

## WALLSEND - 1



Photographer unknown

**Name: School of Arts 1870 – 1879**

**Address: 6 Metcalfe Street, Wallsend**

There were three School of Arts buildings in Wallsend this article refers to the first one, 1870 to 1879. The second and third School of Arts are dealt with in a separate article.

### **History:**

The Awabakal people were the original inhabitants of Wallsend the area they called Nikkinba meaning The Place of Coals. The Awabakal people consisted of four clans, Pambalong, Ash Island, Kurungbong and Lake Macquarie. Most knowledge of the early occupiers of this area comes from the writings of Rev L E Threlkeld. He also recorded much of their language which has proved invaluable to researchers. Because of the abundance of food the area supported more Aborigines than further inland. Numbers reduced drastically after 1837 as a result of European diseases which “*made sad havoc amongst the Aboriginal Tribes*”.

Wallsend, now a suburb of Newcastle, New South Wales, is situated approximately 11 kilometres from Newcastle city centre and the port of Newcastle and, since 1938, is part of the City of Newcastle local government area.

A little to the north is the Hunter River. Iron Bark Creek, a tributary of the Hunter, runs through Wallsend. The swamp land, known today as the Hunter Wetlands National Park, had

the effect of stopping development of the town in that direction – it was referred to as the Delta of the Hunter and in early times known as Barrahineebin. Iron Bark Creek was much deeper than it is today and before the railway to Newcastle was developed the coal was transported to King's Wharf by boat along its course.

After Henry Dangar had surveyed the area land was first taken up in the Wallsend District in 1824 by grants and purchases by men who were to become well known for their development of the district. The Newcastle Wallsend Coal Company acquired land by purchase in 1861, 1863 and 1864. Lemongrove Estate, originally owned by George Brooks, was later subdivided and now forms the shopping centre of Wallsend. Before the advent of the coal mines the area was originally used for agriculture and cattle grazing.

In 1858 Alexander Brown commenced boring for coal on part of the 560 acres of land that he had purchased. He named the area Wallsend after a coal mining and ship building town in north east England. Brown had worked as a Colliery Manager for the Australian Agricultural Company prior to forming the Wallsend Coal Mining Company so was well experienced in mining techniques. He had capital of £100,000 made up of 10,000 shares of £10 each. His company surveyed the town in 1860 and laid out a site for a township and within twelve months it was a booming town with shops, hotels and churches arriving in profusion.

The original township was in and around the present streets of Cowper, Murnin and Metcalfe and most shops and hotels were situated here.

*Sydney Morning Herald of 5 September 1861 states:*

*The suburb was somewhat isolated from the city and it wasn't until a rail line was built to take the coal to the port that a couple of carriages were added onto the back of the coal wagons to take passengers into town. A station was built at Wallsend and a regular service provided until steam trams became the selected transport in 1887.*

In 1861 the first general strike of miners took place and from that meeting it was decided by the miners to set up a co-operative mine. They found a coalfield in what is now Devon Street, Wallsend (Plattsburg back then) and named it the New South Wales Co-operative Coal Mining Company with a capital of £30,000 made up of 6,000 shares of £5 each - James Fletcher was chairman. The Co-operative was low on capital and miners came from all parts to assist by giving a day's work. Shareholders gave their labour in lieu of subscriptions and some of the miners invested their life's savings. Unfortunately in 1869 the mortgagee foreclosed but the mine went on to be one of the best pits in the district. The opening of this mine brought into being another town known as Plattsburg – refer to the file on Plattsburg Mechanics Institute.

Although the population of Wallsend had grown dramatically there was no council to maintain the roads and in winter they were a mass of mud, whilst in summer dust was inches deep. In 1872 John Mitchell called a public meeting for the purpose of assembling a petition to have Wallsend-Plattsburg declared a Municipality. It was not until 27 February 1874 that the town was gazetted after years of planning. In April an election was held and the first aldermen of the Borough elected.

The Borough of Wallsend did not run smoothly. The council meetings became a battle between the two sections of the township. After many disagreements it was decided to divide the Borough of Wallsend into three wards, giving Wallsend two wards and Plattsburg one ward. Plattsburg residents would have none of this and so the trouble went on until it was at

length agreed to have two separate Boroughs. Wallsend was proclaimed a separate municipality in 1874 with James Fletcher as its first Mayor.

