

15. Commonwealth Bank (former), Darwin



The former Commonwealth bank is significant as a symbol of the federal government's Civil and Defence Works Programme of the late 1930s. Displaying elements of Art Deco styling, the bank is a rare example of early modern architecture in Darwin. The building, as an architectural feature on a key intersection known as Bank Corner, makes a positive contribution to the central Darwin streetscape.

The bank was completed in September 1940 and its design was then strikingly modern; the design also incorporated adaptations (eg, vents, overhangs) for climate control. The building was, and remains, a rare example of early modern movement architecture in Darwin (though later alterations have affected the integrity of the building's style to a degree). There is an office section in Bennett Street that was converted from former staff quarters.

Construction of the bank reflected new commercial confidence in Darwin, stimulated by the defence build-up during the 1930s after a long period of stagnation. The building suffered minor damage during early air raids on Darwin and was occupied by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) for much of the war. Cyclone Tracy caused minor damage in 1974.

The building was sold by the bank in 2005.

History

During the 1870s, the site was used as a timber yard and furniture factory. By the 1880s it was the site of about 13 Chinese humpies and by the cyclone of January 1897, it was the site of Ackland Browne's store.¹

A branch of the Commonwealth Bank was opened in the Town Hall in March 1938² and was staffed by Messrs TB Scanlon, Manager, AC Morgan and WP Conley, all of whom arrived on board the *Merkur* in mid-February.³ On 27 July 1939, the land at 22 Smith Street (Lot 413, Town of Darwin) was transferred to the Commonwealth Bank under the *Lands Acquisition Act 1906-1930*⁴ but the *Northern Standard* made the announcement three months before that.⁵

The Governor of the Commonwealth Bank, HJ Sheehan, called for tenders to construct the bank by Gazette Notice 19 of 1940.⁶ The closing date for tenders was 30 January 1940, the Gaskin Brothers being successful.⁷

The bank's £15,000 premises opened in January 1941 and was described by the *Northern Standard* as 'roomy, well ventilated through its louvres, and cool'. Across the road, the Bank of New South Wales was completed in 1940 at a cost of £14,000. Both buildings were part of the Commonwealth Government's £1.5 million Civil and Defence Works Programme, which included the Hotel Darwin, the power station, upgrades to the Kahlin Compound, new military barracks, the RAAF aerodrome and extensions to the town library.⁸

The building was not extensively damaged by the first bombing raids on 19 February, but two months later it had been ransacked because all civilians were evacuated and it ceased to operate as a bank. It was occupied by Naval ratings until it re-opened for business on 20 June 1944. By then, most of the roof had been destroyed, as had most of the ceilings and eighty per cent of the windows had been shattered. Restoration work cost £2630.⁹

Along with the rest of the town, the land was compulsorily acquired by the Commonwealth Government in 1946. The bank received £18,509 in compensation. As part of a plan to relocate the Central Business District, it was proposed to re-site the bank at Larrakeyah, but the relocation plan was scrapped in 1951 and the bank repurchased the building on a 99-year freehold lease for £17,000.¹⁰

There followed a number of additions and alterations. Air conditioning was installed in 1964 and in May 1969, a substantial extension was added at a cost of \$320,000. The building was not structurally damaged by Cyclone Tracy, but there was some roof damage and extensive

¹ Welke and Wilson, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Master Plan*, 1993; p 2.

² *The Evening News* (Rockhampton), 2 Mar 1938, p 2.

³ *Northern Standard*, 22 February 1938, p 2 – *Round About*.

⁴ *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, 27 July 1939 [Issue no 49] page 1359 & *Northern Standard*, 11 August 1939, p 13.

⁵ *Northern Standard*, 21 March 1939, p 2 – *Round About*.

⁶ *Northern Standard*, 12 January 1940, p 10.

⁷ *Northern Standard*, 13 February 1930, p 2 – *Round About*.

⁸ *Northern Standard*, 1 May 1940, p 6.

⁹ Welke and Wilson, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Master Plan*, 1993; p 2.

¹⁰ Welke and Wilson, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Master Plan*, 1993; p 2.

loss of glass from doors and windows. Even so, the branch re-opened for business on 6 January 1975.¹¹

In 1996, the building was entered on the Northern Territory Heritage Register. As noted above, the Commonwealth Bank sold the building in 2005.

¹¹ Welke and Wilson, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Master Plan*, 1993; p 2.



