



GRONG GRONG NSW



Name: War Memorial Commemoration Hall and School of Arts

Address: Balaro Street, Grong Grong, NSW 2652

The Town:

Grong Grong is a small farming village located about 500 kilometres west of Sydney in the Shire of Narrandera, part of the Riverina region of New South Wales. The village is 82 kilometres north-west of Wagga Wagga and 22 kilometres east of the town of Narrandera at an elevation of 162 metres. Grong Grong is situated just off the Newell Highway which now bypasses the village, the highway having been realigned for safety reasons in 2017. It is a short distance east to the towns of Matong, Ganmain, Coolamon and Marrar along the Canola Way in the neighbouring Coolamon Shire.



Sir Ralph Darling

It was during an expedition approved by the Governor Sir Ralph Darling in 1829 to further explore the rivers of western New South Wales that Charles Napier Sturt came to the region. He *'camped next to a lagoon situated close to where the homestead of Berembled Station'* was later to be established by John Lupton in 1832. *'During his stay [Sturt] surveyed the country to the north. With him though he brought small pox, which had a devastating effect on the local Wiradjuri people killing as many as 60% of their population'*. (1)



Explorer Charles Sturt



The Narrungdera clan of the Wiradjuri people called the region Garrongoorung, meaning ‘bad camping ground’. According to folklore, *‘in the 19th century, the local tribe used to camp on the river until a large albino cod took a child – the tribe didn’t camp there again’*. (2)

The Government opened up Crown Land in the 1830s and selected squatters paid an annual license fee of £10 (pounds) to work the land. Although the abundant native kangaroo grass was a highly nutritious fodder plant, droughts, floods and fires caused many early settlers to abandon their land.

In 1861, the Government passed the Crown Lands Occupation Act allowing the ‘selection’ of between 40 and 320 acres of crown land in the Narrandera* region for one pound per acre. Twenty years later in 1881, with the extension of the New South Wales railway line south-west from Sydney to Hay and the Victorian rail service north to Wodonga, many more people were attracted to the Narrandera region. They took up selection blocks, prospected for gold and established businesses to fill the needs of a growing community.

The aboriginal name Garrongoorung was anglicised to Grong Grong and in 1881, when the settlement store originally situated near the Murrumbidgee River moved closer to the rail line, the town of Grong Grong was established.

The town grew steadily and by the 1920s Grong Grong had 680 residents and boasted *‘two pubs, a post office, bakeries, a butter factory, sale yards, slaughter yards, butchers, four black smith shops, one store and two shops, a school, police station, two stock and station agents, a bank, stables, sports club, train station, a couple of dance halls...’* (3) and more. It wasn’t until the 1940s that *‘the Northern Riverina County Council put water through the area and in 1948 electricity was made available.’* (4)

Historically, the main industries in the region were agricultural – grazing, cropping, forestry and fishing. There was also some mining in the area - gold was discovered to the north of the town in 1894. (5) Renewed interest over recent years in exploring the Grong Grong tenement for gold deposits was reported in 2017 as this location *‘adjoins the existing Barellan gold tenement for a combined area of 702 square kilometres’*. (6)

Although the adjoining Coolamon Shire is one of the richest agricultural and pastoral districts in the Riverina, since the rural recession of the 1980s and perhaps because of the subsequent deregulation of crop prices, population numbers in Grong Grong have been falling. The Pig Improvement Company (PIC) is a specialist pig-breeding unit set up by Dalgety Australia in the 1980s on a property 4 kilometres south of the township and it provides some support to Grong Grong. Nevertheless, the infrastructure of the town continues to be challenged with the loss of the primary school, police station, bank and businesses.

* Note that the spelling of the name Narrandera changed about 1949. In this account the current spelling is used throughout, except for the title in such as the *Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser (1893-1953)*; or where a quotation from an existing text uses the former spelling.



