

Armidale and District Historical Society Inc.

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Newsletter for June 2020

The Society is unable to re-commence regular meetings as the 1.5 metre/4square metre separation ruling cannot be met for a gathering at Dumaresq Chambers. However, from **Tuesday 9 June**, volunteers will open the centre between **9am and 4pm Monday to Friday** to welcome and assist members and visitors. A sign-in book, hand sanitiser and alcohol spray will be provided and visitors are requested to maintain the all-important social isolation.

Heartfelt Congratulations to Doug Hewitt OAM: Recognition of our past Mayor and a worthy citizen with unbounding energy and determination, who gets things done. Congratulations!

'Let there be Light': Collane Simmons and Nancy Bruyn have set up a new display which conjures up memories of lamps and lanterns. To complement these exhibits, Sue Tanner has mounted a photographic exhibition in the meeting room depicting the history of light and power in Armidale. **Please feel free to visit and tell others.**

A Word from the Treasurer John Burrell: A big thank you to all those members who have already paid their 2020/21 subs. We live in difficult times without regular meetings. The end of the financial year is approaching and, to assist members, John will be at our rooms in Faulkner Street on **Tuesday 23 and Thursday 25 from 10am to 12.30pm** when payment can be made by cash or cheque. Remittance can also be posted or paid by direct debit to the Greater Bank (Armidale and District Historical Society Inc. BSB 932000, A/c 635782).

Closure of the Armidale Express Office: With expiration of the lease of the Faulkner Street building, the *Express* office has vacated the premises. As a result the Society has become custodian of an almost complete set of *Express* newspapers from the 1960s to 2011. Digitised versions of the *Express* on Trove are currently only to 1954. Alan Wilkinson has installed shelving allowing easy access to these later papers.

Maps: We are exceedingly grateful to Professor John Ryan and his family for the donation of a map cabinet containing an extensive collection of maps, together with a collection of books including a number associated with Folk Lore. Brian and Alan Hardaker are accessioning the maps which is quite a daunting task.

June Committee Meeting: Eight of our ten members met in Central Park Band Rotunda on the coldest day so far this year and discussed progress with Journal 63, publication of a Heritage Walk booklet, the success and benefit of the ADHS Facebook page, the excursion in November and the large number of requests for information over the lockdown time.

A Trip Down Memory Lane: June meetings each decade.

1960: Mrs L. Daley – When the Squatters looked to the East (account of early squatting movement from New England to the North Coast).

1970: L/Col R. Davis – The 12th New England Light Horse and the 12/16th Hunter River Lancers.

1990: J. Ferry - A City in the Building: the Growth and Construction of Armidale 1849-1885.

2000: Dr W. Newman – Reflections on the History of Tamworth.

2010: P. Coventry – Life in and around Armidale and at ‘Lyndhurst’.

