



# BALLARAT CIVIC HALL

*A HERITAGE BUILDING OF THE ART DECO STYLE*

A HISTORY BY

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# History

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**STYLE OR PERIOD:** Modernist, Stripped Classical Revival with Art Deco touches

**ARCHITECT:** Herbert 'Les' Coburn and Gordon Murphy

## PRINCIPAL ARTISANS/TRADES

- Cream Brick – made by Selkirks Ballarat – 580,000 bricks in all.
- One of the first steel-framed building outside Melbourne.
- The timber came from the Otways – big 12 x 2 foot planks that were sawn on site.
- Joinery and interior fittings by local Ballarat trades.

**DATE(S) OF CONSTRUCTION** November 1953- August 1956

## SUBSEQUENT ALTERATIONS

 Nil

Ballarat's Civic Hall was opened on 20 August 1956, a grand new civic meeting space to replace the deteriorating Alfred Hall, which closed its doors for the last time on the same day.

In 1939 the Ballarat City Council became interested in constructing a new public hall at a cost of between £25,000 and £30,000. In October 1939 a Public Hall Bill was prepared for the Victorian Parliament, to enable the haymarket Crown Land to be changed to a public hall site. There was a heated debate in Council as to whether the Alfred Hall should be renovated at a cost of £3,000. On 8 February 1940 a referendum was held asking Ballarat people 'Are you in favour of the Council erecting a new public hall on the locality of the present Alfred Hall?' The majority voted yes – the Alfred Hall being seen as neglected and too old.

The parliament passed the bill, but the war put the project in abeyance.

The Centenary of Gold Discovery in 1951 re-kindled discussion of the need for a new civic hall, and Councillor Herbert Coburn, (Ballarat architect and Mayor in 1945-6), was especially keen on the project. He submitted a number of concept designs for a civic centre. In fact his first proposal was unveiled in 1935, during the Ballarat Centenary celebrations.

Coburn had been articled to the distinguished Ballarat architect Percy Richards and studied architecture at the School of Mines during World War One. In 1922 he was admitted as a partner in the firm of P.S. Richards, Coburn and Richards, but established his own practice in 1933, concentrating on residential and commercial projects around Ballarat. He was a lecturer in architecture and building construction in the SMB Art School from 1919-1946.

In 1951 Ballarat celebrated the centenary of gold discovery and the concept of a new civic hall as a monument to the gold pioneers became a lively topic of public discussion, The City Council agreed that the Haymarket reserve was the most suitable site, and approached the State Government for permission to build on the site and also approached the Commonwealth Loan Council for permission to borrow the money needed for the project.

One of Coburn's designs, in austere Classical Revival style, was finally chosen for a new civic hall. A Melbourne architect, Gordon Murphy, was commissioned by Council to assist Coburn with the design. In this period architects were influenced by European functionalist and modernist designs emanating from the Bauhaus. The Heidelberg Town Hall of 1937 would seem to have provided some inspiration for Coburn and Murphy.

On 28 October 1974 the young Prince Charles visited the hall during his visit to Ballarat.

But by 2001 there were new demands placed on civic spaces, and Council began looking at the need for a conference centre and associated hotel. So the Civic Hall, like the Alfred Hall before it, was critically assessed.

The last civic event held at the Hall was the Mayoral Ball hosted by Mayor Vendy on 26 November 2002.

Heritage consultants Allom Lovell & Associates completed a heritage assessment of the building (2002), and recommended that the hall had historical and social significance at the local level and hence the central structure be retained and incorporated into a proposed new conference and hotel complex. The initial concept plans by architects Peddle, Thorp Walker (designers of the Art Gallery extension) were exciting, showing their talent for melding old and new into an exciting design. However these plans came to nothing.

Astonishingly, it has been entirely overlooked in the Ballarat Heritage Study (2002), although it falls within the Lydiard St. Heritage Precinct.

In 2005, the Ballarat City Council sought title to the land from the State Government. New tenders were called for development of the site. Of eight projects submitted, only two proposed retention of the hall.

On 2007 Civic Place Group was chosen by Council for its design which retained and adapted the Civic Hall, and surrounded it by new development. In September 2008 the CEO wrote in My Ballarat that retaining the Civic Hall 'reduces the 'carbon footprint' by reusing the resource, and is sympathetic to the cultural heritage of the Civic Hall'.

However the global financial crisis of 2008 led to the financial partner in the project pulling out. On 2009 26 February – Council and CEO met with Civic Place Group and announced it was 'pulling the plug' on the project.

In December 2009 the newly-elected Council under Mayor Judy Verlin announced a review of the Civic Hall site and the need for Council office accommodation, in conjunction with CBD Strategy.

On 9 June 2010 Council received a report on accommodation needs of the Ballarat City Council, and a recommendation to relocate Council officers to the Civic Hall site on the basis of a formal approach to State Government for their commitment to involvement as a co-tenant. Agreed to proceed on the basis of seeking demolition of the Civic Hall.

In July 2010 Ballarat Heritagewatch applied to Heritage Victoria to have the Civic Hall added to the Victorian Heritage Register. Mayor Judy Verlin quoted in Courier 17 July 2010 saying Council will undertake a full consultation process before making a decision

22 September 2010 Council voted to establish a Community Advisory Committee to advise on development of City's use of Civic Hall site for office accommodation. Three options to be considered – retention and adaptation of Civic Hall, partial demolition, and complete demolition and new building.