Figures in the 2016 Census show 250 residents listed in the Grong Grong area and the road sign as you drive into the town claims a population of 150 living in town. The median age for the area is 46 and with a growing number of young families returning to combine the joys of a rural lifestyle with work made possible by the inter-net, local residents are quietly optimistic about the future of the town. The Grong Grong Progress Association describes the town with its *'community spirit and proximity to major centres'* as a *'perfect place to raise a family or to enjoy retirement'*. The imaginative Grong Grong Earth Park built on disused land along the rail corridor with gardens, playscapes, picnic grounds, and interactive displays about the district is a testament to the community spirit that survives in this tiny town.

Establishment:

As early as 1907, *"an attempt was made by the people of Grong Grong district to bring into being a Mechanics' Institute, or School of Arts, and a sum of £20 was raised and placed in a trust"* for that purpose. (7)

No further progress seems to have been reported until Saturday, 2 July, 1921 when, in response to a circular signed by Messrs Harris, Shoemark, Kennedy, Miller, Garnsey, Kelly, Walker and Guest, a large gathering assembled at the Public School and a meeting was convened *'for the purpose of raising funds to erect a Schools of Arts and Public Hall in Grong Grong'*.

Mr. G. Miller occupied the chair and there were present Messrs W. Bicket, P. Harris, G. Rosewarne, V. Gawne, H. Shoemark, F.P. Kelly, H. Garnsey, J. McQualter, W. Shannon, J. Kennedy Jnr, G. Mitchell, E. Ashwin, B. McLennan, G. McNeill, Mesdames Harris, Garnsey, Bicket, Gawne, McQualter and Misses A. Gawne and S. Roberts. An apology was received for the absence of Mr W. Guest. After discussion, it was resolved that all present, including Mr Guest, be formed into a committee, with power to devise ways and means of raising funds.

The movement to obtain a School of Arts and Public Hall in Grong Grong comes at an opportune time. There is no doubt that the town has felt the need of this most useful institution for many years but the earlier efforts toward this objective have withered through lack of public interest. The period of the war of course did not permit of a revival in this direction but now the public is at last aroused to a sense of its obligation it is hoped that the movement will receive an impetus from the town and district, which will see the institution an accomplished fact with the next twelve months'. (8)

The town moved quickly and at a meeting held the next month, chaired by Mr Guest, *'several ladies and gentlemen not present at the previous meeting were added to the committee'*. It was decided that *'the allotment of land originally granted as a site for the School of Arts was unsuitable for that purpose and arrangements were made for securing a block more centrally situated.'* Fund-raising was discussed and along with a carnival to be held during the first week



of October, a '*subscription list was opened up and over £40 was subscribed*'. Mr F. Gawne offered a '*£25 donation towards the funds, provided that nine others [were] prepared to offer a similar amount*'. (9)

As well as a general subscription list, a bazaar and queen competition were planned to raise the main part of the building funds – an amount of £2,000 was anticipated for completion of the building.

On 12 August, 1921, the *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW) also reported the meeting and listed Mr. W. Guest as President with Mr J. Kennedy Jnr and Mr H. Shoemaker as Joint Secretaries and Mr. Garnsey as Treasurer.

As President of the School of Arts Committee, Mr W. Guest travelled to Sydney in November 1921 '*to interview the Minister for Education with reference to a subsidy for the proposed School of Arts*' but no government funding seems to have resulted from his efforts.

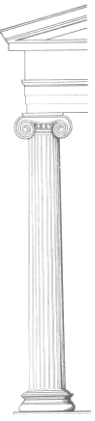
The need for a Public Hall in Grong Grong was felt even more because the Commercial Hotel had caught fire and was '*closed through lack of lighting and other various reasons, and so public functions [were] at a standstill. It [was] hoped that after the harvest the School of Arts proposal [would] receive a fresh impetus and the building [would] only be a matter of months.*' (10)

Despite this enthusiastic prediction and although tenders had been called with a closing date of 28 January, the *Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser* on 8 February 1923 reported that '*no tenders had been received*'.

The local press regularly reported on the progress of the proposed Commemoration Hall and School of Arts and by August 1923, a plan for the building was submitted by Mr Guest and accepted by the Committee subject to modifications.

