1. INTRO

Firstly, I need to justify why I am talking to you at all about your Old Court House. Most of you probably know more about Wollongong’s history than I do; and some of you can probably fill in some of the gaps in my knowledge of the Old Court House - for example I know nothing at all about the interesting trials that have been held in it.

My justification is that I have spent quite a lot of time trying to work towards getting the Old Court House freed of its present users and set up as a Heritage Centre for Wollongong. In the course of this, I have had to study the building,
and I have discovered that studying an important building is one of the best ways to study history.

If I may quote Professor Freeland’s excellent history “Architecture in Australia”

“Every building captures in physical form the climate and resources of a country’s geography, the social, economic technological and political conditions of its society, and the moral, philosophical aesthetic and spiritual values of its people. Every building records, describes and explains the time and place in which it was built... buildings are original historical documents. Unlike the original sources on which most historical fields depend, those of architectural history in the main are not buried under the ground or locked up in closely-guarded libraries and archives and cautiously made available to a few crusty scholars... Buildings carry more history than a library of books - and it is not second-hand.”

I think Professor Freeland overstates the position a bit; but if you do study the building itself together with some of those (in Wollongong) not so closely-guarded archives, you must come to a deeper understanding of Wollongong’s history, and will also recognise that the old Court House is one of Wollongong’s most significant heritage buildings, perhaps the most important.

2. BUILDING THE OLD COURT HOUSE

Now let’s go back to the beginning of European law and order in Wollongong. This started with the Commandant of the military garrison, who was also the local magistrate and sat in a tent to dispense justice. In 1834 a weatherboard Court House was built, but by the 1850s it was damp, decrepit and inadequate; indeed in 1855 part of the ceiling collapsed and one of the verandah posts fell off. The rest fell off the next year.

While that building, which we might now call the Old, Old Court House, was steadily collapsing, NSW and Wollongong were experiencing the most exciting decade of our history following the gold discoveries of 1851. There was great wealth and optimism; free settlers almost doubled the population of Australia in the decade and changed the whole social and economic environment. In 1856, NSW achieved self-government; a new Colonial Architect, Alexander Dawson, was appointed; and 2,000 pounds was voted for a new Court House in Wollongong.

This was part of a massive Court House building push - no less than 37 new Court Houses were built in NSW in the four years 1857-60 inclusive; and to get that respect for law and order into focus, we should note that general building standards in the Colony left much to be desired. Indeed, in the 1861 Census, the authorities found it useful to introduce a new category into the statistics on dwellings; to brick and stone; timber; and “other” they added “tents and drays”, and the returns showed that just over one-seventh of NSW dwelling were in fact tents and drays.

The Mercury had begun publication the year before, in 1855, and led successful local efforts to change the original plans for Wollongong’s new Court House. It was enlarged; the proposed cells were left off; and it was re-postioned so as to front the harbour. Finally, a low tender - only 1,250 pounds - was accepted from William Stoddart of Woolloomooloo in May, 1857 and the building opened for business on 1st February, 1958. It thus joined the remarkably large number of
important buildings completed in that single year in the Illawarra - there was a slump in the building industry in Sydney in 1857 - 58, presumably because the goldrush backlog had been overcome, and it looks as if the Illawarra benefited.

The Court House was immediately recognised, and still is, as an elegant piece of architecture; The harbour was the entry to both Wollongong and the rest of the Illawarra, and the focal point of the growing town; and the Court House dominated the harbour. It was flanked to the north by the Brighton Hotel opposite; to the west by the Police Station (or Watch House); and a large gaol was built next door on the south in 1859. Grand houses were built around it; St. Francis Xavier's, Market Square and the town water supply were all just up the road. It was of course more than just a Court House. It was both the prime symbol and also the place of all government in the Illawarra - local government did not come till the next year, 1859.

The grand new building had no witnesses' room and no toilets, and needed a screen to keep out the easterly winds, but these deficiencies were rectified, and one might have assumed that justice would continue to be dispensed there indefinitely.

3. WHAT WENT WRONG?
In less than 30 years, however, yet another new Court House was built for Wollongong, one that is still serving its original purpose. What went wrong with our elegant 1858 building? The simplistic answer is that it became too small, but that is not good enough - there was plenty of government land beside it for expansion.

We might at this stage have some light relief and look at a few slides, which between them give the answer.