Additional Photographs



1939. Commonwealth Bank under construction (right).
Image: Graham Poeling-Oer Collection.



1947. Left of the building is the Bank Manager's Residence.
Image: State Library of Victoria



1948. Image: National Archives of Australia, F Fisher photographer.



1957. Note Bank of New South Wales on left.
Image: National Archives of Australia, Cliff Bottomley photographer.



1967. Image: National Archives of Australia, Australian News and Information Bureau.



1970. Manager's residence has been replaced with more office space. Image: National Archives of Australia.



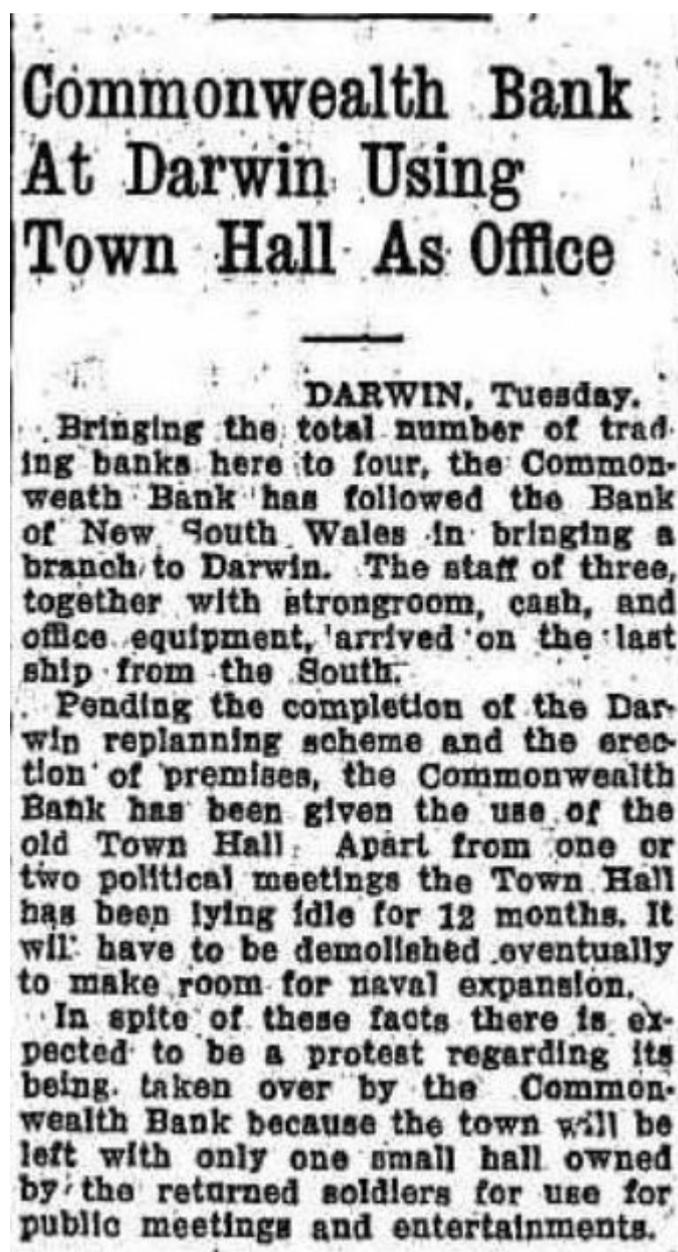
2004 – Heritage Branch Collection.

Further reading

Northern Standard, 22 February 1938, p 2:

ROUND ABOUT

A concrete indication of confidence in Darwin's future is the projected opening of a branch of the Commonwealth Bank. This will make the second bank to be opened in Darwin within the last twelve months. The staff for the new bank arrived by the *Merkur* last week. They are Messrs. T. B. Scanlon (manager), A. C Morgan and W. P. Conley. The temporary premises of the bank will be the Town Hall, and the branch will be opened in about three weeks' time.



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

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.

DARWIN TO LOSE TOWN HALL

Commonwealth Bank Housed In Building

DARWIN, March 1.

When the newly-established branch of the Commonwealth Bank opens its doors here on Tuesday, the only town hall in the Northern Territory will cease to exist. Darwin will have no town hall. The former town council appealed to the Government to take over its functions, as it was unable to carry on, and the council passed out of existence several months ago. Its duties and functions have been distributed among various Government departments, and there is now no civic body in the town. 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. The Government has housed the Commonwealth Bank temporarily in the building. Although it is the biggest hall in Darwin—there are only two here—it will probably be unable to house the bank's five-ton safe. There is no gear big enough to handle the safe, and the foundations will probably not support it.