Plans were ambitious. '*The building will have an attractive appearance with overhanging gable roof supported by massive round pillars. A spacious entrance porch will give access on the right to the library and reading room, and on the left to the committee room and reading room. A vestibule with cloakrooms on either side will lead to the main hall, which will be 60 feet by 40 feet and provide twice as much floor space as the present hall. A cinema operating room is to be constructed above the vestibule. The large stage, 40 feet long and 20 feet wide has been specially designed to serve as a supper room, for all the stage fittings shall be moveable. The kitchen will adjoin the supper room and electric light is to be installed throughout.*' The amended plan was to be submitted to the architect to '*take out the quantities and prepare an estimate of the cost*'. (11)

The article went on to report that the Committee '*was empowered to draw up a suitable and attractive programme*' in aid of the building fund for the new hall. Included were '*flag races, bending races, musical chairs for motorcars, etc., as well as the usual flat races*'. However, '*the absorbing topic of the day*' was the forthcoming bazaar that had '*various stallholders ...displaying an abundance of enthusiasm and energy and a keen spirit of friendly rivalry*'.



The next week, the Wagga Wagga *Daily Advertiser* also reported on the proposed building plans adding that a Market Day run by Miss Kennedy and Mesdames Butler, Mitchell and McQualter had raised £23 and commented that, *'if hearty cooperation and earnestness are any criterion'*, a substantial sum should be raised at other planned fundraising activities. The reporter's confidence was well founded as evidenced when the *Daily Advertiser* reported on 9 October 1923 that an amount of £831/10/9 was raised at a Bazaar on behalf of the Soldiers' Commemorative Hall and School of Arts and that with donations, a grand total of £1300 had been raised. *'It is a splendid result for the little town and shows the fine spirit of the people'*.

An article in the *Narandera Argus* on 5 October 1923 covered the Bazaar more fully reporting that Mr G. G. Miller, secretary, had *'expressed his pleasure at the result, and said that for a town of the size and population of Grong Grong, he was sure the effort had never been equalled in New South Wales or Australia'*. He referred to a recent windstorm that had caused great destruction making it more imperative than ever that the township should have a new hall. *'Five copies of the plans are being prepared gratis by Mr Smart, of Sydney, himself a returned soldier and architect of the Hay Memorial High School'* who was giving his services in the interest of the soldiers of the district.

(Although the writer hasn't been able to verify it as fact, this could be Charles Smart (1882-1950) who was with Bates Smart, architects, from 1907-1950.)

Listed also in the report was an amazing array of *'articles disposed of in connection with the bazaar'* including a gramophone, afternoon tea set, case of pipes, biscuit barrel, horse, bridle, box of cigars, eiderdown, pickle cruet, travelling rug, bag of potatoes and a tin of kerosene.

Tenders were called in December 1923 and advertised in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as well as the regional newspapers for the *'Erection of a school of arts and hall at Grong Grong. Brick or reinforced concrete. Plans at the Shire Hall, Narandera, Literary Institute, Wagga, and Country Promotion League, Imperial Arcade, Sydney.'*

Tender advertisement in the
*Narandera Argus and Riverina
Advertiser* ►►

Friday 21 December 1923 p.2

Building Contractors

TENDERS are invited and will be received by the undersigned up to 28th JANUARY, 1924, for the ERECTION OF A SCHOOL OF ARTS AND HALL at GRONG GRONG; walls brick, or an alternative tender reinforced concrete (conformity with plans etc.). Two tenders may be submitted, viz., one for the whole structure, and one for the main hall and rear appointments shown on plan. Plans and specifications may be seen at Shire Office, Narandera, Literary Institute, Wagga, Country Promotion League, Sydney, or the undersigned. Lowest or any tender not necessarily accepted.

J. KENNEDY, JUN.,
Hon. Sec. Commemoration Hall.



On 1 April the following year, the *Narrandera Argus* reported plans for the new hall had been approved and Mr J.H. Robertson of Narrandera was entrusted with the work of drawing up the amended plans and providing specifications.