4. SLIDES
1834 plan of W'gong.
construction of Belmore Basin, 1860s
idyllic blue painting, but with tram lines
harbour with tram lines (1861 and 1862)
the gaol
the Customs House c1890 - new Court House tower visible
the Mercury's 1887 birdseye view of the town - centre has moved west; railway is there; coal mines; the 1858 building is on now on the periphery.

5. THE NEXT 100 YEARS
It has taken a long time to cover the Old Court House's first 27 years, but I will get through the next one hundred in a lot less than half the time. As the Court moved out, there was a new occupant ready and waiting. The rapid growth of trade in the 1880s in and out of the port had led to increasing customs activity, and when the Court moved out in 1885 the NSW Customs authorities moved in.

They moved their Customs Shed immediately to the south of what we can now call the Old Court House about this time and it stayed there till 1938, to the confusion of people trying to study old photographs. (That shed still survives round at the back and is known as the Officers' Mess. Also surviving round the back is the old toilet block of 1866, although it is a bit like Abraham Lincoln's
Somewhere around this time the back verandah was probably added. The man in charge, the Preventive Officer, as he was called, lived on the site, and supervised staff at other points including the developing Port Kembla. They seem to have been busy with customs work in those days, and there must certainly be another interesting story in that.

Then in 1901 came Federation, and the end of State customs duty and in the meantime Port Kembla Harbour was developing, and the proud Belmore Basin was starting to become something of a backwater. So the Old Court House needed a new tenant. The NSW Government transferred it to the new Commonwealth Government in 1902 for a price of 1,122 pounds; it was given over to the Army, apparently on 6th July, 1904, for its regional headquarters, and by 1905 it was already being called the Drill Hall. Compulsory military training was introduced by the Defence Act of 1911, from which time it obviously had a significant role in local life, giving it a specific role.

The greatest extension of the building since its construction 80 years before came in 1938, as Australia moved towards war again, when the Army added four rooms on the south side. Conservationists argue whether these four rooms should be removed or not - they provide useful space and are part of the history of the building; but the front one certainly distorts the original elegant facade.

After nearly 70 years the Army got a major jolt at the end of 1972, when the new Whitlam Government ended conscription and also Australia's involvement in Vietnam; it would be hard to see what use they could then make of the aging Old Court House.

By one of those chances of history, however, this now supernumary building found yet another new user in no time. The Naval Reserve Cadets in 1974 needed somewhere to go when their shed on Belmore Basin was demolished. No one else seemed to want the old building - there was very little recognition of the value of heritage buildings at that time, and I suppose conservationists in Wollongong were busy fighting battles to preserve the natural environment, so in came the Cadets, and here they still are 18 years later.

7. NAVAL RESERVE CADETS

The Naval Reserve Cadets are not part of the Navy, although it gives them some assistance, mostly in the form of uniforms, equipment, and care of buildings, and has an obviously strong feeling of moral responsibility to help and protect them. So for nearly two decades the building has been used, chiefly for Saturday parades, by a small group of teenagers (their number has varied from 20 to 60 over the years, and is currently 39) with limited resources, and the building shows it. The Navy is doing some work at present, although it remains to be seen whether it will fix the rising damp problem.

One good thing we can say about its use by the Cadets is that at least it ensured that no-one thought of demolishing the building during the destructive 1970s and using the site for residential purposes, as had in earlier years been the fate of the adjacent police station, gaol and Brighton Hotel sites.

Nevertheless, public attitudes on heritage matters have changed since 1974 and there can be no doubt that this important building should now be in proper public hands, should be restored, and should be available for the benefit of the public.
of Wollongong.

The Conservation Plan for T.S. Albatross, as the Navy calls the building, carried out in 1987 by Michael E. and C. Megan Jones Pty.Ltd. states -

"The occupancy by T.S. Albatross is an inappropriate use of this group of significant public buildings and does little to enhance the general public's appreciation of them."

"The buildings are unoccupied a minimum of five days each week, yet other community groups cannot use them, except for "ad hoc" meetings, because of the Navy paraphernalia."

"The general public - residents of the City of Wollongong and visitors - have no access to the site and therefore no opportunity to appreciate its significance."

8. THE FUTURE

There can be no disagreement, then, that the Old Court House is a most significant part of the heritage of Wollongong. It is the only surviving government building from the days when Wollongong was centred on the harbour, and is important architecturally in its own right. From what I have said, I hope it is clear that this also encapsulates Wollongong's history through the years, and can developed so as to interpret that history very clearly. It is not looked after properly; and the Wollongong community is denied access to it, apart from the monthly committee meetings of the National Trust. Indeed, you have only two chances to see the inside of the building - there is an Open Day on Saturday, 8th August; or you can join the committee of the regional branch of the National Trust.

