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## Chapter 5

### **The Town Economy: Construction Activity.**

The construction industry in Cooktown reflects the district's fortunes, and at times provided an economic stimulus in its own right. For instance, the provision of bridges over the Annan and Endeavour rivers stimulated the local economy during construction, and also allowed greater exploitation of the tin, timber and agriculture industries. Despite the perception that the "boom" years were over for Cooktown by 1885, most of the construction work, both Government and commercial, occurred after that time. Many major new projects were undertaken by both the private and public sectors after the gold reserves of the Palmer started to decline, and in general, the buildings constructed after 1885 were of a higher standard than those built in the earlier period. Some of them survived to become assets to the tourist industry. The local authorities in the area continued to finance the building and maintenance of roads, and the construction of the stone gutters which are a feature of the town, but a shortage of funds prevented them from providing further infrastructure until recent times.

#### **Government infrastructure.**

Any discussion involving these events must take into account the extended planning phase before the actual implementation of a project. This applies especially to Government infrastructure. Many Government construction projects in the Cooktown district after 1885 were planned before that date. Given the evidence of economic

decline, and the fall in revenue from the district by that date, the projects could have been terminated, or at least amended. The Maytown railway project was terminated prematurely, but only after considerable funds had been spent. The Government continued to provide funds for infrastructure in the Cooktown district after it became obvious that the facilities would not be economically feasible.

Cooktown's economy obviously benefited at a crucial time, but the failure of these projects to give a realistic economic return was a major factor in the Government's subsequent reluctance to provide other financial assistance to the area.

Some construction work after 1885 consisted of replacing existing infrastructure. This reflected the poor quality of building materials and construction methods used by both the commercial and public sectors during Cooktown's early years. Initially the Government was in a hurry to establish a town under inhospitable conditions, and little attention was given to quality. Many early buildings were prefabricated in Brisbane, and were not suitable for North Queensland, where the harsh climate and termites took their toll on soft timber. Some Government buildings, particularly the Post Office and the Court House, were replaced more than once.

Despite the increase in building activity after 1885, some of the significant Government buildings presently remaining in Cooktown were built in the boom years of the Palmer gold field.<sup>403</sup> Cooktown is fortunate to have retained these buildings, as some of them were at

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<sup>403</sup> The most significant of these buildings are the Cook Shire Council building and the hospital building. (The hospital building was purchased by the Jehovahs Witnesses in 1984 and relocated). The present R.S.L. building was originally the office of the Daintree Divisional Board.

different times threatened with demolition.<sup>404</sup> Later, because the town was in economic decline, the authorities refused to provide funds for replacement, and only necessary maintenance work was done. An improved economic climate coincided with an increasing appreciation of the historical environment, and made renovation a preferable option to demolition. The buildings were eventually renovated, and are still in use, providing a "living example" of Colonial Queensland Government architecture. Significant among these are the Post Office and the Cook Shire Council office.

As will be seen in chapter nine, the most significant Government project in the Cooktown area in the period after 1885 was the construction of the railway line to Laura. Despite significant political opposition in Parliament, and ample evidence that the Palmer field was in decline, construction began in 1884. However, although the Opposition was unable to prevent the line's construction, they forced the Government to abandon it before it was completed. Instead of terminating at Maytown, as originally intended, the line went no further than the Laura River, which was reached in 1891.<sup>405</sup> This made the line useless. There is little doubt that the losses generated by the Cooktown to Laura railway influenced successive Governments against committing further funds to infrastructure in the area.

The Cooktown railway failed to give a return on investment, but its construction provided a boost for the town. In addition to the labour

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<sup>404</sup> Funding was sought for a new Shire Council office from funds nominated by the Government for Post War reconstruction work. The Shire Clerk claimed that the existing building was old and falling down. Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, to Coordinator General of Public Works, Brisbane, 11 January 1944. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown. (A similar claim was made on 28 March 1945).

<sup>405</sup> Knowles, *The Cooktown Railway*, p. 11.

employed by the railway contractors, many found work building a new wharf to allow the delivery of construction materials direct to the rail line. After the railway was completed, the Colonial Government sold the Railway Wharf to the Municipal Council, and it eventually became the main wharf. Escalating maintenance costs and declining income finally forced the Council to demolish its other wharves, keeping only the Railway Wharf. This timber structure was renovated in 1951. The present wharf is a mixture of timber and concrete, and is used principally by fishing boats, and as a fishing platform by locals and tourists.

### **North Shore Tramway.**

The Cooktown to Laura railway was not the only ill-fated rail project in the district. In 1894 a small tramline was built on North Shore, across the harbour from Cooktown, to service a proposed fever isolation hospital. Unlike the Cooktown to Laura railway, it received little public recognition. It was never used, and was dismantled after five years.

As the first mainland port of call for ships using the northern route to Australia, Cooktown was vulnerable to infectious diseases carried by passengers and crew. The local population feared the spread of infection, and demanded the establishment of a quarantine station. Their fear was justified, as the SS *Mecca* arrived in December 1876 with one smallpox case aboard. The local hospital had few facilities to handle infected patients, and the ship was ordered to lay to at a beach about five miles north of Cooktown. Under considerable pressure from

the local community, the Colonial Government designated a Quarantine Area to accommodate the passengers and crew.<sup>406</sup>

The situation was further aggravated when another ship, the *Thales*, carrying almost 500 Chinese passengers, arrived with suspected cases of plague. This ship was also ordered to the North Shore quarantine area until the matter was clarified.<sup>407</sup> The area was again occupied when the French naval ship *L'Allier* arrived with sick crew members. A Quarantine Station was provided, consisting of a hospital for eighty men, with separate accommodation for females. It also had officers quarters and tent accommodation for 150 men who were not sick enough to be admitted to hospital.<sup>408</sup> Four crew members died aboard and were buried at sea in the roadstead. Nine died at the quarantine hospital and were buried near the beach.<sup>409</sup> Their remains were later exposed, and were reburied in the Cooktown cemetery in 1905. The North Shore establishment was particularly difficult to service and operate. It was located in an area that was vulnerable to the weather, and which had no safe anchorage for shipping. The site was soon abandoned, and all Quarantine Station buildings were sold in February 1879.<sup>410</sup>

The threat of fever arose again in the late 1880s, and Cooktown asked the Government to build a permanent plague hospital on North Shore to isolate and treat patients. The Government agreed to erect the hospital and connect it by tramway to a jetty on North Shore, opposite

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<sup>406</sup> Letters and Telegrams re SS *Mecca*, COL/A237 1301-2700, 1887, Q.S.A.

<sup>407</sup> Quarantine of *Thales* passengers, North Shore, (3396), 4 May 1877, Q.S.A. ., COL/A240. Cooktown Courier, 4 April 1877.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid, 15 February 1879.

<sup>409</sup> Sergeant King, Police Department, Cook District, Cooktown Station, to Inspector Durham, Cairns, 28 October 1904, PRE/A 1907 3929, Q.S.A.

<sup>410</sup> Cooktown Courier, 26 July 1879.



the Cooktown wharf. The contract for the line, 2.5 miles long, went to Trotter and Bolles, for £2,082.<sup>411</sup> Although the Government voted funds for the line, rolling stock, and buildings, it never honoured its promise. The line was built, but no rolling stock or permanent buildings were provided. The tramway was eventually dismantled, and the rails taken to New Guinea, where they were used in the construction of a railway to fill swamps.<sup>412</sup> The quarry that supplied gravel for the roadbed, and part of the bed itself, are still discernible. Although this tramline was insignificant in comparison to the Cooktown to Laura railway, it undoubtedly helped influence the Government against further investment.