John Hill Robertson was born in Sydney in 1870 and died in Narrandera in 1955. He was a member of an illustrious family of architects. His father, Albert Louis Robertson, practiced in Sydney and his older brother, Louis Spier Robertson, later established his own firm there. John Hill Robertson came to Narrandera in 1909 as Government Architect, driving in his horse and buggy to the towns of the Riverina and sleeping in a tent, which he used as his office by day. By this means he surveyed for the Government the farms which were allotted to the veterans of World War 1. He later embarked on private practice and for many years he was the only architect covering a large area of the Riverina. As a result, many of the important buildings in the area are designed by J.H. Robertson. (12)

Although there had been some scaling down of the Committee's original plans, the School of Arts section was still to consist of a library and a reading room (each 18 feet by 14 feet) but would not include provision of a billiards room as at first intended. The main hall would be 52 feet by 32 feet and the stage 22 feet deep to serve as a supper room when required. Dressing rooms on either side of the stage would be provided and the kitchen would adjoin the stage. Provision was also to be made for a cinema operating room.

Laying of the Foundation Stone:

At a general meeting held on 11 June 1924, the Committee considered two propositions for the laying of the foundation stone, *'one being that it be laid by the Queen of Grong Grong, (Miss Woolard) and the other, that a prominent member of the returned militia be invited to perform the function. After considerable discussion, the latter proposal was adopted and it was agreed to ask Major General Cox to officiate'*. It was further decided that a circular letter of invitation be forwarded to *'all residents of the district and prominent Narandera citizens, and also to old time residents of Grong Grong'* and *'it was fervently expected that all who have the interest of the returned soldiers, the memory of deceased soldiers, and the welfare of the town and district at heart, will be present at this epoch making ceremony'*. (13)

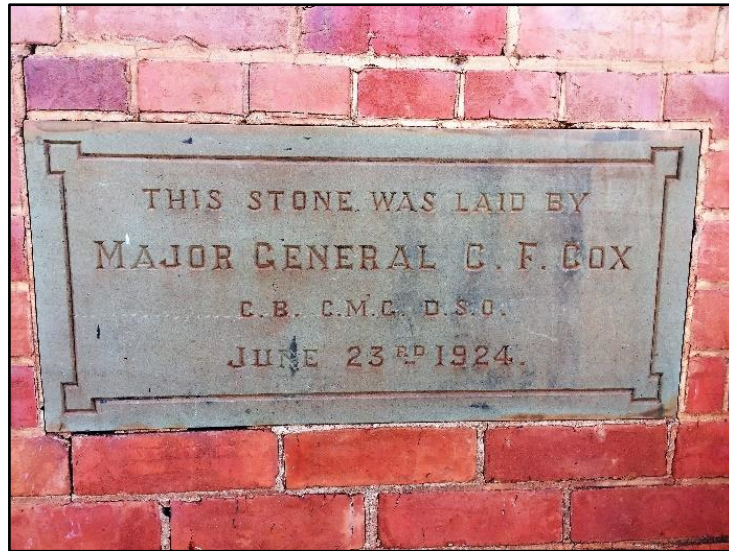
The Major General duly consented to be present to perform the ceremony on 23 June 1924, the Prince of Wales' birthday.

Attended by a couple of hundred residents and visitors, the Foundation Stone Ceremony held on the appointed date was reported as a *'red letter day'* in the history of Grong Grong. Fulsome in its praise, the paper said that *'the laying of the foundation stone of the School of Arts and Commemorative Hall at Grong Grong ... will stand for all time as tangible evidence of Grong Grong's appreciation of the great services rendered to their country by the soldiers who enlisted from the town and district.'* (14)

All did not run smoothly at the ceremony. Highly decorated and known *'as a spirited leader'*, Cox had earned the affectionate nickname of *'Fighting Charlie'*. Nevertheless Cox was not without his critics, *'some of whom disliked what they saw as vanity and a seeking after popularity'*. (15) And despite his being *'the most popular Senate candidate in New South Wales at the last Federal elections'* (15) perhaps some returned soldiers at the gathering shared



this opinion of Cox because it was reported that the *'ceremony [was] marred by the action of a small section of diggers who had been averse to the General performing the ceremony. They presented him with a petition, 'apparently requesting him to desist.'* The Major General read the petition but ignored it, rallied, and placed the stone in position, declaring it *'well and truly laid'*. (16)



The inscription reads

This stone was laid by Major General C. F. Cox CB CMG DSO June 23rd 1924

The stone was prepared by Mr F. Lindley, monumental mason, of Narrandera, who generously donated it to the Hall Committee. (17)

Major General Charles Frederick Cox CB, CMG, DSO, VD had seen action in the Boer War, and in World War 1 in the Dardanelles where he served with the (dismounted) Light Horse Brigades. He was wounded and sent back to hospital just days after arriving at Gallipoli in 1915 but returned later to continue service in the campaign until the evacuation of the peninsula. He served later with the Anzac Mounted Division in Egypt, the Sinai, Palestine, and Syria, including action at the battles of Magdhaba and Beersheba. Returning to Australia after the end of the war, he served with the Australian Military Forces commanding the 4th Light Horse Brigade in 1920, and the 1st Calvary Division in 1921-23. He was elected to the Upper House of the Australian Parliament in 1919 and served as a Nationalist Senator until 1938. (18)



C.F. Cox (1863-1944)

Fundraising continued throughout the year with, amongst other activities, a garden fete held in the local school ground during October 1924 featuring *'picking a wife per medium'*, *'blowing bubbles in the good old country style'*, and *'a cooking competition'*. Funds raised at stalls run by Mesdames Bicket, Kelly, Kennedy, Bellman, Harris, Butler, McQualter and others were donated to the School of Arts furnishing fund and *'any persons wishing to make donations of chairs'* were asked to do so *'in good time before the order is given for the furniture'*. (19)



The Building:



The building opened in 1924. Entrance doors lead in to the vestibule opening on either side to a Library and Reading Rooms. A spacious Hall and Stage extend beyond the doors of the vestibule.

Within a year of tenders being called the building, which could be described as Inter-War Free Classical in style, was completed and although Mr Smart of Sydney was earlier credited with drawing up the original design, a report of the Official Opening in the *Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser* named Mr J.H. Robertson of Narrandera as the architect and Messrs Hayes and Dixon as the contractors.

The official opening held on Wednesday 19 November 1924 was reported the following Friday in the *Narandera Argus* as a brilliant function. *'No less than 400 sat down to a sumptuous banquet catered for by the ladies. It was a unique gathering, representative of all parts of the district, and everyone present was filled with enthusiasm and pride at the beautiful and substantial building...'* So many attended that there *'was not enough room in the hall to seat the whole company at one sitting'* and arrangements had been made to *'hold a dinner for one class and a dance for the younger people'*. The hall was *'beautifully decorated with greens and streamers and lighted with Aladdin lights'* and the *'Arcadia Orchestra (Narandera) supplied the music'*.



The Hall

◀ The stage



◀ Detail of pressed tin work in the surround of the proscenium arch

Mr George Henry McNeill occupied the chair, declared the building open and proposed the toast to the King. He asked Messrs Carr and Atkinson to unveil the memorial tablets in the porch on either side of the entrance to the Hall. The tablets, which had been donated by Mr F. Lindley of Narrandera, were of marble and engraved in gold with the names of 51 residents of the Grong Grong district who had served in the Great War. Eight of those named had *'not been spared to return'* and in honouring them, Mr Hankinson (Narrandera) went on to give a long speech about the achievements of the A.I.F. and *'was pleased to see that the deeds of those who enlisted from Grong Grong were to be kept green by the erection of the Commemoration Hall and School of Arts.'*

Many more toasts were proposed – to the Returned Soldiers, to the Visitors from Narrandera, Coolamon, Matong, Ganmain and other centres, to several old boys who had spent their schools days in Grong Grong, to the British Empire to the accompaniment of Rule Britannia, to the district, to the ladies responsible for the excellent dinner, and finally to the Press.



The Memorial tablets were placed each side of the entrance vestibule in the Hall



The formalities ended with Mr J. Kennedy (Hon. Secretary) reading the balance sheet. Constructed of brick, the building, together with furnishings and lighting, cost approximately £3,000 and at the time of the Opening liabilities were in the vicinity of £1,031.