For five years now, several groups have been working on the problem of how to get the building restored, and how to develop it into something of value for our community. It may be a dream, but it definitely is not an impossible dream, although it sometimes feels rather like a nightmare.

The massive obstacle is of course that the building is occupied, and occupied by a small group that are under the patronage of the RAN. Whatever anyone might think about the Navy, its role and its special skill is defence, and we are talking about the Navy's defence of a position that one of its proteges has been in occupation of for 18 years. This is a formidable obstacle, and we have to recognise that step one is to find a new home for the Cadets. We also have to accept that the Cadets are a small group with limited resources, with neither the energy or the impetus to find new quarters for themselves. If you like, I will come back later to what we have tried to find that is acceptable to them, but this is a continuing saga that has involved Lake Illawarra, the Lake Authority, Port Kembla, the Maritime Services Board, all our local politicians, local, State and Federal, and many others. But first I will explain what should happen to the Old Court House when the Cadets are provided for elsewhere.

9. THE PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

There are two elements to the plan - restoration of the building, and its development as a Heritage Centre for Wollongong.

9. (a) RESTORATION

The necessary work has been clearly identified in the Jones and Jones Con-
servation Study of 1987. The building is basically sound, and the works can be done gradually over a period of time, if the urgent needs are attended to first. At the risk of sounding over-optimistic, I do not believe that restoration will be a problem; between the local interest groups there are already some funds and a lot of access to help in kind. Further, the building was the first building in Wollongong to be entered on the National Estate Register (in August 1987) and is so significant that it must be high on any priority list for Federal, State or Local Government funds, whenever these become available. And funds will become available. The Commonwealth Government’s One Nation Package allocated $6.8 million for heritage buildings for NSW a few months ago, and there will be more. Further, the grand plan for the building is one which will justify expenditure even on commercial grounds.

9. (b) THE PLAN FOR A HERITAGE CENTRE

The plan for the Old Court House to become a Heritage Centre for Wollongong was developed through 1987, and has been steadily refined since, by a group that includes the regional branch of the National Trust; the South Coast Conservation Society; the Illawarra Environment Centre; the National Parks Association and others.

The Proposal is that -

* the main court room will become a meeting room for the users of the building and others (I would hope that the Illawarra Historical Society might in due course want to join us).

* conservation and heritage groups may rent one of the four lock-up rooms as secure offices for their own needs.

* the front room will be a general information centre on heritage and environment matters, and also with tourist information (since the building is the centre of Wollongong’s heritage tourism area). This will be kept open all weekend (unlike the present tourist office) and we hope every day as well with volunteers from the various bodies that participate in the Heritage Centre.

* there will be a permanent display in the Meeting Room of the history of Wollongong, as seen through the history of the building itself. This should be supplemented by changing displays of high quality from time to time.

* Wollongong City Council and others will be encourage to use it for such events as the annual Architectural Awards.

* the heritage and environment bodies that use the Centre will use its finance-raising potential to the full - shop sales, afternoon teas for tourists, car boot sales in the car park, membership drives, walking tours round the historic parts of the city, etc. etc. This will provide the funds for maintenance of the building.

10. CONCLUSION

All this may seem unrealistic to some of you. After all, the Navy has control and the Cadets are too small and poverty-stricken to want to take the risks of moving; nothing can be done until they go, and they won’t go. I must admit that at times I would agree with that view. Then, however, I remind myself that this
is an important heritage matter and we must press on with it.

We have a lot of strengths. We probably have 2,000 members in all our groups. We have lobbied widely - within the last three months every local MP has given personal attention to the issues; we have active help from the Lord Mayor and his staff; we have had some media attention; we have got our messages up to the highest levels of the Navy and had a positive hearing from them. Above all, what we want to do is sensible, financially practicable, and, I believe, inevitable.

In your August Bulletin your ex-President, Winifred Mitchell says of heritage battles “Success has only been assured when there has been widespread debate and lobbying by individuals and organisations in the community”. We are promoting widespread debate, and we are lobbying vigorously; and we are also looking energetically for alternative sites for the 39 cadets. If we keep at it we must succeed.

(transcript of an Address to the August Meeting of the Society)

North and South Elevations of Court House, as built in 1858

Architectural Drawings from the Conservation Study commissioned by the Department of Administrative Services, 1987: