability, is one which should not be clouded by either sentiment or friendship. Mr. Solomon promises to make his lecture both instructive and interesting, and hopes to have a good attendance to address. Since the granting of the suffrage to the women of the Commonwealth similar addresses have become quite common in the southern portion of the States.⁴⁸

The Town Hall remained the centrepiece of civic Darwin life and was used for fund raising efforts during World War I as well as a site for commemorative services in respect of servicemen from the Northern Territory who did not return.

The Town Council, which had always struggled with a lack of money owing to absentee landlords and their failure to pay rates, was disbanded in 1937. In the absence of any civic organisation, the Town Hall was not managed and effectively had no owner until the Commonwealth Bank took temporary possession in 1938 until its new premises were completed.

⁴⁸ *NT Times and Gazette*, 14 April 1905, p3.

Commonwealth Bank At Darwin Using Town Hall As Office

DARWIN, Tuesday.

Bringing the total number of trading banks here to four, the Commonwealth Bank has followed the Bank of New South Wales in bringing a branch to Darwin. The staff of three, together with strongroom, cash, and office equipment, arrived on the last ship from the South.

Pending the completion of the Darwin replanning scheme and the erection of premises, the Commonwealth Bank has been given the use of the old Town Hall. Apart from one or two political meetings the Town Hall has been lying idle for 12 months. It will have to be demolished eventually to make room for naval expansion.

In spite of these facts there is expected to be a protest regarding its being taken over by the Commonwealth Bank because the town will be left with only one small hall owned by the returned soldiers for use for public meetings and entertainments.

The Evening News (Rockhampton), 2 March 1938, p 7:

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As the *Adelaide Advertiser* opined:

The town hall was the last monument to the ratepayers. During the past year two concerts, a garden party, and about four political meetings have been held there, but now citizens are complaining that they have no meeting place.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ 2 March 1938, p24.

The Commonwealth Bank opened its new building in 1940 (see Heritage Trail #15) after which the Town Hall was again left without an owner or a tenant until the Tax Department was a very short-term tenant. The bombing of Darwin in February 1942 resulted in this building—and most others in Darwin, including private homes—being taken over by the Navy. It is hardly surprising that it was used as a workshop and storage area; Browns Mart across the road was a Navy torpedo workshop at the same time.

A replacement (of sorts) for the Town Council had to wait until 1947 when the Darwin Town Management Board was introduced, all five members being appointed. Four members were government officials, the fifth being appointed by the Administrator from nominations made by citizens. The Board's brief was to take over municipal control, including allocation of leases⁵⁰, which would not have been an easy task given the difficulties of proving ownership of land prior to World War II. The Town Management Board, however, did not meet in the Town Hall, which was now being used as a museum.

The Darwin Amateur Musical and Comedy Society was formed in 1950 and later became the Cavenagh Theatre Group⁵¹. At about the same time, the Cavenagh Theatre was established in Cavenagh Street near the intersection with Daly Street. Productions were reported by the *Northern Standard*, including *Sally*⁵² and *Countess Maritza*⁵³ in 1951, and *High Jinks*⁵⁴ in 1952.



⁵⁰ Andrew King, Darwin History Facebook page.

⁵¹ Harvey and Christine Allen Manuscript Collection 1967-1971, National Library of Australia.

⁵² 26 January 1951.

⁵³ 20 April 1951.

⁵⁴ 3 October 1952.

1972 —*The Cavenagh Theatre, 96 Cavenagh Street.*
Image: Cheater Collection, Northern Territory Library.

A temporary Town Hall was constructed in Mitchell Street on the site of what is now the Darwin Entertainment Centre. The earliest dated photograph is 1957, although the 'temporary' Town Hall was still in place in 1965. Productions also continued at the Cavenagh Theatre.

Cyclone Tracy put an end to the multiple uses to which the original Town Hall had been put in 1974.