Social History: 1924 - 1953

To raise more funds to furnish and stock the Library and Reading Room, a concert and dance was held in the Commemoration Hall on Wednesday, 15th April, 1925. The importance of a School of Arts to the township of Grong Grong was passionately put in an article in the *Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser* of 24 April 1925: 'Grong Grong is on the threshold of a new era, for never has the town before possessed a library and a reading room. Many people have long felt the need for both, and are happy to see realization of their desires; but it is the younger generation of boys and girls who are going to derive incalculable benefit from the institution'.



◀ The Library

It is still stocked with books, board games and other equipment used regularly by the local residents.



The Hall lived up to expectations. In a chapter about the Hall in *'Grong Grong. The Spirit of a Small Town'*, the Grong Grong History Committee records the many plays performed in the early 1930s by the Dramatic Society including 'Tilly from Bloomsbury', 'The Ghost Bird', 'Are You A Mason?' and 'The Best People'.

The Country Women's Association (CWA), Diggers, Scottish Society and local churches all held their balls in the hall and in 1932 the Footballers' Plain and Fancy Dress Ball attracted a big crowd. There were flower shows and regular dances, prize-givings and juvenile fancy dress balls. To prepare for functions, the dance floor was rubbed with sawdust, kerosene and candle wax.

Harry Choy, who with his brother Percy owned the local garage, ran picture shows every Saturday night with Laurence (Mo) Evans working the projectors. *'A staircase led up from the committee room up to the projection room where the films were shown onto a screen.'* Because projectors used carbon arc lamps and there was danger of fire with celluloid film, the projection room had metal walls and a tin floor. There were two square holes in the wall for the projector and a rectangular hole *'for the projectionist to view what was happening'*.



▲ Access to the projection room



◀ The Hall showing the holes for film projection at ceiling height.

Close up of the projection holes. ▶

The structure for the projection room rises above the roof level.
(See photo p. 8).



The annual School of Arts ball was an attractive event and was run on different lines each year. Although numbers were down during the Depression years, in 1931 *'attendance was satisfactory in view of the times'*. The Ball took the form of a Black Cat Ball with the *'mysterious appearance of his ghostliness, the Ghost'* and *'the boiling of King Depression in a cauldron, around which a couple of little fairies danced'*. (20)

The institution was still feeling the economic restraints of the times when as President, Mr J. Kennedy outlined the activities of the School of Arts at the Annual General Meeting of 1936. A sports carnival and dance had been an outstanding success and plans were in place for something similar to be held for Eight-hour Day in early October. *'Improvements to the water supply were carried out during the year and also to the picture loft, and talkies are now screened regularly.'*



The Grong Grong Dramatic Society had been '*a great help not only from a pecuniary aspect but also for popularising the hall and the education of younger people.*' (21)

In 1939, the annual ball was held in June, three months before Australia entered World War II. The Hall was decorated in pastel shades of blue, lemon and pink and the Ganmain Revellers' Orchestra provided the music. '*The Jolly Miller proved a most popular number and was repeated more than once. Some of the novelty having worn off the Lambeth Walk, it was not so prominent a feature, but the Palais Glide is apparently going to take more lasting hold on dancers.*' (22) Advertised a week earlier on 12 April and promising patrons 'an enjoyable evening', it appears that the Grong Grong Ball went ahead in 1940. However, at the Annual Meeting on 26 February 1941, it was resolved that the fortnightly dances which were proving exceedingly popular would be held in preference to the ball – '*the ball involving a lot of work for a small return.*' (23)

Not many big functions were held in the Hall during the war years and revenue was derived mainly from picture shows and socials. The local branch of Country Women's Association (CWA) raised money towards a suitable supper room extension to the hall but the work was put on hold. The District News reported that '*many soldiers had been farewelled and some welcomed home and given their certificates. A number are still to be entertained, and preparations are being made to secure a date that will be suitable for the majority.*' (24)

A District News article in the *Narandera Argus* of Friday 20 May 1949 reported that in the twenty five years since its opening, the Commemoration Hall and contents had been well cared for by successive committees of management. The hall was free of debt with '*sufficient surplus to allow the material for some minor repairs to the building and appointments.*'