#### **Public buildings.**

Expenditure on public buildings was significant during the 1880s. The Supreme Court, which was on the main street, was threatened with closure in 1885 because court proceedings were interrupted by traffic noise. The Circuit Judge even threatened to halt all traffic while trials were in progress.<sup>413</sup> The problem was resolved when the Government bowed to community pressure, and agreed to build a new Court House away from the main street. The Council resented the practice of importing building materials, and suggested that the new Court House be built with stone, providing more work for locals. It argued that the building would be impervious to termites, and would be cheaper in the long run. However, the Minister for Works regarded the proposal as absurd, given the high labour costs of dressing stone, and the lack of qualified masons. A new timber building was erected directly behind

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<sup>411</sup> Q.V.P. 1888, Vol. 3, pp. 644-645.

<sup>412</sup> Cooktown Courier, 15 December 1893.

<sup>413</sup> M.A. Lyons, Secretary, Cooktown Railway League, to The Honourable, The Colonial Secretary, Brisbane, 10 April 1885, WOR/A 381 (1124), Q.S.A.

the original Court House, facing Flinders Street.<sup>414</sup> The Magistrate's residence was later built on this land when the Court House returned to its original site on Charlotte Street.

In spite of Cooktown's slow economic decline, the Government continued to fund new public works, and provide for significant maintenance. Although fewer police were required to maintain order in the district, additions to the Police Station and stables in 1887 amounted to £445. The following year a further £3,000 was allocated for various public works, including £850 for a memorial to Captain Cook.<sup>415</sup> This was followed in 1900 by the construction of new cells, kitchen, office and stockade at the gaol, at a price of £1,672.<sup>416</sup>

Although the Government appeared willing to allocate funds to construct memorials and selected buildings, its treatment of the lower echelon of public servants was appalling. The Inspector of Works reported in 1897 that the boatman's cottage had neither a bathroom nor a toilet. He arranged for the construction of a building to suit both purposes, but as water was scarce, only a bucket shower was provided. The structure was not provided with windows, and air flow and light were provided by lowering the iron cladding of the walls to leave a gap between roof and walls.<sup>417</sup>

Three different buildings were constructed to house the Post and Telegraph Department in Cooktown. Little information is available

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<sup>414</sup> Town Clerk, Municipal Council Chambers, Cooktown, to The Minister For Works, Brisbane, 23 February 1886. WOR/A 381. Court House Cooktown. (671). Q.S.A.

<sup>415</sup> Q.V.P. 1888, Vol. 2, p. 810.

<sup>416</sup> Approval of contract to Edward Hemple Bulcock, WOR/A624 (9523), Q.S.A.

<sup>417</sup> Memorandum from M. Park, Inspector of Works, Cook and Carpentaria District, to A.B. Brady, Government Architect, 19 July 1897, WOR/A460 (5605), Q.S.A.



about the first building, which was restricted to postal business, but it was reported in 1875 as being inadequate for its purpose, and in an unsuitable position.<sup>418</sup> A new Post and Telegraph office was built on another site in 1876, after the telegraph line reached Cooktown, but this was also inadequate. When yet another Post and Telegraph Office was constructed in 1887, the second building was used as the Post Master's residence. It underwent alterations and extensions in 1888, with new doors and lattice work.<sup>419</sup> In 1890 the Municipal Chamber was destroyed by fire, so the Council rented the old Post and Telegraph Office until 1899, when it purchased the building for £600.<sup>420</sup> Since then the building has served as the Municipal Chambers, and after the amalgamation of the Town and Shire Councils, as the Cook Shire Council Chambers. Despite occasional attempts by some councillors to abandon the building, it has been maintained in relatively good condition. The present Council appreciates the historic importance of the building, and its value as an example of period architecture.

The present Post Office was built in 1887, and has remained in constant use. In 1946 the Department considered purchasing another building, rather than pay for expensive repairs.<sup>421</sup> However, after inspecting several alternative sites, the Department decided that

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<sup>418</sup> Cooktown Courier, 18 September 1875. The building was known locally as "Noah's Ark", because it was on swampy ground, and was built by Noah Roper.

<sup>419</sup> Cooktown Post and Telegraph Office - Alterations, 1888, J2774 W2098C, Australian Archives.

<sup>420</sup> R. Robertson, Under Secretary, Department of Public Works, Brisbane, to His Worship, The Mayor, Cooktown, 2 March 1899. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>421</sup> A.D.J. Tighe, District Inspector, Cairns, to Superintendent, Postal Services, 26 June 1946, J56/11 QL3899, Australian Archives.

renovation was preferable.<sup>422</sup> The introduction of new technology, such as an automated exchange and air conditioning, made some changes necessary, but the building is still close to its original condition.<sup>423</sup> The building is now regarded as a prime example of Colonial Queensland architecture.

Despite the efforts of its citizens to reverse the decline of the town, Cooktown showed significant signs of decay in the early part of the new century. Conditions at the Court House had deteriorated to such an extent by 1909 that the Police Magistrate complained of goats camping on the verandah of the building. He requested the provision of a fence and some gates to keep the animals out, as "The mess of excrement and urine deposited thereon by these goats creates a most unwholesome and disgusting smell".<sup>424</sup> Conditions did not improve to any great extent. Only four months later, his replacement urged the Department of Justice to provide him with a small hanging safe to protect the court books from destruction by rats and cockroaches.<sup>425</sup>

As Cooktown's economy declined, the town began to lose some Government services, and the buildings that housed them. When it was the major centre north of Townsville, Cooktown hosted sittings of the Northern Supreme Court and Circuit Court. In 1921, with the town in severe decline, the Government threatened to abolish the Courts and try cases elsewhere. Charles Patching, a local solicitor, urged the Town

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<sup>422</sup> T.B. Payne, Chief Property Officer, to Officer-In-Charge, Land and Property, 7 October 1954, J56/11 QL3899, Australian Archives.

<sup>423</sup> The original plans are available, and show that the building is virtually unchanged, J2774 W2097A, Australian Archives.

<sup>424</sup> W.M. Lee-Bujle, Police Magistrate, Cooktown, to The Under Secretary, Department of Justice, 22 September 1909, WOR/A608 (3680), Q.S.A.

<sup>425</sup> Charles Patching, Solicitor, Cooktown, to His Worship The Mayor And Aldermen Of The Town Of Cooktown, 13 October 1921. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Council to campaign against the proposed closure, as it would reflect badly on the town's reputation and harm its prestige. He said that Cooktown would also suffer financially, as it would lose the benefits of Jury payments and the salaries of court officials, and that witnesses would face the expense and inconvenience of travelling to Cairns for court hearings.<sup>426</sup> The town had a partial victory when the Government compromised, transferring the Supreme Court to Cairns, and keeping the Magistrate's Court in Cooktown. Cooktown was able to keep its Court House building, but lost other support buildings like the gaol and lockup keeper's quarters. The gaol became less relevant as the town declined, and only twenty-four people were arrested in 1919, prompting the Commissioner of Police to call for its closure. He also said that the police presence in Cooktown should be reduced to one Acting Sergeant in Charge, one Constable for watch house and general duties, and one Mounted Officer.<sup>427</sup> The advice was accepted, and the closure of the Cooktown Gaol was gazetted in 1921.<sup>428</sup> After it closed, the Lockup Keeper's Quarters became redundant and the building was sold. The sale of this building was only one incident in the complicated history of Government buildings in Cooktown. It was erected on the site of the original Court House in Charlotte Street after a new Court House was constructed on the block adjoining in Flinders Street. The present Court House again occupies the original position in Charlotte Street, and the Magistrate's residence is on the Flinders Street site.