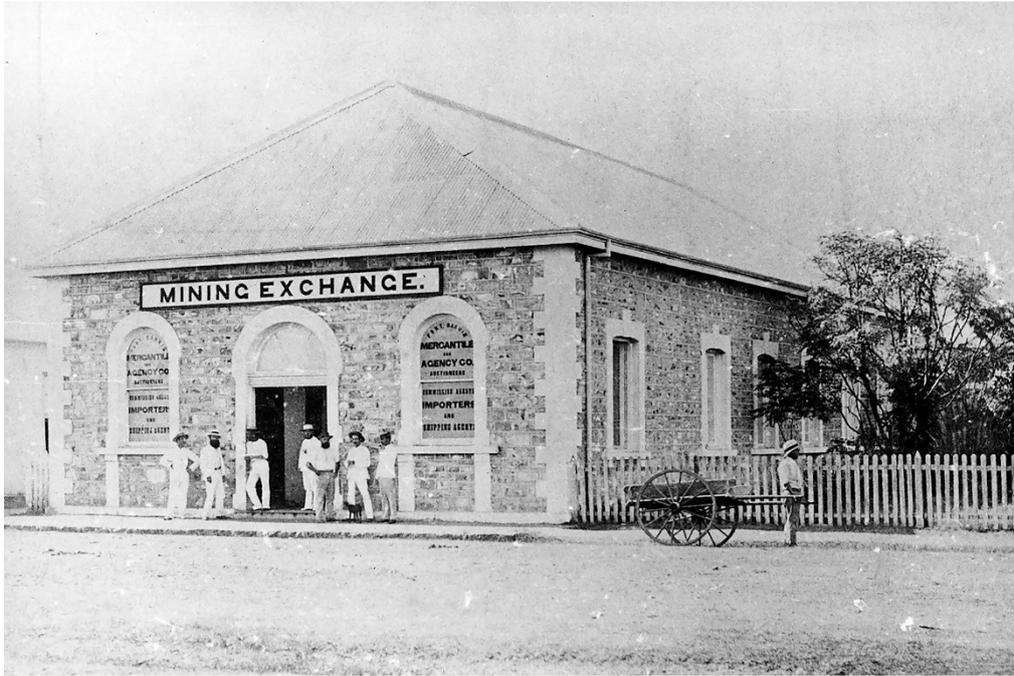
Additional Photographs



1880s – the Town Hall.
Image: Bleaser Collection, National Library of Australia



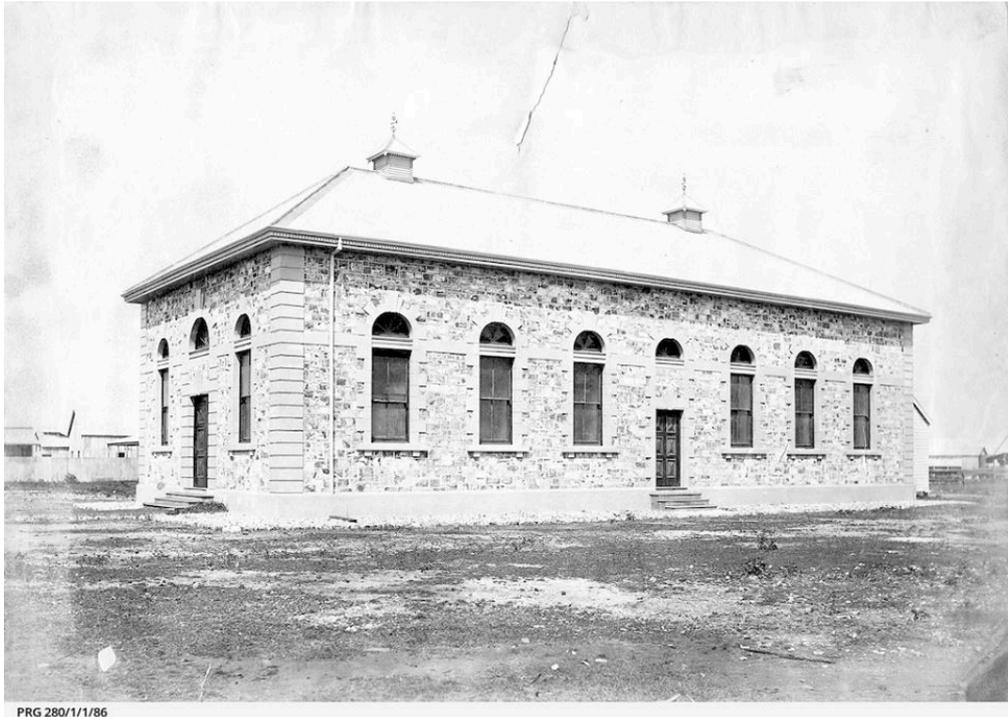
July 1887 – Christening ceremony for the locomotive Port Darwin after which there was a banquet in the Town Hall. Image: State Library of South Australia



*Browns Mart was built opposite the Town Hall in 1887 by Vabien Louis Solomon.
Image: State Library of South Australia.*



*Ninth Earl of Kintore, Governor of South Australia, who visited Palmerston in 1891 and was given a banquet at the Town Hall.
Image: Australian Dictionary of Biography.*



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1896 – Palmerston Town Hall.
Image: Searcy Collection, State Library of South Australia



1895 – Foelsche Collection, State Library of South Australia



Circa 1900 – HMS Ringdove, which was at anchor in Port Darwin during the memorial service for Queen Victoria on 2 February 1901 at the Town Hall.



*1913 – farewell for the wife of a Medical Officer. Image: Northern Territory Library
NB: The NT Times and Gazette records a farewell at the Town Hall to Mrs Edith Strangman, wife of Dr Cecil Lucius Strangman, on 7 Aug 1913 (p 7).*



1959 — the temporary Town Hall. The bunting was for the proclamation of the City of Darwin.
Image: Cheater Collection, Northern Territory Library.



1960 — final curtain, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Temporary Town Hall. Australian Elizabethan Theatre Company Tour.
Image: National Archives of Australia.



1965 — temporary Town Hall,
Image: NT Government Photographer Collection, NT Library.



1968 — HMS Pinafore being performed at the Cavenagh Theatre by Darwin High School students.
Image: Cheater Collection, Northern Territory Library.