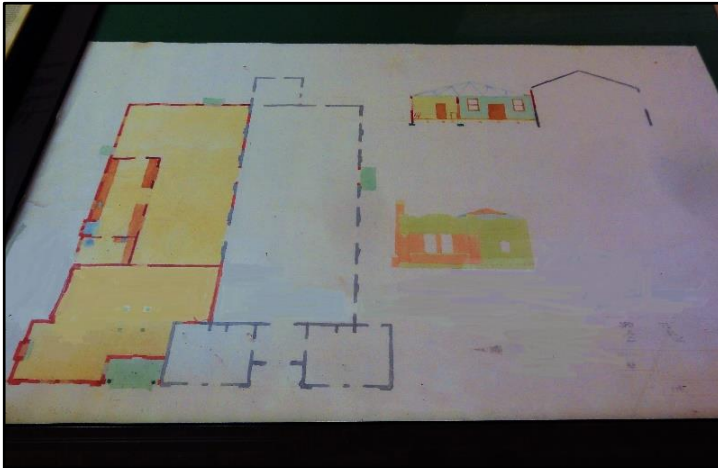
Building Additions - War Memorial Fund:

A well-attended public meeting convened by the Grong Grong War Memorial Committee was held in the School of Arts and Commemoration Hall on Wednesday, 12 August 1953, to consider proposed alterations and additions to the Hall to include a club room for ex-servicemen and a supper-room annex to the Hall. Costs would be covered by a War Memorial Fund and '*when completed, these additions [would] not only fill a long felt want, but make the Grong Grong hall something to be proud of.*' A full report on the history of the hall was presented by Mr K.J. Bicket who also outlined the proposed additions. Mr R.H. Cuthbert reported the legal position and certain technicalities arising that faced the Committee of the War Memorial Fund, stating that the Department of Education and the Chief Secretary would have to give consent. The School of Arts and Commemoration Hall committee, as the only borrowing authority, would become the Advisory Committee for the building work and this request would be presented to that committee at its next meeting. After general discussion and consideration of the lowest tender, received from Mr H.S. Dixon for £6225/10/-, a motion moved by Mr Stapleton and seconded by Mr Guymer read that '*All funds now held by the War Memorial Fund be transferred to the School of Arts and Commemoration Hall Fund when required.*' (25)



Liquid assets of the Grong Grong War Memorial Fund amounted to £3019/2/3 at the time of the meeting and Mr Bicket estimated that an extra £3500 would be needed to complete the hall. This amount would be made available by a loan through the Bank of New South Wales. Mr Snare moved *'that a collection be made throughout the district by the Advisory Committee for cash and interest free debentures to augment present funds'*. (26)

The hall committee obtained the services of architects Louis S. Robertson of Sydney and his brother John Hill Robertson of Narrandera to finalise the plans for the proposed additions.



◀ Outline plans for the additions to the building, including a separate entrance and porch to the extension (in green at left) and extensive supper room and kitchen accommodation.

The original building plan (at right in grey) shows the Hall, with entry porch, vestibule, and library and reading room either side of the entry

Wing Commander William Brill, DSO, DFC & Bar unveiled the foundation stone for the additions on June 23rd 1954.



William Lloyd Brill DSO DFC and Bar, or Billy Brill, as he was known to the locals, was born in nearby Ganmain as the fourth of seven children and farmed his parents' property 'Clearview' until joining the RAAF in 1940. He trained as a pilot at the RAAF base at Narrandera and later in Canada. Posted to the UK as a bomber pilot, Brill had a distinguished war record serving in Nos 460, 463, and 467 Squadrons of the RAAF, flying first Wellington and later Lancaster aircraft in bombing raids over Europe. He remained in the Air Force after the war commanding air bases at Rathmines, Canberra, and Townsville before serving two terms as Director of Personnel Services for the RAAF. He died of a heart attack in October 1964 at the age of 48 during a posting with the Department of Air in Canberra. (27)



W.L. Brill (1916 – 1948)



The Grong Grong History Committee records that after the alterations to the building were made, *‘the hall became a great place of entertainment. Fund raising activities in the form of Pork and Port Nights, Mock Weddings and Prawn and Chicken Variety Nights took place.’*

However, in 1959, with repairs to the hall roof and clubrooms, as well as replastering and repainting needed for some of the rooms, funds were short and the debt for the additions was not being reduced. The Hall Committee proposed a number of innovative activities including an annual Gymkhana that was held on blocks behind the golf course and set up from scratch by volunteers. Local station owners also allowed the Hall Committee to crop some of their land in an effort to clear the debt. *‘All work on this project, together with machinery, fuel, seed, fertilizer, and cartage, was voluntary or donated’*. (28) It was a wonderful community effort and later a new toilet block was added in the 1970s.