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<sup>426</sup> Charles Patching, Solicitor, Cooktown, to His Worship The Mayor And Aldermen Of The Council Of The Town Of Cooktown, 13 October 1921. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>427</sup> W.H. Ryan, Inspector 2/c, District Inspectors Office, Cairns, to The Commissioner of Police, Brisbane, 19 March 1920. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

## Hospital.

Two hospitals were built in Cooktown before 1885. The original hospital was built in 1874, soon after the first European settlers arrived. It was situated in Green Street, between Helen and Hope Streets. It is interesting to note that Asians were not welcome to share the facilities, and were asked to contribute towards the construction of a separate ward.<sup>429</sup> The facilities of the first hospital were obviously limited, as it wasn't until July that tenders were called for a bath house and a "dead house".<sup>430</sup>

The building and grounds were soon found to be too small for the growing town, and the Government was asked for funds for a new hospital in more extensive grounds. The request was granted, and the Colonial Architect prepared plans in 1879.<sup>431</sup> This was followed by a Government loan of £2,000 for construction. Tenders were called, and A. Doorey & Sons of Brisbane won the contract.<sup>432</sup> The building was constructed in Colonial style, with wide verandahs to give patients access to cooling breezes in hot weather.

The hospital buildings remained virtually unchanged, but as the population declined, less money was available for repairs. A report by the Medical Officer in 1945 gives some indication of the detrimental impact of Cooktown's decline. He claimed that the hospital had not seen improvements for over twenty years, and that the buildings had

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<sup>428</sup> Q.G.G., 1 October 1921.

<sup>429</sup> Cooktown Courier, 9 February 1876.

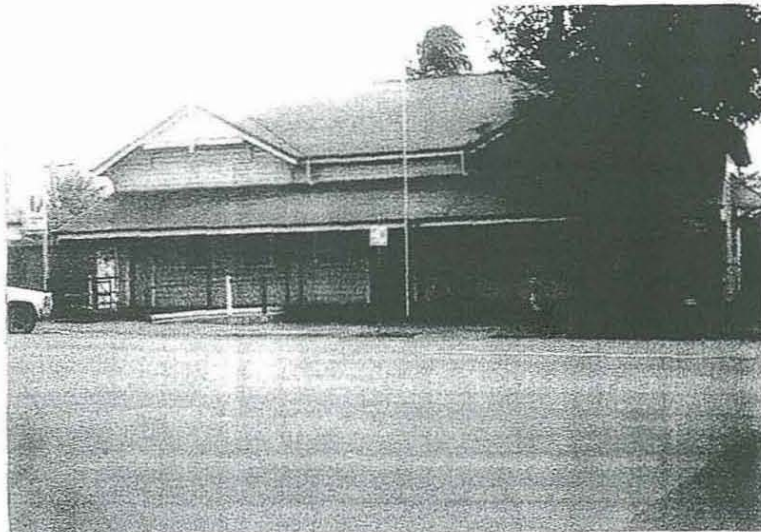
<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 15 July 1876.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 26 April 1879.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 17 September 1879.



Cooktown hospital during World War Two. (Sinclair, Cooktown At War).



Post Office, Cooktown.



poor ventilation and leaked in wet weather. The water supply was inadequate to maintain health, as were the facilities for the treatment of patients. He recommended that the building be replaced by a small modern hospital with adequate facilities.<sup>433</sup> The complaints were justified. Although the hospital was also used by the armed forces, it did not even boast a septic toilet system. The local Member supported the request for a new hospital,<sup>434</sup> but the Government refused to supply the necessary funds. Another attempt was made to have the hospital replaced in 1974, but the Government said it had no funds available. By 1982 plans were drawn up, with an estimate of \$3,185,000 for construction. Cabinet finally approved funding for the building, but limited costs to \$2,000,000. The contract was awarded to Leighton Constructions in May 1985.<sup>435</sup> Patients were moved into the new hospital in January 1986<sup>436</sup> The original building was relocated and renovated by the Jehovah's Witness Church, and is used as a meeting place. It is open for public inspection. Many locals are disappointed with the new hospital. Unfortunately, the Government chose a plan unsuited to the tropical environment. The new building could be described as an air-conditioned box, and lacks the wide verandahs of its predecessor. Patients often slept on the verandahs of the old building, and most spent the day there, taking advantage of the breeze for which Cooktown is famous. The present hospital has little such outdoor space available. The air-conditioning posed its own problems. Cooktown is still prone to power outages, and at times there is insufficient power to cool the building.

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<sup>433</sup> The Medical Officer in Charge, Cook Hospital, Cooktown, to The Chairman, Hospital Board, Cooktown, 25 January 1945. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>434</sup> H.H. Collins, Parliament House, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 23 March 1945. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>435</sup> Cooktown Weekly, 29 November 1985.

<sup>436</sup> Cooktown Weekly, 24 January 1986.



### State school.

The State School at Cooktown reflects the economic progress of the town perhaps better than any other facility. Its fortunes ebbed and flowed as the population fluctuated, but like the hospital, survived all disasters, both economic and natural. The first school, known as the National School, opened in January 1875 with eighty pupils. There were thirty-eight boys and forty-two girls, and in keeping with the fashion of the day, the local press offered the information that there were sixty-eight Anglicans, ten Roman Catholics and two Presbyterians.<sup>437</sup> The original school consisted of one building measuring sixty feet by twenty feet, with a verandah all round. The builder was J. Meldrum, who received £180 to erect the structure.<sup>438</sup> The total cost of land, building and fittings came to £1,308.<sup>439</sup> It is of interest that the school inspector's report for 1875 said that of all schools visited in Northern Area, only Cooktown's was well designed for the tropics. The inspector must have been unusually benign for the period. He said that:

I have constantly striven to abolish corporal punishment, and am happy to say I have no reason to believe that any teacher on the schools under my charge has been guilty of "beating" knowledge into his pupils.<sup>440</sup>

Although the school was a welcome addition to the town, locals complained that when it was opened it was not supplied with books, register, black boards or other necessary items.<sup>441</sup> Nevertheless, the school prospered, and by the end of the first year, had 145 pupils. Apparently the Chinese were not entirely ostracised in the town. The

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<sup>437</sup> Cooktown Herald, 27 January 1875.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 9 September 1875.

<sup>439</sup> Q.V.P., 1876, Vol 2, p. 823.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., pp. 894-896.

<sup>441</sup> Cooktown Herald, 27 January 1875.

local press reported that seven Chinese children attended the school, and admitted that they were the brightest scholars.<sup>442</sup>

By 1877 the school was not big enough to accommodate the pupils, and the Government promised a new wing, which would allow the boys to be separated from the girls and infants.<sup>443</sup> The school was enlarged again in 1885, when a new building was constructed for the boys. The old building was kept as a girls and infants school, which included boys up to seven years old.<sup>444</sup> By 1902 the school was reputed to have 150 pupils at the boys school, and 130 at the girls.<sup>445</sup> Both buildings were extensively damaged in January 1907 by a cyclone. The boys school was soon back in use, but the girls building was not available again until the end of the year.<sup>446</sup>

Cooktown's population continued to increase from the late 1960s, and the number of pupils attending the State school rose accordingly. The existing buildings were in need of considerable maintenance, and were not capable of accomodating many more pupils. Rather than put more money into old buildings, the Government built a completely new school in 1970.<sup>447</sup> This school served the Cooktown community until it was replaced by a modern new school on land at the foot of Mount Cook. It joins the high school that was constructed on the same land in 1984. Unlike the new hospital, the school is built for the environment. It had large airy class rooms, and an abundance of covered areas and walk-ways to shelter pupils and staff from the tropical climate.

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<sup>442</sup> Cooktown Herald, 10 November 1875.

<sup>443</sup> Cooktown Courier, 17 January 1877.

<sup>444</sup> Cooktown State School - The First 100 Years, 1975. Cooktown State School Parents and Citizens Committee, p. 3.

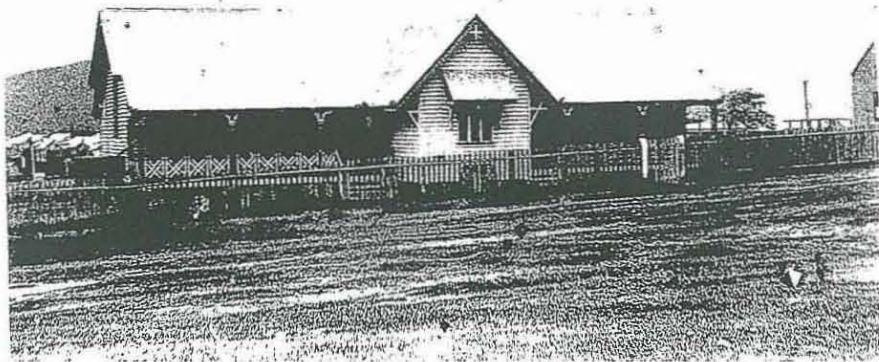
<sup>445</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>446</sup> District School Inspector's Report, February 1908. Q.P.P., 1908, Vol 2, p. 75.

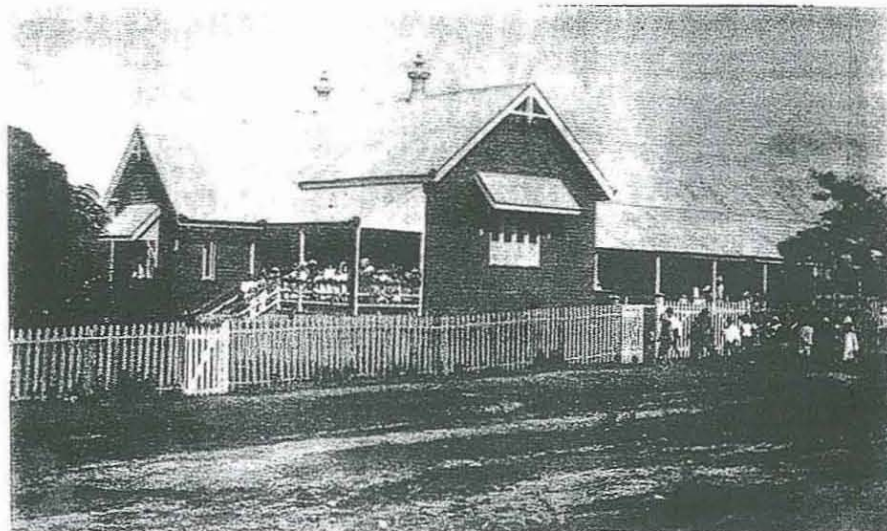
<sup>447</sup> Cooktown State School - The First 100 Years, p. 9.

Cooktown School Opened 25 January 1875						
Year	Annual Enrolment			Average Daily Attendance		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1875	153	156	309			147
1876	157	165	322			158
1877	118	134	252	80	74	154
1878	161	163	324	98	89	187
1879						
1880						
1881	118	94	212	69	53	122
1882	83	71	154	52	41	93
1883	105	110	215	67	61	128
1884						
Change to Boys School and Girls & Infants School						
Year	Average Attendance			Teachers		
	Boys	Girls	Infants		Total Av	
1885	54	110		164	7	
1886	53	100		153	6	
1887	59	113		172	7	
1888	86	144		230	9	
1889	95	183		278	9	
1890	99	172		271	8	
1891	102	168		270	8	
1892	109	147		256	7	
1893	111	156		267	7	
1894	104	125		229	6	
1895	112	142		254	7	
1896	117	172		289	8	
1897	112	170		282	7	
1898						
1899	119	134		253	7	
1900	113	139		252		
1901	122	136		258	6	
1902	138	153		291	7	
1903	125	136		261	9	
1904	138	127		265	8	
1905	116	104		220	7	
1906	102	94		196	6	
1907	96	106		202	6	
1908	103	97		200	6	
1909	98	91		189	6	
1910	84	85		169	5	
1911	71	83		154		
1912					5	
1913	68	83		151	6	
1914	66	88		154	5	
1915	62	100		162	5	
1916	41	87		128	7	
1917	37	84		121	7	
1918	33	81		114	6	
1919	33	81		114	5	
1920	All one school now			103	5	
1921				95	4	

School attendance records, Cooktown 1875-1921. (Statistic of Queensland).



Cooktown Boys' School, c. 1890. (Cooktown State School: the first hundred years).



Cooktown Girls' School, c. 1920. (Cooktown State School: the first hundred years).

### **Commercial construction activity.**

Like the Government structures, more imposing private buildings were constructed after the Palmer rush. Cooktown's establishment saw a frenzy of building activity to provide accommodation and services for a population that reached its peak of about 4,000 within two years. All construction materials were shipped from southern centres, and most of the commercial buildings in the first few years were temporary. Many were crude structures of canvas over bush timber frames, and the use of sawn timber and corrugated iron was cause for comment in the local press.<sup>448</sup> Despite the impressive early growth, most of the substantial commercial buildings in Cooktown were built between 1885 and 1890. Some building activity consisted of replacing existing structures, but the largest permanent buildings in Cooktown, some of which exist today, were constructed in this period.

Despite the decline in gold production on the Palmer, in the mid 1880s Cooktown enjoyed a boost to its economy. Tin mining on the upper Annan River coincided with a surge in Government building activity. Employment levels in the district rose, with up to 800 miners working on the tin fields, and another 200 workers employed on the railway line to Laura.<sup>449</sup> In addition, a significant work force was employed in constructing bridges over the Endeavour and Annan Rivers. The consequent boost to commercial activity encouraged many businesses to build new premises, or renovate existing ones. Some commercial

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<sup>448</sup> James Reid listed all buildings in the new settlement when he arrived there to make the first survey of the new town. He shows the "Courier" as being housed in a tent, some buildings made of wood with an iron roof, and a butcher operating in a building made of calico on poles. *A Rough Plan Of Cooktown by James Reid, Government Surveyor, 28 March 1874. C1792, Department of Mapping and Survey, Brisbane.*

<sup>449</sup> *Q.V.P.* 1886, Vol. 3, p. 327.



interests showed faith in Cooktown's future by constructing substantial buildings.

### **Queensland National Bank.**

The most impressive of these was a two-storey brick and plaster structure built for the Queensland National Bank. It was designed by F.D.G. Stanley, who called tenders in early 1890.<sup>450</sup> The successful tender, of £5,000, was submitted by J. Baker, a Brisbane builder.<sup>451</sup> The statistics of the building were impressive, with a banking chamber thirty-five feet by twenty-five feet, and ceiling height of fifteen feet. The chambers featured timber fittings of black bean and red cedar, and a fireproof strong room of twelve feet by ten feet. The ground floor contained the banking chamber, manager's room, dining room, sewing room, pantry and kitchen. The upper floor included a drawing room, four bedrooms, a bathroom, and a linen closet. Two bedrooms were also provided on this floor for servants. The Cooktown Courier described the building's style as "Italian", with a frontage of seventy-two feet, and a height of thirty-five feet.<sup>452</sup>

Although the building provided a welcome stimulus to the local economy, the contractor was criticised for not supporting local industry more. The press castigated him for importing stone window sills for the bank when an unlimited supply of suitable stone was available locally.<sup>453</sup> However, when the building was completed in 1891, it was universally accepted as a credit to the town.