The Advertiser (Adelaide), 2 March 1938, p 24:

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Northern Standard, 26 January 1940, p 9:

G.N. 19/40.

COMMONWEALTH BANK OF AUSTRALIA.

Tenders, in accordance with the Conditions of Tendering, accompanied by the prescribed deposit, and closing at noon on Tuesday, 30th January, 1940, with the Works Director, Department of the Interior, Sydney, N.S.W., are invited for the following:

Erection and Completion of Commonwealth Bank Building, Darwin, Northern Territory.

Plans, Bills of Quantities and Tender Forms are available at the Office of the Works and Services Branch, Department of the Interior, Darwin, up-on payment of a deposit of £2.2.0 [Two pounds two shillings] which will be refunded on receipt of bona fide tender.

Tenders must be enclosed in envelopes, marked with the name of the work.

No tender necessarily accepted.

H. J. SHEEHAN,

Governor.

NEW COMMONWEALTH BANK

Concrete foundations of the new Commonwealth Bank building in Darwin have been poured in by the contractors, Messrs. Gaskin Bros.

The building, which has been de-signed after examination of banking institutions in tropical countries, will take approximately six months to complete. Twenty-five men will be employed.

Complete housing accommodation will be provided for the manager.

Sleeping and recreation rooms are provided for the staff.

A feature of the design of the building is the wall space allotted for windows.

The Commonwealth Bank is not situated in the only public hall in Darwin.

The hall was requisitioned by the Government when the defence programme first was commenced.

Northern Standard, 2 April 1940, p 6:

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DARWIN'S BUILDINGS.

Several building undertakings of Darwin's £1,500,000 civil and defence works programme are nearing completion.

They include military barracks, power station, community structures at the native compound, the £75,000 luxury Hotel Darwin and the Australian Inland Mission's welfare centre.

The Commonwealth Works Department expects the new military barracks to be finished in a month's time.

The first two generating sets installed in the new power house, situated near the Locomotive Repair Shops will soon be given a trial run while the £38,000 native compound should be completed within a month. The new compound consists of aboriginal living quarters, hospital, school, stores, native police station and administrative block.

The contractors building the new hotel estimate that the job will be completed by the end of June. The features of the hotel will be suites to accommodate 44 guests, a spacious lounge and dance floor.

Darwin's most imposing business premises, the £14,000 concrete Bank of New South Wales, were com-

Northern Standard, 1 May 1940, p 6:

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Darwin's most imposing business premises, the £14,000 concrete Bank of New South Wales, were completed recently and have been occupied by the Bank staff, while a start has been made with new Commonwealth Bank. This building will also be concrete and will cost £15,000.

Extensions to the Public Library have been made and the building is now three times its original size. There is now space for an additional 3,000 books.

Work is going ahead on the Manton Gap reservoir for the town's water supply, the R.A.A.F. aero-drome and other defence and civic works.

A start was recently made with new military works and others will be put in hand shortly. Included in these projects will be additions to the jetty, to provide berths for four ships, and wharf sheds.

Northern Standard, Tuesday 9 July 1940, p 8 of a Hotel Darwin supplement:

THE CHANGING FACE OF DARWIN

A few short months ago Darwin boasted a main street, a few stores and pearl fishing as its main industry.

With the necessity of building a defence centre in the north the town has changed from a name on the map to one of the most important towns in Australia at the present time.

With the expenditure of defence money in Darwin has come a new policy of banking and commercial institutions, of building branch offices and stations. This, in turn, has brought a prosperity to the residents of the north which years of peace time development could not have achieved.

The Bank of New South Wales has erected the finest banking institutions in the Territory, and the Commonwealth Bank will shortly take over their new premises.

Burns Philp has established their own office here, as also have Thomas Brown and Son of Brisbane.

The oil companies have built and are constructing plants and depots to take care of present needs and future expansion of the Territory.

A new power house is now operating to give residents better service, and a water scheme that will guard against any shortage in the supply of water is well under way. Wharfs and spurs to the railway line will guarantee more efficient and economical handling of goods entering Darwin.

While the present international situation precludes the spending of money on other than the most urgent and essential services, it is hoped to be able to improve the aesthetic aspect of the town in keeping with its commercial and defence importance when overseas conditions are more settled.

The face of Darwin is rapidly changing, and will continue to change to the benefit of permanent residents if the government pursues a policy in keeping with that of business and commerce to develop the vast resources of the Northern Territory.

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.