Currently (2018):

Over the years, the Hall has been the venue for regular billiard mornings, piano lessons, dramatic and musical society productions, badminton competitions, line dancing, dancing classes, bush dances, old time dances, games nights, picnic races under lights, debutante balls, fundraisers, market days, weddings and wakes. The spacious hall, together with its extensive facilities, including a large supper room and a modern kitchen recently installed with funding from a government grant, provide excellent accommodation for the many functions held there.

As in the 1930s, amateur plays became popular again in the 1980s and 1990s and the Grong Grong - Matong Musical & Dramatic Society staged numerous musical shows including *Guys and Dolls*, *The Continental Quilt*, *The Secret Service Show*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Annie get your Gun*, *South Pacific*, *Oklahoma*, *The Pajama Game*, and *Grease*. Costumes and props still exist and attest to the high standard of the productions.



Each show was commemorated with a bottle of vintage port labelled and dated for the particular musical.

- The Ticket Office – moveable, and used as required.



An Over-50s Club meets fortnightly in the reading room of the School of Arts and the Grong Grong Progress Association and Grong Grong Hall Committee arrange special events and regular outreach meetings for the community.



In 2015, there was the realisation of a project to provide new Honour Rolls to be erected in a position that would be publicly accessible, rather than closed inside the building. Money for this project came from the Centenary of Anzac NSW government funding, together with private donations from local citizens. The new memorials were unveiled on 20 June 2015, the weekend date being closest to that when the foundation stones for both the original building commemorating World War 1 servicemen and the addition for those who fought in World War 2 were unveiled: 23 June 1924 and 23 June 1954.



◀ The Honour Roll for WW I includes a plaque affixed below to commemorate four local servicemen who were awarded the Military Medal (MM).

One name has been added to the WW I memorial, formerly missing from all of the three rolls that had been earlier produced for servicemen from Grong Grong. As well, the Honour Rolls include corrections to the spelling of some names. Ninety names of WW1 diggers are listed, including sixteen noted as killed in action. The prime mover behind the project, Mr Mick Batchelor, arranged for a display of military memorabilia in the School of Arts as part of the commemoration ceremony.



► Inside the Hall, a display of Light Horse, World War I and II memorabilia tells the history of the town's contribution.



The Narrandera Shire Council in a statement of heritage significance lists the War Memorial and Commemoration Hall & School of Arts at Grong Grong as *'the finest building in the town'* because of *'its aesthetic qualities and contribution to streetscape'*. It is the town's heart and the centre of activity, much appreciated by local residents.

The story of the Grong Grong Hall reflects the 'can do' personality of a tiny but vibrant town and the role that the School of Arts movement played in developing community values and unity.

A Footnote:

Although it still raises local eyebrows, no story of Grong Grong would be complete without mention of the town's claim to be the home of the Neenish Tart. In an article headed 'Mystery of the Neenish Tart', the *Narrandera Argus* of 29 October 2016 related the long held belief that this Australian icon originated in the kitchen of one Mrs Ruby Neenish of Grong Grong when she ran out of cocoa and topped her tarts with half each of brown and white icing. Some locals had hoped to erect a 'Big Neenish Tart' as a tourist attraction but the story was debunked when a former resident, Douglas Evans, owned up on ABC radio in July that year to fabricating the story in a letter he had written to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1988. The origin of the Neenish Tart remains a mystery.



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Photos: Marlana Jeffery and Helen Creagh

Archival Photos: Google: Sir Ralph Darling
Charles Sturt;
ADB: Major General CF Cox;
Wing Commander William Brill

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