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<sup>450</sup> Cooktown Courier, 7 January 1890.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 25 April 1890. Cooktown Weekly, 20 December 1985.

<sup>452</sup> Cooktown Courier, 25 April 1890.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 13 June 1890.





Westpac Bank, formerly Queensland National Bank building.

The Queensland National Bank served the public of Cooktown for fifty years, and ceased operations in 1933.<sup>454</sup> When the Shire Chairman learned of the closure, he moved to offer £1,100 for the building for a Council Chambers, rather than undertake costly renovations to the Council's existing building. However, he failed to secure sufficient support.<sup>455</sup> The building was left derelict and quickly deteriorated, but the Bank refused the Council's demands that it be made safe. Instead, it offered to sell the premises to the Council for £800 for the building and all fittings, or £750 bare of fittings.<sup>456</sup> The Bank finally reduced its price to £700 cash for the premises as they stood.<sup>457</sup> However, many local ratepayers and some Council aldermen objected to the proposal, which they said was "an unwarranted and wasteful expenditure of the Ratepayers Money". They told the Chairman the money would be better spent on repairing roads and streets.<sup>458</sup> Some Councillors complained to the Home Secretary that the Shire Council could not afford to buy the building, and that the Chairman wanted it for frivolous reasons. They said he was determined to buy the building as it was "a fit and proper place to entertain a representative of His Majesty the King, or a Minister of the Crown".<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> The Bank notified the public that it would close its doors on 31 July. Cairns Post, 13 July 1933.

<sup>455</sup> Cook Shire Council Minutes, 4 September 1933 & 6 November 1933.

<sup>456</sup> General Manager, The Queensland National Bank Limited, Brisbane, to A Standfield Sampson, Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 18 September 1933. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>457</sup> General Manager, The Queensland National Bank Limited, Brisbane, to A Standfield Sampson, Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 13 November 1933. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>458</sup> Letter from 108 Residents, Electors and Ratepayers of Cooktown to The Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 6 January 1934. R. Donald, A.M. Wallace, W. Baker, Cooktown, to The Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 27 January 1934. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>459</sup> The North Queensland Register, 14 October 1933.

Despite the opposition, the majority of Councillors were determined to purchase the building, and asked the Home Secretary if a poll could be held to decide the issue.<sup>460</sup> The protracted negotiations were too much for the Queensland National Bank, and it sold the building to the Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac), for £500.<sup>461</sup> The building, with its original red cedar fittings, has been fully restored, and is now one of Cooktown's most significant tourist attractions.

### **Thomas and Madden.**

Thomas and Madden, general merchants and shipping agents, also built an impressive commercial structure in 1888.<sup>462</sup> This building, which was the largest in the town, replaced another store and warehouse that was destroyed by fire.<sup>463</sup> The new building was fifty feet wide by eighty feet long, and three stories high.<sup>464</sup> Although it was a commercial building, the owners were willing to contribute to the aesthetic values of Cooktown. The facade was ornate, and included some gilded surfaces.<sup>465</sup> Unfortunately, Thomas and Madden never reaped the benefit of their investment, as they went into liquidation soon after the new building was completed.<sup>466</sup> Most of their commercial property and stock was purchased by Burns Philp, who extended the building and made it their principal store.<sup>467</sup> However, the building was destroyed by fire in 1919, leaving only a brick strong room intact. This

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<sup>460</sup> C Done, Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Hon. The Home Secretary, Brisbane, 6 November 1933. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>461</sup> Manager, The Queensland National Bank Limited, Cairns, to The Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 31 August 1934. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>462</sup> Cooktown Courier, 31 August 1888.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 31 July 1888.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 31 August 1888.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 30 October 1888.

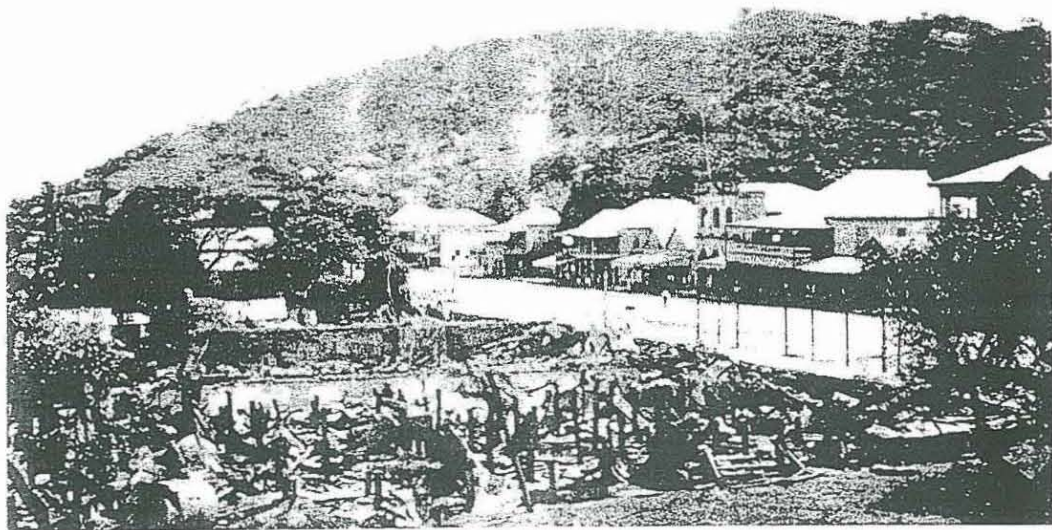
<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 3 January 1891.

<sup>467</sup> K. Buckley and K. Klugman, 1981. The History of Burns Philp: the Australian company in the South Pacific, Burns Philp & Company, Australia, p. 54.





Charlotte Street showing Burns Philp building, c. 1900. (Cairns Historical Society).



Burns Philp after the fire, 1919. (Cairns Historical Society).

small building, with its distinctive arched brick roof, is all that remains in Cooktown of the Burns Philp empire. Claims have been made that the Burns Philp building was constructed of bricks, but photographs taken of the gutted remains after the 1919 fire indicate that it was a wood and iron building.

### **North Queensland Bank.**

The building industry in Cooktown was further stimulated in 1890 when the Bank of North Queensland called tenders for the construction of a new chambers.<sup>468</sup> Like the Queensland National Bank building, it was a brick building of two storeys. The successful tender of £2,500 was submitted by John Armstrong, who "launched" the new construction job with a foundation laying ceremony attended by fifty people.<sup>469</sup>

Armstrong learned from the criticism of the builders of the Queensland National Bank, and arranged to purchase bricks from John Savage, a local brick maker.<sup>470</sup> Savage had taken advantage of the building boom by opening a brick factory, and in January 1889, the Cooktown Courier announced that after much experimenting, he had succeeded in producing bricks equal to those from the south. The Editor commented that:

The brick building stage of a town makes a district advance in civilisation, and when this material is used for shop and offices, the initial stage of existence has been passed, and a permanent prosperity is assured.<sup>471</sup>

Savage was determined to ensure an adequate supply of quality bricks, and arranged for the "best brick-maker in Mackay to come to Cooktown

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<sup>468</sup> Cooktown Courier, 28 August 1890.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 17 October 1890.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., 4 November 1890.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 11 January 1889.

to work". He said the clay deposit was at least fourteen feet thick, ensuring sufficient bricks for the future. The Editor of the Cooktown Courier, ever an enthusiastic supporter of local commerce, commented, "we hope to see brick buildings going up at an early date".<sup>472</sup> His enthusiasm was misplaced. Despite Savage's claims that his products were equal to any import, work was delayed by a lack of bricks.<sup>473</sup> There is nothing to indicate whether the lack of bricks was due to production problems, or if Savage's factory was incapable of producing enough bricks.