30 October 2010 – Heritage Council advises its decision that hall was not of state significance.

24 November 2010 – After significant community protests about demolition of the hall, Council considered 3 options – full retention and adaptive re-use, partial retention, and demolition and a new building. Officer's report said demolition was the cheapest option, and council voted for it.

28 December 2010 – Heritage Watch objects to Heritage Council's decision not to list the hall at the state level, and seeks a hearing.

15 April 2011 – Heritage Council Hearing. In May decision handed down that Civic Hall has local heritage significance, and asked the City of Ballarat to look at including the Civic Hall in its planning scheme.

10 August 2011 – Council announces design by Lyons for a new building for Council officers chosen from three short-listed architectural submissions. Cost projected at \$40 million, with \$30 million to be

Tenders for construction were advertised on 19 August 1953, which the architects estimated would cost £133,000. The Ballarat firm of W.B. Trahar constructed the building, for a cost of £140,000.

Work commenced in November 1953. The City Council took responsibility for the foundations of the hall. 88 piers were sunk into the sub-soil, then filled with massed concrete to within a metre of the surface. This foundation was necessary to support the steel superstructure and brick panel walls

On 9 March 1955 the Governor-General Sir William Slim came to Ballarat to lay the foundation stone, and on 25 May 1955 a commemoration stone was set into the pillar on the left side of the main entrance as a matching piece to the foundation stone. A history of the project was sealed into a glass container behind the commemoration stone.

The Civic Hall was an enormous job. At least 245 tons of steel had to be transported from Melbourne, including one great eleven ton girder for the roof. There were no cranes in 1956, so the steel had to be put into place using time-honoured methods – derrick poles, winches and guy ropes.

The huge quantity of bricks were ordered from the local firm Selkirks – all 580,000 of them. With such a big order, Selkirks set up its own freight service, and purchased a fleet of Bedford trucks.

The timber came from the Otways – big 12 x 2 foot planks that were sawn on site.

The concrete was mixed on site by the workers. This was after all before the advent of the mobile concrete mixer. Sand came from Mt. Egerton, white gravel from Allendale, and the cement from Geelong.

The interior woodwork, plastering and furnishings were supplied by local firms, as proudly detailed in the Mayor's Annual Report of 1955-6.

The Civic Hall was built to last, of only the best materials. Mayor Nathaniel Callow, in opening the hall, anticipated that 'the hall will be of immense value to the developments of the cultural and artistic tastes of the community, and also give full and free enjoyment for many other purposes.'

The Civic Hall was officially opened on 20 August 1956, in a ceremony that immediately followed the closing of the old Alfred Hall, which was to be demolished. At the opening 1500 citizens sat down to enjoy the first of many concerts. Another concert followed the next day, with money raised going to the purchase of a Grand Piano and two upright pianos. Three matinee performances were given on the second day for the scholars of no less than 43 Ballarat and district schools.

Soon after, a ball was held to celebrate the centenary of the Ballarat Base Hospital. Events associated with the 1956 Olympic rowing competitions were held at the Hall, and before the end of the year a major conference of the Real Estate Association of Victoria.

From that time the hall became the focus of many important social, cultural and political events, with the main hall able to seat 1500 people, or else to be cleared to reveal a wonderful dance floor. A smaller hall to seat 440 people was incorporated under the main hall.

One aspect of the Civic Hall that cannot be forgotten is the Ballhausen Organ. W.E. Ballhausen died in November 1900, leaving a large bequest of £1200 to the City for the purpose of providing a pipe organ, made in Victoria, for the Town Hall. The bequest also specified that one person (male or female) would receive a scholarship of free tuition from the City Organist for up to five years. After many vicissitudes this was eventually achieved, when an electronic organ made in the USA (Allan Digital Computer Organ System 1105 Model) costing \$40,000 was inaugurated in the Civic Hall on 6 December 1981, following a judgement in 1979 by Justice McGarvie the Supreme Court, to vary the original will made by Ballhausen, so that an American-made electronic organ could be installed in the Civic Hall.

Some of the memorable functions to be held in the Civic Hall include events associated with the Begonia Festival and the South Street Competitions, symphony celebrity concerts, a popular 60/40 Saturday night dance in the 1960s and 1970s, school speech nights, balls and dinners, rock concerts, rowdy election meetings, conferences and exhibitions. From the 1970s the lower hall became a popular bingo venue.

borrowed, and a projected \$10 from sale of assets.

New building to cost \$27 million, with \$8 million for a car park to house 270 cars, and \$5 million for site works.

18 September 2011 – Public meeting called by Ballarat Residents and Ratepayers Association.  
Unanimous condemnation of project.

23 October 2011 – Save Civic Hall rally, following the presentation to Council of a petition signed by over 3000 people.

In December 2011, after a concerted public campaign against Council's proposal, Council voted to abandon the project.

In 2012 a Poll commissioned from Roy Morgan Research by Council showed that 72% of the population favoured retention and re-use of the hall. Council then held a series of public consultations to look at options for adaptive re-use of the site.

November 2012 elections brought a new Council and a new Mayor in John Burt.