

THE SEXIEST WAR MEMORIAL IN AUSTRALIA

VARNEY PARKES

AND

THE WOLLONGONG MEMORIAL ARCH



The Arch has always impressed me. Much more so when it remained on its original site in at the front of the Council Chambers in Crown Street.

Tucked away in the park in Church Street it now gets much less chance to impress visitors and locals. But it really is worth the effort to stop and take a close and thoughtful look.

It is so very odd. But that's being kind. Its kitsch. But its such interesting kitsch!

Children with bare-feet, waratahs, winged cherubs, two British coats-of-arms, and a woman with unnecessarily large breasts on top! It is almost as if she was carved straight from the hand of that well-known purevvor of buxom nudes, Norman Lindsay.

Who designed this strange memmorial? What on earth were they trying to say?

Well, as it turns out the memorial was designed by none other than the son of Sir Henry Parkes. And the reason Varney Parkes was allowed to let his eccentricities full reign was that he designed and supervised the whole of the work for nix. As a result the entire hunk os stone and marble only cost 1200 pounds. And even wowers are presumably somewhat less discomfitted by large breasts when they're getting them on the cheap.

But even so, so much about the memorial is still left unexplained.

What of the bare-foot children? Are they the offspring of war-widows doing it tough in the immediate post-war period? Surely it would have been better to provide them with real shoes, rather than immortalize their fathers in marble?

And why was it necessary to have such a flagrantly naked symbol of Victory, holding her torch aloft? After all, if the Anzac Day photos I've seen are anything to go by, she only seems to have gone on to cause acute embarrassment for our modest diggers. Some master of military strategy seems to have always been forced to position a large wreath of flowers in such a way as to obscure poor Victory's offending breasts!

In short, it's a great monument and probably the finest regional war memorial in Australia. Built in 1923, Varney Parkes seems to have realized that he couldn't compete with the simple, dignified elegance of Signor Casagrandi's forlorn soldier built at Thirroul in 1920 - the first war memorial on the south coast and the one immortalized in D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*. So Varney appears to have gone all out to design something incomparable! His success is evident for all to see.

The experience of recently re-examining Parkes's Wollongong Memorial Arch made me keen to see other examples of his work. Was it all this bizarre? And what was Varney like himself?

Varney Parkes was the seventh child of Sir Henry Parkes and his first wife Clarinda (nee Varney) and was born on June 4, 1859 in Sydney. He went to the Kings School and eventually became a cadet in the Colonial Architect's Office in 1879. (ICAC would no doubt find evidence of considerable impropriety in Varney's appointment were it to occur today.) He received a diploma for his efforts when he resigned in 1880 to form a architectural partnership with C.H.E. Blackmann

The practice flourished and Varney went on to design the fabulous 'Marble Bar' for George Adams 'Tattersalls' Hotel in Pitt Street in 1891. George Adams, of course, was a man with impeccable local credentials. He owned Bulli Colliery and all of Sandon Point. His wife, Mrs. George Adams, went on to have her name inscribed on the monument to the wreck of the brig 'Amy', which foundered on Thirroul beach. From its appearance this monument was definitely not designed by Varney Parkes.

If there are a few souls in existence who have not yet seen Varney Parkes Marble Bar, make the effort to go to the Hilton Hotel in Sydney and seek it out. It is still as opulent and extraordinary today as it must have been in the 1890s, even though, like the Wollongong Memorial Arch, it has been relocated to a site that does not do it justice.

Varney Parkes managed to combine architecture with politics and was elected to the NSW Legislative Assembly as early as 1885, representing central Cumberland and, later, East Sydney.

Declared bankrupt in June 1895, he was compelled to resign from Parliament, but was immediately re-elected. (Some of the members of the currently embattled Greiner Government tottering on the brink of insolvency might do well to investigate this apparent loophole in the law!)

Varney Parkes later became Post Master General in George Reid's ministry during 1898-1899. He resigned his seat in June 1900 and unsuccessfully contested the Federal seat of Parkes in 1903.

Somehow amid all this political activity he kept up his architectural practice which, from 1895, he conducted alone, except for brief partnerships in 1904-1906, 1914, and 1923-1924.

According to a Bachelor of Architecture thesis by Louise Raine (University of

NSW, 1977), Varney Parkes only distinguished himself when his clients had money. For a time he was fashionable and his influential clients could allow him the freedom to build in opulent style. Forced to deal with clients of more modest means, his designs (according to Raine) became increasingly mundane.

He accepted his last commission in 1926 and retired to Conjola, near Milton, on the South Coast of NSW and became a recluse. He collected fossils, sketched local geological formations, lectured on evolution and taught drawing. Many of his fossils were obtained by the Museum of Natural History in Sydney.

Varney Parkes, however, did not have a completely happy life or retirement. His married life had never been easy. His wife died five months after their wedding and he married her elder sister a year later, eventually (unsuccessfully) filing for divorce in 1902. He was committed to the Hospital for the Insane at Gladesville in 1934 and died there in May, 1935.

There would be some who would today argue that the Wollongong Memorial Arch is a very appropriate monument, not to the heroes of the First World War, but to Varney Parkes's own incipient madness. It is nonetheless endearing for all that.

Joseph Davis