Despite the Bank of North Queensland's faith in Cooktown, declining trade forced it to close its doors by 1908. The building was later used for a variety of purposes, including a dental surgery and private residence. From 1915 to 1932, the building was occupied at different times by the Police Magistrate and officers from the Customs Service. During the war it was used by the Postmaster General's Department, and a move to purchase it for a post office was rejected on the advice of the Department of Works and Housing.<sup>474</sup> The building remained derelict until 1950, when Con O'Leary took it over. In the 1970s the building was renovated, and became a supermarket. It is now vacant.

### **Church construction.**

Church buildings played an important part in Cooktown's social life, and their construction and survival reflected the fortunes of the local economy. Like other buildings, the churches built before the turn of the

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 2 December 1890.

<sup>474</sup> C. Boulter, Authorised Surveyor, Cairns, to Survey and Property Officer, Department of the Interior, Brisbane, 17 December 1946 Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.



century were not robust, but some of them survived the ravages of two severe cyclones. Little detailed information exists about these buildings, although the surviving newspapers of the period reveal some interesting details.

### **Anglican.**

The first Church representative in Cooktown was Reverend Kildahl, who held a service in the Court House in May 1874.<sup>475</sup> Supporters then raised funds to construct the present Anglican church, known as Christ Church, at a price of £300.<sup>476</sup> Built in 1875, Christ Church served a dual role. In addition to church services, the Good Templars, a male social organisation, used it for their weekly meetings.<sup>477</sup> The building went through two cyclones, but survived to the present time.

### **Roman Catholic.**

The first Roman Catholic priest, Dr O'Quinn, arrived soon after his Anglican counterpart, and also held services in the Court House until more permanent arrangements could be made.<sup>478</sup> The first Catholic Church was dedicated by the Parish Priest, P.J. MacGuinnes, on 2 May 1875.<sup>479</sup> This timber building was destroyed in the 1907 cyclone, and was replaced within a year by a new building costing £1,000. Despite the depressed state of the local economy, the debt for the construction of the new church was almost repaid before the building

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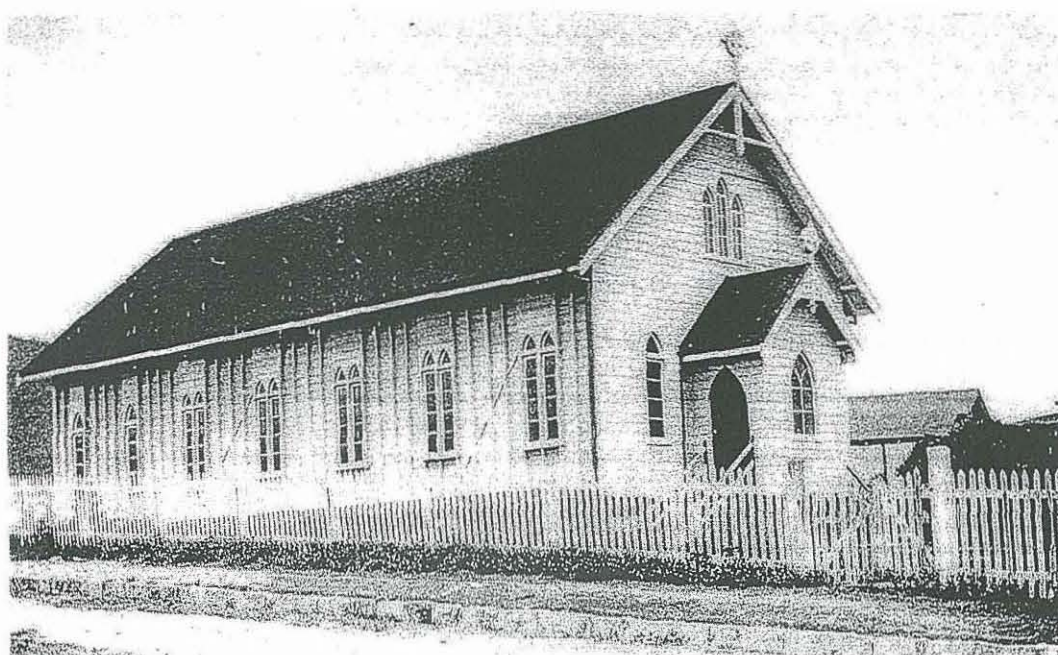
<sup>475</sup> Cooktown Herald, 13 May 1874.

<sup>476</sup> Cooktown Courier, 24 April 1875; 22 May 1875. Cooktown Herald, 19 May 1875.

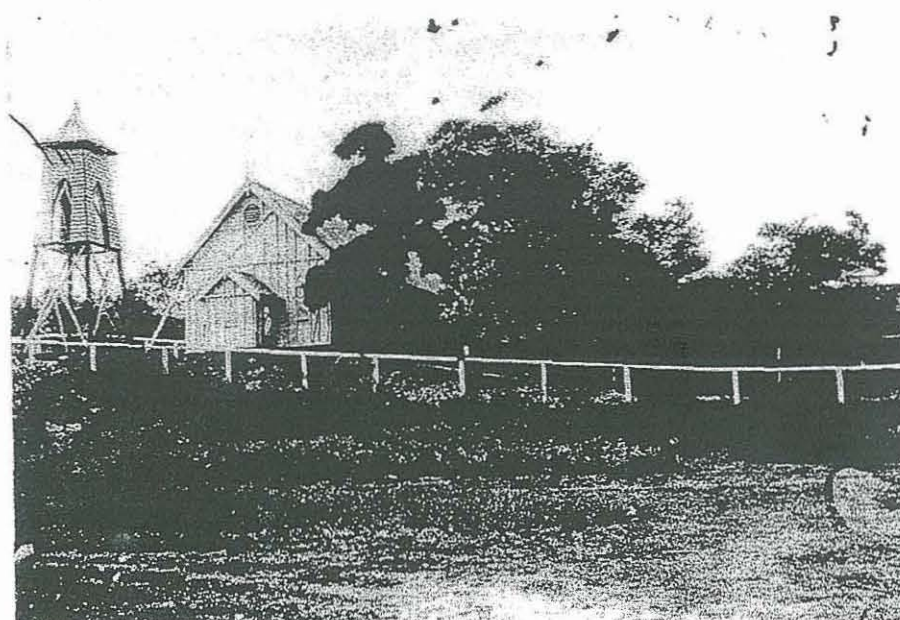
<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 9 February 1876.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 24 August 1890.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 1 May 1875.



St. Mary's Catholic Church, c. 1940s. (Cairns Historical Society).



Christ Church Anglican Church, c. 1930s. (Cairns Historical Society).

was finished.<sup>480</sup> It remained in use until 1984, when it was replaced by a modern concrete block building.

### **Presbyterian.**

The Presbyterian congregation of Cooktown also moved early, and occupied their first church building in Green Street in 1875. This building had a short life, and by early 1890 tenders were called for the erection of a new Presbyterian Church in Helen Street.<sup>481</sup> When the building was completed, it was described as "one of the most handsome places of worship in Cooktown, and one of the most comfortable in North Queensland". The Church was fitted with stained glass windows and other accoutrements that "give it an air of substantiality". Not everyone was impressed, however. The Cooktown Independent said that the latticed walls, while suited to the climate, were "suggestive of a Butcher's shop".<sup>482</sup>

Despite the obvious signs of a decline in Cooktown's economy, the Presbyterians of Cooktown did not stint when they built their new Church. The building was fifty-one feet long by thirty-six feet wide, with ceilings fifteen feet high. Three sides also had verandahs, adding another six feet to the perimeter. The building, including seating, cost £760, but the organ was an additional cost.<sup>483</sup> This was a considerable sum for such a small population, and the congregation employed a

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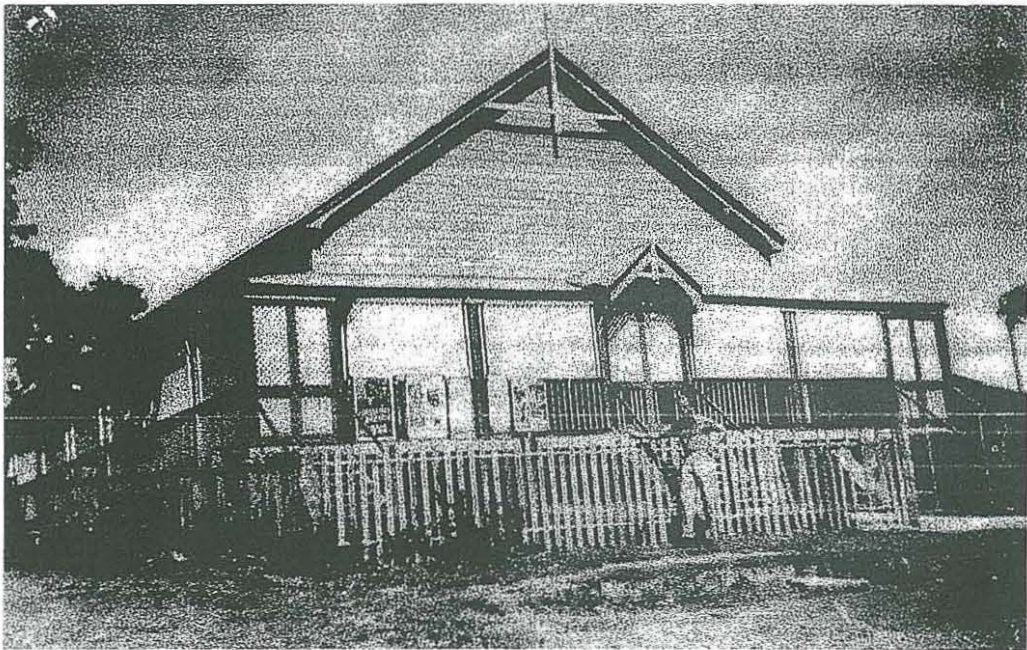
<sup>480</sup> Stan Arnell, 1992. Out Where The Dead Men Lie: the Augustinians in Australia 1823-1992, The Augustinian Historical Commission, Brookvale, p. 233.

<sup>481</sup> Cooktown Courier, 21 February 1890.

<sup>482</sup> Cooktown Independent, 6 August 1890.

<sup>483</sup> Information supplied by Cooktown Research Group (Nancy Keable, Lorraine Ryle, Sue Ure, Bernie Hall), 28 June 1990.





Shire Hall, Cooktown, 1944. (Sinclair, Cooktown At War).

variety of methods to repay the debt.<sup>484</sup>

The faith of Cooktown's Presbyterians in matters temporal was misplaced. The decline in the town's economy and population took its toll on the church congregation, and their ability to maintain the building. In June 1906 it was sold to the Trustees of the Loyal Captain Cook Lodge of North Queensland, Order of Odd Fellows.

Unfortunately, the building was severely damaged in the 1907 cyclone. The Odd Fellows repaired the building, and retained ownership until 1936, when it was purchased by Charles Standen for a picture theatre and general social hall. The Standen family retained ownership until 1951, when the Cook Shire Council purchased the building for a Shire Hall. Since then it has been the venue for most public gatherings in the area.<sup>485</sup> Despite the passage of time and the ravages of the elements, it remains strikingly similar to the 1907 building.

### **St. Mary's Convent.**

The only building dedicated to religious purposes that could be described as a solid structure was St. Mary's Convent of Mercy. It was built as accommodation for the Sisters of Mercy, and for school boarders. A Catholic school had operated in Cooktown from 1886, but Father (later Bishop) Hutchinson thought that the lay teachers should be replaced with teaching Sisters. Consequently, he arranged for the Sisters of Mercy to take control of Catholic education in the area, and the first teaching Nuns arrived from Ireland in June 1888.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> For instance the debt was reduced by £570 raised through an art union. Cooktown Courier, 8 August 1890. Other issues of the Courier at the time report fundraising ventures like bazaars, concerts and auctions.

<sup>485</sup> Information supplied by the Cooktown Research Group, 28 June 1990.

<sup>486</sup> Arnell, Out Where The Dead Men Lie, pp. 230-231.

Bishop Hutchinson wanted the convent to be an imposing centre point for his newly designated Vicariate. He chose Francis Drummond Grenville Stanley, the former Colonial Architect, to design the building. Stanley had designed many other buildings for the Catholic Church in Queensland, as well as the Cooktown Hospital and the Queensland National Bank. He took advantage of the geographical features of the town, and sited the convent on a ridge overlooking the harbour.<sup>487</sup>

Advertisements in the local papers were quite eloquent:

The new Convent occupies one of the prettiest sites in or about Cooktown. High above the sea level its lofty balconies command charming views of the Town, the Bay, and the Valley of the Endeavour, and of Mount Cook with its lovely surroundings. The prevalent health-bearing sea breezes, diffuse a welcome cool throughout the entire building. The system of ventilation is well-nigh perfect, and nothing has been overlooked, which could contribute to the health and comfort of the inmates.<sup>488</sup>

The elevation allowed the building to catch the cooling sea breezes, and gave the Sisters and pupils a magnificent view over the harbour.<sup>489</sup> The building, which was constructed of red brick, cost £5,488.<sup>490</sup> It was the first building in Cooktown with a face brick exterior, and the external bricks were imported from Brisbane. However, in deference to the local manufacturer, the builder was given discretion to use local bricks for all interior work.<sup>491</sup> Bishop Hutchinson laid the foundation stone in July 1888, with over one hundred children from the Catholic School attending the ceremony.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Cooktown Courier, 2 August 1889.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> Maureen Lillie, *St Mary's Convent of Mercy, Cooktown, National Trust, Queensland*, pp. 7-8..

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., p. 231. The local papers reported that the contract price for building the Convent was £4,300, which was £2,346 less than the local tenderer. Cooktown Courier, 4 May, 1888

<sup>491</sup> Cooktown Courier, 4 May 1888.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid., 24 July 1888.



St. Mary's Convent offered boarding and day school facilities until the Second World War, when the partial civilian evacuation of Cooktown in 1941 forced its closure. The town's decline was so severe that when the Convent closed it had only four Sisters and thirteen pupils.<sup>493</sup> The Sisters were sent to Mt. St. Bernard School in Herberton.<sup>494</sup> The building was occupied by members of the United States armed forces until the end of 1944. While it is impossible to determine exactly which units occupied the building, it is accepted that a Naval Unit was in residence during that time.<sup>495</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that the building suffered considerable damage during this period.