People associated with this place

John George Knight (Architect)

CW Hughes and Hall (Contractors for construction)

Victor Voules Brown (Chairman of the Palmerston District Council when the Town Hall was constructed)

John Corber Hillson, James Pickford, Joseph Skelton, Vabien Louis Solomon (Councillors when Town Hall was constructed)

Walter Harrison and Thomas Wilshere Morris (Auditors)

John George Kelsey (Clerk of the District Council)

Edward William Price (Government Resident who laid the foundation stone)

William Henry Paling (Piano supplier from Sydney)

Maurice Holtze (Curator of the Government Gardens)

Charles and Edwin Millar (building contractors on the North Australia Railway)

Algernon Hawkins Thomond Keith-Falconer, Ninth Earl of Kintore (Governor of SA)

Margaret and Edward Hopewell, Caterers (Palmerston Club Hotel)

Ellen Ryan, Caterer (the Vic Hotel)

Dr Leonard Smith O'Flaherty and Mrs Susannah O'Flaherty

Arthur Richardson (around Australia cycling competition winner)

Dr Cecil and Mrs Edith Strangman

And the thousands of Territorians who performed or were audience members, those who attended civic functions and medal presentations, and those who attended weddings or dances in the Town Hall.

Further reading

Extracted from the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

John George Knight (1826-1892), architect and administrator, was born in London, son of John Knight, stone and marble merchant. He took up engineering, joined his father's firm and in spare time studied architecture. In February 1852 he arrived in Melbourne and after a week on the goldfields joined the Public Works Department. While a government inspector at a salary of £1200, he joined the private practice of Thomas Kemp who returned to England in 1855. About 1853 Knight's design for Government House won the first prize of £500 but was not used. He later won prizes for designs of the Melbourne ship canal and docks. In 1856 when plans were resumed for the Houses of Parliament, the supervision was given to Knight and then handed to his partner, Peter Kerr. Knight was a founder of the Victorian Institute of Architects and its first president in 1856-61. His paper on colonial building stones, read to the institute in 1859, was published in Melbourne and London in 1864. At St Paul's, Melbourne, on 21 April 1853 he had married Alice Bertrand.

Knight helped to organize the Victorian Exhibition of 1861 and designed a 'miniature Crystal Palace' to house the exhibits. Next January with his family he went to London as secretary for Victoria at the London International Exhibition. He won medals for his gilded pyramid representing the total amount of gold mined in the colony and for his collection of building stones. In 1864 he assembled the Victorian exhibits shown at the Dublin Exhibition.

In March 1865 Knight was appointed lecturer in civil engineering at the University of Melbourne at a salary of £100 with fees. In 1866 he had charge of the Melbourne Intercolonial Exhibition and in 1867 organized Victoria's contribution to the Paris Exhibition. In 1868 he was a founder and until 1871 first manager of the Athenaeum Club in Melbourne. He had compiled a pamphlet on the 1862 exhibition and in 1868 a souvenir booklet on the Duke of Edinburgh's visit.

In the early 1870s Knight was attracted to the Northern Territory by reports of gold. In 1873 the South Australian government appointed him secretary and accountant to the resident, G. B. Scott, with extra duties as architect and supervisor of works. He sailed from Melbourne on 2 September, but the appointment of a Victorian annoyed Adelaide politicians. In November 1875 Knight was retrenched as supervisor of works and his salary as secretary and accountant was severely cut. He resigned and left for Melbourne in December, but in January 1876 accepted the post of goldfields warden. He returned to Port Darwin and on the goldfields promptly built a hospital, where he often tended sick miners himself. In April 1880 he became clerk of the Local Court, Palmerston, and was soon made deputy sheriff, clerk of the licensing bench, curator of the property of convicts, registrar, accountant and official receiver and returning officer. In 1887 he was granted leave to act as commissioner for the territory at the Exhibition and in 1888 was commissioner at the Melbourne International Exhibition. He intended to resign in 1889 but was asked to act as government resident and judge. Next year he became government resident.

Knight was a fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, an associate of the Institution of Civil Engineers, and corresponding member of the Society of Arts, the Royal Dublin Society and the Royal Horticultural Society of London. In Palmerston he enjoyed a 'sort of patriarchal authority' but friends in Melbourne complained that his talents were wasted.

Described as a 'very nice fellow, a real gentleman, and a jolly old chap', he was respected for his common sense and resource. He died at Palmerston on 10 January 1892, survived by three sons, two married daughters and by his wife, who was then living in London. She inherited most of his estate, valued at £800.

Sally O'Neill, 'Knight, John George (1826–1892)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/knight-john-george-3966/text6257>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online 26 July 2017.

This article was first published in hardcopy in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 5, (MUP), 1974

Northern Standard, 31 January 1941, p 11:

Bank In New Home

The Commonwealth Bank is now housed in its new and very handsome building at the corner of Smith and Bennett Streets.

Of ferro-concrete construction, the bank is a substantial building. The hall in which the public does its business is roomy, well ventilated through its louvres, and cool.

It is understood that the bank's former home in the old Town Hall will be made the new home of the Taxation Department.

Some dissatisfaction has been expressed with this arrangement. It is claimed that Darwin should not be without a public hall, and it has been urged that the Town Hall, now that the bank has left it, should be available to the people once again.