

a history of the maitland regional art gallery building

by Eric Martin and Associates
10/68 Jardine Street KINGSTON ACT 2604
Ph: 02 6260 6395 Fax: 02 6260 6413 email: emaa@emaa.com.au

Steeped in history, the Federation Gothic building housing Maitland Regional Gallery is an awe-inspiring example of early 1900s architecture. Officially opened in 1910, the building was constructed to house the Maitland Technical College, which it continued to do until 1987.

Technical education experienced many changes during this life of the building. Only two years later the building behind the Gallery was added to provide more class space. If you look closely at the brickwork of the two buildings, it is clear that they were to be eventually joined by a walkway.

Of course, the history of buildings within central Maitland is not complete unless mention is made of the 1955 Maitland flood. The Maitland Technical College was closed for three weeks following the disaster.

The flood destroyed most of the College records and ruined the relatively new addition, the Technological Museum. Twenty-two showcases were smashed and at least half of the exhibits were destroyed. The Museum was abandoned and most of the remaining exhibits were sent to be included in the Sydney Museum of Applied Arts and Science.

The main building at the front of the site which now houses the Gallery is not only vitally important because of its role in technical education. Architecturally, it is one of the most significant buildings in Maitland and, in fact, it has features which are of great importance statewide.

Designed by the then government architect, Colonel W L Vernon, the building has a structural system which is one of the earliest of its type in New South Wales. The upper floor comprises steel beams and a suspended reinforced concrete slab.

This system was used in other buildings of the same period, however Maitland Technical College was one of the first and finest. The detail on the underside of the flooring in this building is much more refined and integrates very well with the ceiling of the ground floor.

Another remarkable feature of Maitland Regional Gallery is the cantilevered marble staircase. The white marble treads of the stairs with grey marble supports are distinguished even further by a rare rose coloured Newell post.

Lighting the staircase is an enormous art nouveau, stained glass skylight. Look up and enjoy!

The façade of Maitland Regional Gallery is impressive, some say imposing. Built from red brick with Ravensfield sandstone details and a steep slate roof, the external, visual impact prepares the visitor for the inspirational interior.

Five trachyte steps lead visitors into the Gallery's foyer where Tasmanian Blackwood joinery and a parquetry Red Beam floor with a border of marble impress. Tudor roses are a feature of the foyer's joinery as are the Tudor arches over the doorways and reception area.

Once inside the main gallery, Tudor gives way to Gothic. Three massive, late Gothic arches divide the exhibition space. The resounding impact upon walking into the Gallery is one of space and light. With a ceiling height of over five metres, even the two metre wide hallway at the rear of the main gallery is spacious enough to hang additional works.

Constructed with creativity and technical achievement well ahead of its time, the unique features of the building certainly emphasise that architect, Walter

Liberty Vernon remains an important architect in New South Wales' history. Of undeniable heritage significance, Maitland Regional Gallery provides a visual feast. Art and architecture work in tandem and the result is magnificent.

In a display of exceptional judgment and forward planning, Maitland City Council purchased the High Street building in 2002 for \$1.25 million. A huge undertaking, modifying the building into suitable premises for a state of the art gallery, Council ensured the heritage of the building was conserved.

Just over a year and some \$500,000 later, the Council proudly opened the brand new Maitland Regional Art Gallery on 7 November 2003. Maitland Regional Art Gallery now boasts a stunning main gallery with state of the art facilities enabling the Maitland community the enjoyment of touring exhibitions as well as its own very significant collection of contemporary Australian art. Future plans for the grounds of the Gallery include a sensory garden and a café.

Maitland Regional Art Gallery epitomises Maitland City Council's commitment to its community's cultural life.

The Maitland Technical College was designed by Government Architect Walter Liberty Vernon in 1908, constructed by BJ Pearch of Hamilton for £7,393 and opened in 1910. The original design was reduced in scope to meet budgetary constraints. The building was described as one of the Departments most ornate and featured a fine façade to High Street and a cantilevered marble staircase. A two storey detached workshop block of modest design by Vernon was constructed in 1911.

The building initially accommodated a Museum and technical teaching spaces and was referred to as the Maitland Trades School from c1913 – 1935.

The building was used to develop skills of people during the depression but despite growth of technical institutions during the 1930s-1950s the facility did not expand. Following the flood in 1955 the museum objects were relocated to

the Sydney Museum of Applied Arts and Science but the College continued as a technical teaching facility. A new technical college for Maitland opened in 1987 and the College closed and has only had intermittent use since.

Description of the new college building at the time of the opening ceremony as reported in the Maitland Mercury 6 August 1910.

The new college building is of brick with Ravensfield stone dressing and slate roof, the general design being perpendicular Gothic. The High Street façade forms an imposing but quiet and dignified aspect being flanked at each end with gables and massive rectangular piers, while the balance of the design has been well maintained. Between the two gables the front is divided by three half octagonal piers, standing well in relief. The main entry porch is approached from the footway by seven trachyte steps, and is surmounted by a large moulded stone segmental arch, the face above being divided into moulded panels with stone diaper work above. Fourteen stone mullion windows with stone quoins, fitted with metal frames, furnish light to the front rooms on the ground and first floors. The roof is steeply pitched and is of slate. Four dormer windows furnished in muntz metal relieve any monotony in the roof surface.

The seven trachyte steps lead through the entrance porch, into the vestibule, from which access is gained to the stairs hall, through folding doors under a Tudor arch. The fittings of the vestibule are in Tasmanian Blackwood all to detail while the flooring is parquetry of red beam with a border of marble, the whole floor being set in concrete. Swinging doors under a Tudor arch give access from the vestibule to the No 1 museum court, which is separated from No 2 museum court, by three large late Gothic arches, with massive piers moulded and finished in Keen's cement. The openings in each museum court are finished in the same way, and a projecting moulded dado at a height of eight feet runs throughout the two courts, the ceiling of which are plain, but finished with massive cornices. A corridor six feet wide leads from the lane entrance along the rear of the museum courts into the stairs hall, through a Tudor arch. Provision has been made for access from this corridor to the new wing provided for in the second contract. Access is gained to the first floor from the stairs hall

by a handsome staircase of Australian marble, the treads being of white Sicilian marble. The railing is of wrought ornamental ironwork, with polished Blackwood handrail, and a second handrail along the wall. The walls of the stairs hall are in face-brick bedded in black mortar. The floor of the hall is parquetry of red beam timber with marble border, all bedded in concrete. Apart from the handrail, there is no woodwork in the staircase, which is probably the finest of its kind in the State.

The first floor provides accommodation as follows: - A large demonstration room a classroom for chemistry, geology, etc., lecture room, library and corridor. The demonstration room is over the museum and is 22 feet high, with an open roof, carried on three hammer beam trusses. All walls throughout the building are finished in Keen's cement. Fireplaces are also provided liberally for asbestos fires. The resident master's offices open from the stairs hall and are on the left of the vestibule.

Water and gas services are laid on throughout. The ventilation is a main feature of the building, and calls for special attention. The inlet vents are all of galvanised tubing, coming in at various points through large tubes, and having smaller branches. All exhausts from the ground floor, as well as from the first floor, are similarly constructed. The tubing is taken up through the walls and connects into larger shafts in the roof, where they are centralised and discharge through large cowls above the roof. The building has cost about £8,000 and was designed in the office of the government architect Colonel W L Vernon, and was erected by Mr B G Pearse of Hamilton under the able supervision of Mr John Harding, clerk of works.