After the war the Convent building remained unoccupied, and continued to deteriorate until the 1949 cyclone, when it was extensively damaged. The roof was repaired after the cyclone, but broken windows were not replaced, resulting in further deterioration of the internal woodwork. The building was eventually declared a danger to the public, and as the Diocese couldn't afford the repairs, tenders were called in January 1969 to demolish it.<sup>496</sup> However, appeals from individuals and organisations resulted in the convent being offered to the National Trust of Queensland for a museum. Cooktown had a local museum in the old railway station building, which was relocated to Charlotte Street, and its collection was offered as the nucleus of the new museum. The project drew widespread interest, and the State Government offered \$6,000 to the National Trust in a matching grant to renovate the building. The work was completed in time for Queen Elizabeth to officially open the James Cook Historical Museum during the Royal

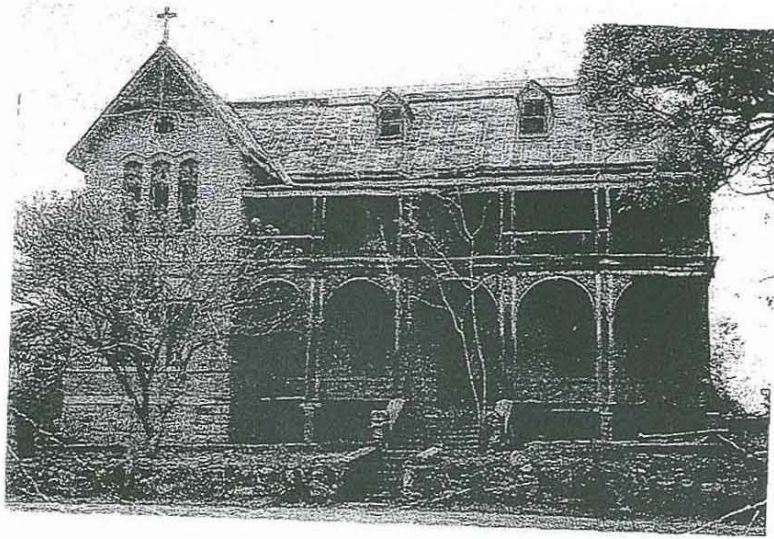
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<sup>493</sup> Lillie, *St Mary's Convent Of Mercy*, p. 13.

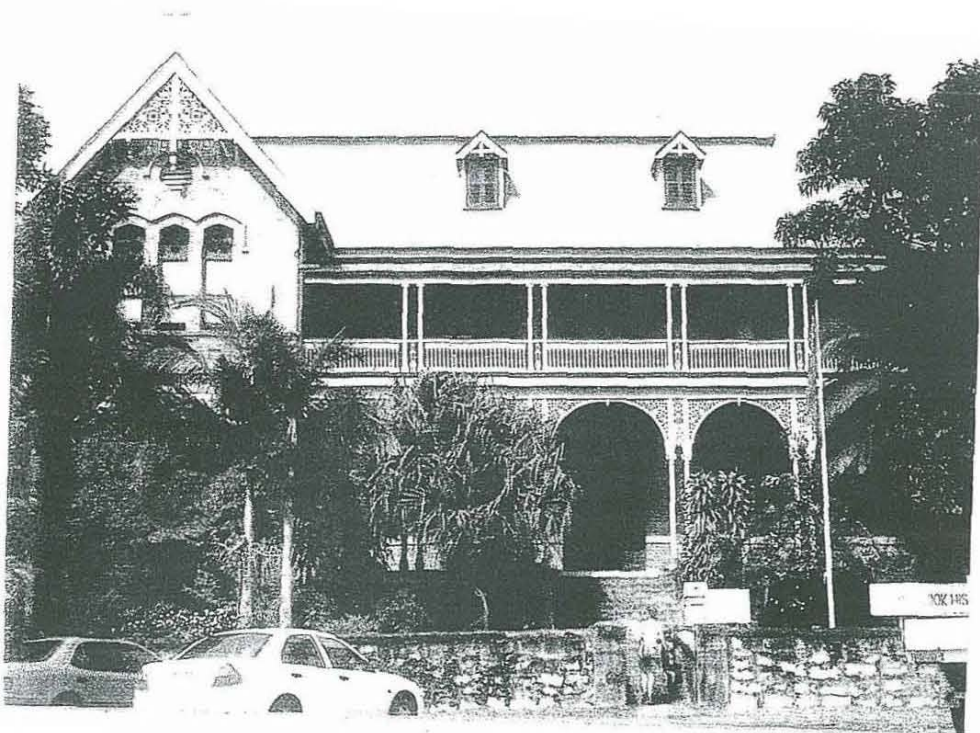
<sup>494</sup> *Cairns Post*, 22 January 1969.

<sup>495</sup> Sinclair, *Cooktown At War*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>496</sup> *Cairns Post*, 22 January 1969.



Derelict St. Mary's building after World War Two. (Sinclair, Cooktown At War).



James Cook Historical Museum, 1999.

Tour in 1970.<sup>497</sup> The occasion was not without its lighter moments. Most of Cooktown's buildings at the time were in various states of disrepair, and were deemed not suitable to be seen by the Queen and her entourage. In a rare act of benevolence the authorities supplied enough paint to disguise the walls of those buildings liable to be seen by the royal eyes when the party travelled between the wharf and the museum. The authorities were also fearful of a hitch in the actual opening ceremony, as the renovations had been rushed. They had a man hidden behind the door to surreptitiously open it if the lock failed to work when the Queen used the key. Despite their doubts, the Museum was opened without a problem. It continues to act as a central point of interest for tourism in Cooktown, and provides an invaluable historical educational resource for the area.

### **Conclusion.**

The history of the construction industry in Cooktown indicates that the town survived the decline of the Palmer gold field for some time, and indeed prospered for a short period. Alternative products, such as tin, timber, and marine products, contributed to the increased construction activity. However, the volume of trade these products generated was insufficient to overcome the disadvantages of distance from markets. Outside capital has helped many towns overcome such shortfalls, and Government money for construction fitted the bill nicely. Unfortunately, the principal Government construction projects, which were provided to stimulate the economy of the area, added to its decline in the long term. The failure of the railway to cover even its operating costs

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<sup>497</sup> Lillie, St Mary's Convent Of Mercy, p. 15.

deterred the Government from further investment in the area, and the wharves later placed the local authority in debt.

Cooktown's buildings accurately reflect the economic and social progress of the district. The urgency to establish a port to supply the Palmer gold field was illustrated by the flimsy prefabricated Government buildings, and tents for commercial premises and private habitation. However, the strengthening economy encouraged the construction of a better class of building for both the Government and private sectors, with some that could even be described as permanent. Unfortunately, this stage proved to be an "Indian summer", as Cooktown lived off its golden past with no real future in sight.

One unforeseen benefit of economic downturns is the preservation of a town's heritage. Cooktown's decline saw new building projects curtailed, and the renovation of Government buildings that would have otherwise been replaced. This meant that the town retained many of its important historic buildings. The improvement in Cooktown's economy in the past thirty years has coincided with an increased awareness of the importance of the physical and social history of the area, particularly for tourism, and a willingness to provide the necessary funds to maintain important buildings. In this at least, Cooktown has benefited from its own drastic decline.

Central Place theory is perhaps more relevant to the history of Cooktown's buildings than to any other subject discussed in this thesis. In its heyday Cooktown was the central point for health in the northern district, with patients coming from the area between Cairns and New Guinea. For a time it was also the most important centre for justice, with Supreme Court hearings of all important cases in the region. Its

buildings reflected its importance. However, as Cooktown declined, most Government services and facilities were lost to Cairns. Some important commercial enterprises also left Cooktown to relocate in Cairns, and the buildings were either left vacant or adapted to lowlier uses, only to later become tourist attractions.