Snippets of History: By 1887 the northern side of Beardy Street between Faulkner and Dangar streets was filled with shops, but a fire on the night of 14/15th March changed this streetscape. At 7.30pm a small bedroom fire involving bed curtains, calico ceiling and some shingles was extinguished at the shop/dwelling of **Mr Dusautoy**, fruiterer and wine merchant two doors west of the Courthouse. But around 2.30am, ringing of the Town Hall clock bell alerted sleepers of a major blaze at Dusautoy’s premises. Behind most of the buildings were a ‘number of small outhouses, brushwood, cases and other inflammable articles’ and it was here that the body of the flame was fed as it came onward from Dusautoy’s premises with the help of an easterly breeze. To the east of Dusautoy’s the flames were shooting up the high walls of **Mrs King’s establishment** (now Robinson House) and to the west **William Drew’s saddlery** was engulfed and then **Mr Taylor’s tobacco and fancy goods shop**. Beside Taylor’s were an empty house recently occupied by Mrs King and an empty shop formerly **Kessler’s hardware**. Then followed **Mrs Clarke’s millinery and dressmaking establishment**, ‘a large and high brick building which in great measure broke the force of the fire’. Next to Mrs Clarke was **Mr Poole the tailor**, **Mrs Rose’s millinery and dressmaking business**, **Mr Trim’s saddlery**, Alderman **Love’s large two storey bakery**, the **auctioneers Gawthrop and Bradley** and the office of the **Armidale Express**. On the Dangar St corner was the substantial **Commercial Bank** (NAB). Some premises were destroyed, pumps at wells at W. Trim’s and the Telegraph Office (Post Office), Love’s Bakery and the Lands Office were ‘vigorously employed’, axes were used to smash windows, gain entry, destroy burning structures. The intense heat blistered the doors of the hotel on the opposite side of the road (Tatts). Volunteers threw valuables from Mrs Clarke’s balcony into the street below but saved her piano by lowering it with ropes. Articles salvaged from burning premises were placed on the Southern side of the street, but among the 2000 present in the crowd, looting took place to add insult to injury. Some injuries were sustained from firefighters falling or falling debris and Mr Dusautoy who suffered from a heart condition required assistance. **Miss Evelyn King** risked her life to run into the burning building to bring out a servant girl asleep in the burning kitchen bedroom. **Mayor Holmes** and several Aldermen were ‘strenuously endeavouring to secure the safety of the town’. By 5am the fire was under control. A number of buildings were not insured, some shopkeepers had not insured their stock and losses were considerable. The Society has a large photograph of ‘the morning after’ showing the buckled iron, debris and damage of the buildings on the east end of the street. One positive outcome of the disaster was to petition for an organised, trained Fire Brigade. However after many meetings, discussions and subsequent fires, applications for an Armidale Volunteer Fire Brigade were not called until March 1891 and the first public demonstration with the Armidale Brigade using firefighting equipment with the new horse-drawn fire engine “Jersey” was in September 1891.

This June newsletter 'talk' submitted by Jim Belshaw complements the exhibition and photographic display at Dumaresq Chambers. Apparently meeting dates were organised to coincide with the full moon to make for easier walking to and from the School of Arts, hotel or Town Hall which were often the meeting sites.

The bright lights of the city

Today we are used to bright lights. Indeed, our world is saturated with light to the point that we now talk about light pollution. We forget how recent all this is.

For much of human history, light has been provided by the moon, by fires and later by a variety of lamps. As late as the early 1880s the night lights of Armidale consisted of fifteen or sixteen kerosene street lights intended to help travelers between the railway station and town, lamps at the entrance to inns and the dull glow of fires and candles within houses.

The first use of gas for lighting came in Sydney in 1841 when 23 street lamps were lit. From there, the use of gas spread to illuminate buildings and to other centres where coal was available. The light was seen as soft and pleasing, although the gas flame itself "was almost too dazzling to look upon".ⁱ

The good citizens of Armidale did not wish to be left behindⁱⁱ. Now that the Great Northern Railway had reached Armidale, the small city had economic access to Hunter Valley coal.

On 12 May 1883, a group of local notables petitioned the Mayor (John Moore) to convene a public meeting to consider the advisability of forming a gas company. The subsequent meeting held in the Town Hall was well attended, with the initial fifty attendees growing to 100 over the course of the evening.

Those supporting the concept had clearly done some homework, for H S Meyer presented a proposal on behalf of David Storer & Sons to construct a gas works to cost at least £7,000 to £8,000. A committee was formed to consider various proposals and expert advice.

By July 1885 Mayor John Moore was feeling sufficiently confident or perhaps just impatient to convene another meeting to consider the creation of a share list for the new gas company. There was some hesitation, but finally sufficient support was gained to allow the project to proceed.

The new works were opened on Friday 23 October 1885. Manager Samuel Rutter charged the five miles or so of public mains with gas and then with a team of plumbers and gasfitters he visited the various premises to check that there were ready to light up.

By 7 o'clock the following day Armidale's central area was thronged, the city band was playing at the gasworks, as the lights came on. The darkness vanished in a display of light never seen before.

Armidale took to gas with gusto as lighting was installed in shops, churches and halls. Never again would a visiting drama company complain of the gloom.

ⁱ Sydney Herald report cited in Geoffrey Blainey, *Black Kettle and Fu, as the lights came on. 1 Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Viking, 2003, p53. Chapter two, 'The Dimming of Candlelight', pp45-64, provides a nice history of light in Australia.

ⁱⁱ The story on the creation of the Armidale gasworks is drawn from Lionel Gilbert, *An Armidale Album*, New England Regional Art Museum Association, Armidale 1982, pp-124-126