Plattsburg became a distinct municipality on December 27 1876 with James Birrell the first Mayor. For thirty-eight years, as a result of local jealousy, two separate Councils governed this small municipality.

In 1915 the divide was once again joined when it was realised that for economic and social reasons it would be best to make one town out of two. The battle was not easily won with supporters on both sides of the argument becoming, in some cases, very vitriolic. The newspapers of the day fuelled the fire somewhat but eventually it was gazetted that they reunite under the title of Wallsend Municipal Council. There was much progress and improvement of the area after amalgamation.

The Welsh population of Wallsend was instrumental in launching the first Eisteddfod in the old Welsh Chapel. These eisteddfods grew to become large musical Festivals and spread through the district but Wallsend was always referred to as the home of the Eisteddfods. Advertising and programmes were printed in Welsh which must have been a challenge to residents who did not speak Welsh.



JAMES FLETCHER features often in the history of Wallsend, Plattsburg, Minmi and indeed Newcastle. James Fletcher arrived in the Colony in 1852 and quickly became engaged in the coal industry. In fact just two years later he was Chairman of the Miners Association. He founded the Australian Agricultural Company's sick and accident fund, the first society of this kind in the Colony. He was one of the first to appreciate the benefits of School of Arts and Mechanics Institutes and worked tirelessly for them. Fletcher became one of Newcastle's leading citizens, a mine manager who worked unstintingly for the benefit of the miners, a politician and the first proprietor of the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*.

*James Fletcher<sup>1</sup>*

He erected *Styles Grove* (photograph opposite) in the 1880s a large two storey house on the Minmi Road in a suburb now known as Fletcher. The home and 6ha was purchased by the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle and is now the administrative centre for Bishop Tyrell College.

In Rotunda Park, Wallsend, stands a statue of Fletcher donated to the people of Wallsend by his grand-daughter, Mrs Elleen Surman, in 1937.



## **Establishment:**

The School of Arts/Mechanics Institutes movement had been growing in strength throughout the Colony with the aim of improving the mental and moral education of its citizens and the

Newcastle coal mining towns and villages were quick to see the advantages of an educated work force.

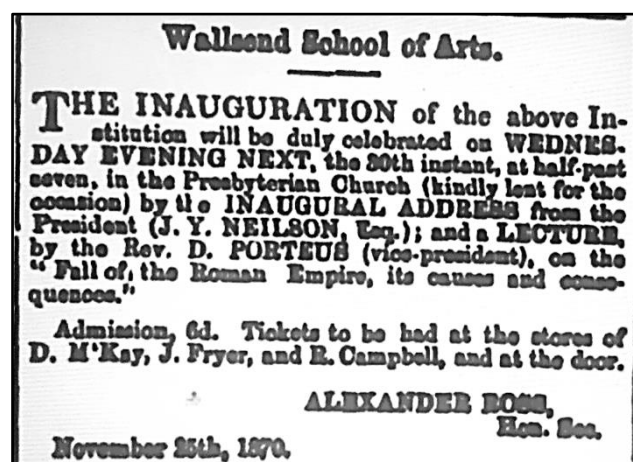
By 1868 the good people of Wallsend thought they were lagging behind other centres by not having a facility for the further education of young adults and so:

*A meeting was held in the English Baptist Church for the purpose of erecting a School of Arts at Wallsend. An election of office bearers to act in that capacity for twelve months with the President being John Young Neilson, manager of the Wallsend Colliery. It was decided at this inaugural meeting that a Board of Trustees be chosen and they try and acquire Government Trustee Bonds and write to the Manager of the Bank of New South Wales asking for the sum of £300 on the security of the Trustees. The amount being required for the erection of a School of Arts and Miner's Institute the money being wanted only as the building is in progress of erection.<sup>2</sup>*

It was not until some fourteen months later on 13 September 1870 there appeared an article in the *Evening News* (Sydney) which throws into question the activities of the Trustees.

*At a meeting of the members of the Wallsend and Plattsburg Mutual Improvement Association it was decided to change the name of the society to Wallsend School of Arts as it was thought that a Mutual Improvement Association would not meet the object sought after – such societies generally being restricted to debates, lectures and essays with one night only, weekly or fortnightly, for meetings and which are mostly conducted in places of worship. Hence it was thought by the meeting that a School of Arts wherein any subject having a moral or intellectual bearing might be discussed without reserve, a course that could not be pursued [sic] in a place of worship, and where members could resort nightly and wile away what leisure hours they had with the amusements that shall necessarily be provided - would answer better than the present association. A new committee was elected.*

After a public meeting on 16 September *The Newcastle Chronicle* of 20 September had a lengthy article on the matter of renaming and the infighting associated with it. As there was no agreement by those in attendance another public meeting was called for the following night and again there was “squabbling” but at the end of the night it was agreed to form a School of Arts and the committee empowered to do so. Mr Neilson was duly elected President after much discussion about the process. There followed a series of letters to the Editor about the meetings held. After reading the articles it is still a wonder that the Wallsend School of Arts ever got off the ground.





Finally on 15 October a meeting was held and a committee elected. An advertisement appeared in the *Newcastle Chronicle* on 26 November, 1870 that indicated that at long last something positive was happening.

Before the School of Arts obtained its own building in Metcalfe Street the first meetings of the School of Arts were conducted in the Old Welsh Church in Brown Street, the Baptist and St Andrews Presbyterian Church in Nelson Street (still standing) and then in rooms belonging to Thomas Fryar. At the half yearly meeting on 11 April 1871 it was noted that the School of Arts was progressing well and they had a comfortable hall to meet in.



*Thomas Fryar's premises in Cowper Street. Photo: University of Newcastle, Living Histories*

Early meetings were held in a long upstairs room of Fryar's building in Kemp/Cowper Street. He had built a reading room in his building after he was guaranteed twelve months rent and it was hoped by then that the Society would be able to build a hall of their own. Members had worked to make the meeting place attractive and there were 50 on the roll. There were lectures, debates, readings and recitations. Debating and grammar classes had been started along with a Chess club and all were working very successfully.

At the half yearly meeting held on 4 November 1873 "*Your institution is now so numerously attended and so well established in the favour of the public that your committee have deemed it advisable to take steps for providing a building of our own*". The proposal was advertised and after reading the tenders sent in it was resolved to purchase part of Mr Thomas Fryar's allotment at 6 Metcalfe Street for £13/15s payable in two quarterly instalments. The debt to be cleared by February 1874. In June it was noted that membership cost 3d a week.

By 3 October plans had been drawn up and a tender notice was placed in the *Newcastle Chronicle* on for the erection of a brick building. Plans and specifications were executed by Mr P Canavan.

**Wallsend School of Arts.**

**TENDERS** will be received until Noon, on the  
31st October, for the Erection of a Brick  
Building for the School of Arts, Wallsend.

Plan and Specification may be seen at the Walls-  
end Colliery Office.

The lowest or any Tender not necessarily accepted.

**ALEXANDER ROSS,**  
Hon. Secretary.

The first Wallsend School of Arts was eventually built in 1875. The Government contributing £99, the public £146 and the Wallsend Coal Company £50. In the Government Estimates for 1872 £50 was allocated to the School of Arts which helped greatly to boost their library.

As a major fund raiser the Wallsend School of Arts organized A GRAND EXCURSION to celebrate the eighty seventh anniversary of the colony on 26 January 1875. The excursion left Wallsend by train at 7.15 to head for Newcastle to board the *Goolwa* “a large and commodious steamer” for Raymond Terrace and Morpeth. All was running smoothly until just out of Raymond Terrace when she ran aground. There she stayed for two hours before continuing on to Raymond Terrace where 400 very hungry passengers alighted. After lunch they travelled to Morpeth and after a smooth trip home, not arriving to Wallsend until 9 pm, voted the day an outstanding success.<sup>3</sup>

## The Building:

On a very wet day the foundation stone of the building was laid on Friday 27 February, 1875.

Wet weather held the building back somewhat but it would occupy a handsome site next to the residence of Dr Schraedar. The Foundation Stone was laid by Mrs J Y Neilson and the famous Wallsend Brass Band played for the enjoyment of those attending - the ceremony followed a grand procession and a concert held at Harris’s Assembly Rooms.

A lengthy article appeared in the *Newcastle Chronicle* on Tuesday 2 March 1875 which describes the day in great detail. Mr Neilson, President, in his opening remarks mentioned that although the weather was unwelcome for the day it was a blessing as they were in the midst of a drought and it refreshed the parched ground and gave people water to drink. They had 80 members on the roll. The cost of the building would be £450 of which £200 would have to be collected. Mrs Neilson, who did the honours, received the silver trowel and mallet engraved:

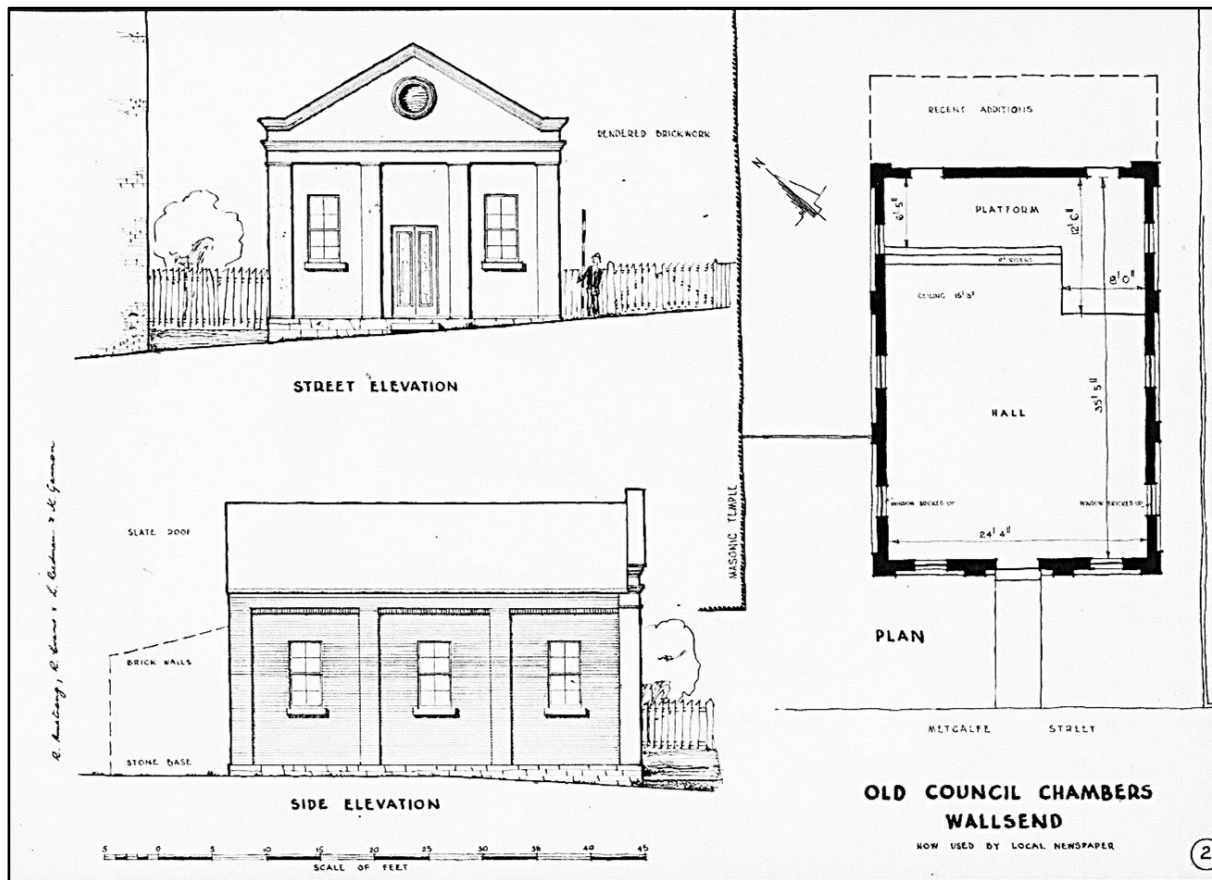
*“Presented to Mrs J Y Neilson on the occasion of laying the foundation-stone of the Wallsend School of Arts, February 27<sup>th</sup> 1875”.*

The trowel was a very handsome one, prepared by Mr Charles Provost of Newcastle, the handle being made of Myall wood and the mallet, also of the same material, was beautifully polished. The foundation stone was duly laid with parchment and papers under the stone listing all associated with the School of Arts and local Council.

The Bruce Clan of Caledonians dressed in Scottish costume, the chief wearing the full Highland dress, added colour to a rather dull day. The mornings activities concluded after a tea at Johnson’s Commercial Hotel. The president closing the activities with thanks to those who had assisted in “*this pleasant little episode in the history of the flourishing township of Wallsend*”<sup>4</sup>. It was estimated about 200 attended despite the weather and lack of cover.

The finished School of Arts was opened 3 May 1875 the weather was “stormy and tempestuous” and as a result the Grand Parade was cancelled as was the grand concert which was to follow the official opening of the hall. The postponed concert was held to much success on 6 May the hall being beautifully decorated and a grand ball was held the following night. Final figures of the building cost including land was £497. Towards this the members of the public have contributed £146, Government £99, Wallsend Coal company £50 total contributions £285, leaving a debt of £202. Mr Neilson in his address at the concert referred to the hall as “*substantial and neat, if not elegant, character of the building is, I think, another matter for congratulation.*”

The inside dimensions of the building are 34 feet by 24 feet, height of walls 15 feet. The walls are substantially built of brick on stone foundations and the roof was slated. The contractor was Mr James of Maitland.



The plan of the School of Arts submitted by the Council when they added a room at the back of the building. The basic dimensions remain the same as the original building.

The first debate in the new building was held on Wednesday 26 May. On June 9 a very interesting debate took place the subject being - *Ought women to vote at Parliamentary elections?* Owing to the nature of the debate ladies mustered in force to hear for themselves what reasons can be urged for and against the claim to vote. *The reserved seats were occupied by a goodly number of the fair sex to listen to the orations of our embryo legislators.* The result of the debate was decided by a majority of 28 that the ladies ought not to become "*free and independent electors*" of members of parliament and therefore not eligible to legislative honours.<sup>5</sup>

In July the library books were moved from the old school of Arts (Mr Fryars Assembly rooms) to the new building. The builder of the hall, Mr James, also built the book case in cedar and it was placed on the eastern wall of the stage.

Half yearly meeting in July 1875 it was noted that 140 were on the roll, the secretary putting down the big increase due to the new hall. It was decided to rent the hall for religious services on the Sabbath at a rental of 7s 6d per week.

In December 1875 there were 144 members on the roll and a Government endowment of £75 was received. The debt on the building stood at £280 at the end of December to be reduced by the Government grant.

Spelling Bees proved very popular and the series of lectures always well attended. Those who had taken first, second and third prizes at previous spelling bees could not compete. Admission for the Spelling Bees was - front seats 1s, back seats 6d and 6d extra to competitors. These nights, by all accounts, were very entertaining and fun for all – recitations and songs interspersed the spelling.

Debates were held fortnightly and vocal music classes, to teach the elements of this “desirable” art, were commenced. In September due to the falling interest in debates they were to be cancelled until January 1876. In May there was much criticism about the debates not continuing although they were promised to do so in January. The debates recommenced almost immediately and were held in the winter and spring months.

At the instigation of Dr Nash an Art Union was organised in August 1876 with 10,000 tickets at 5 shillings and 100 prizes offered. The committee had not gone through the proper channels, legally, for holding the art union but, with the support of Dr Nash and the office of the Attorney General, in October the articles were fully approved. *“we have been informed that there has been a rapid sale of shares since the legalising of the above venture”.*<sup>6</sup>

The Art Union was to be drawn 6 January 1877 but owing to the entire number of butts not being handed in it was postponed to 20 January.<sup>7</sup> The Art Union added £392 to the credit of the institute. £182 used to pay off a former debt.

The half yearly report 5 February, 1877 noted that the numbers were down to 70 members, it was thought to be because of the continuing “dullness” of the coal trade.

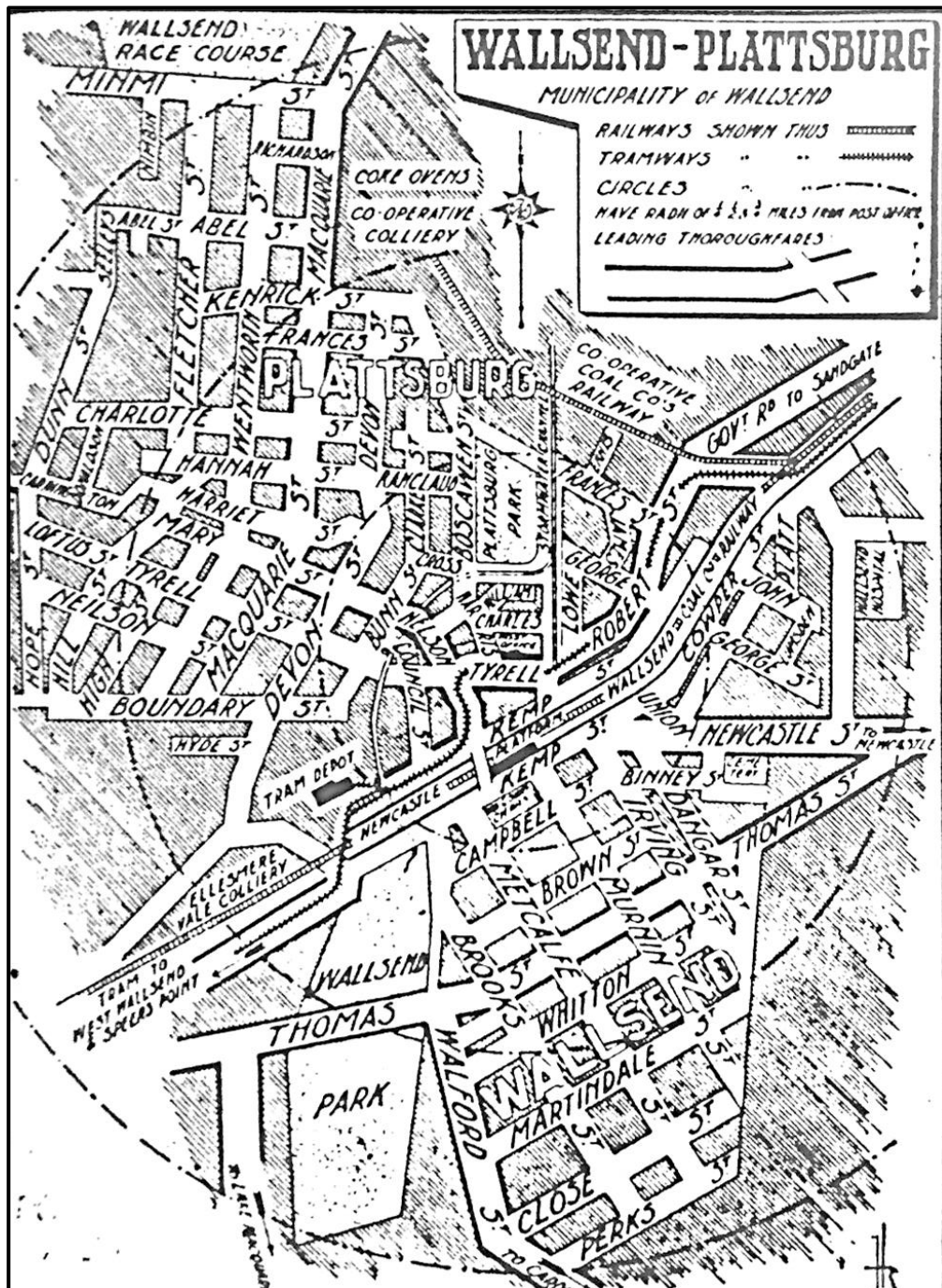
The matter of extending the present building was brought up as the present one was thought not large enough to hold public meetings. If this was done the President believed a good profit would accrue from the money invested. A small committee formed to look into the matter. Rather than extend the hall the committee made the decision to build a new School of Arts. In the mean time a fence was erected in front of the building to prevent children and even adults from annoying the members while they were reading.<sup>8</sup>

The half yearly report in August showed membership had increased again to 90. This could possibly be because of the prospect of a new, larger building. The fluctuations of members seems always to be a concern to the various Schools of Art around the state.

A site was purchased from the Wallsend Coal Company in Cowper Street, just around the corner from the present School of Arts, and work started on plans and building the second Wallsend School of Arts. The half yearly report mentions the new building site and that it has been purchased and paid for in full.

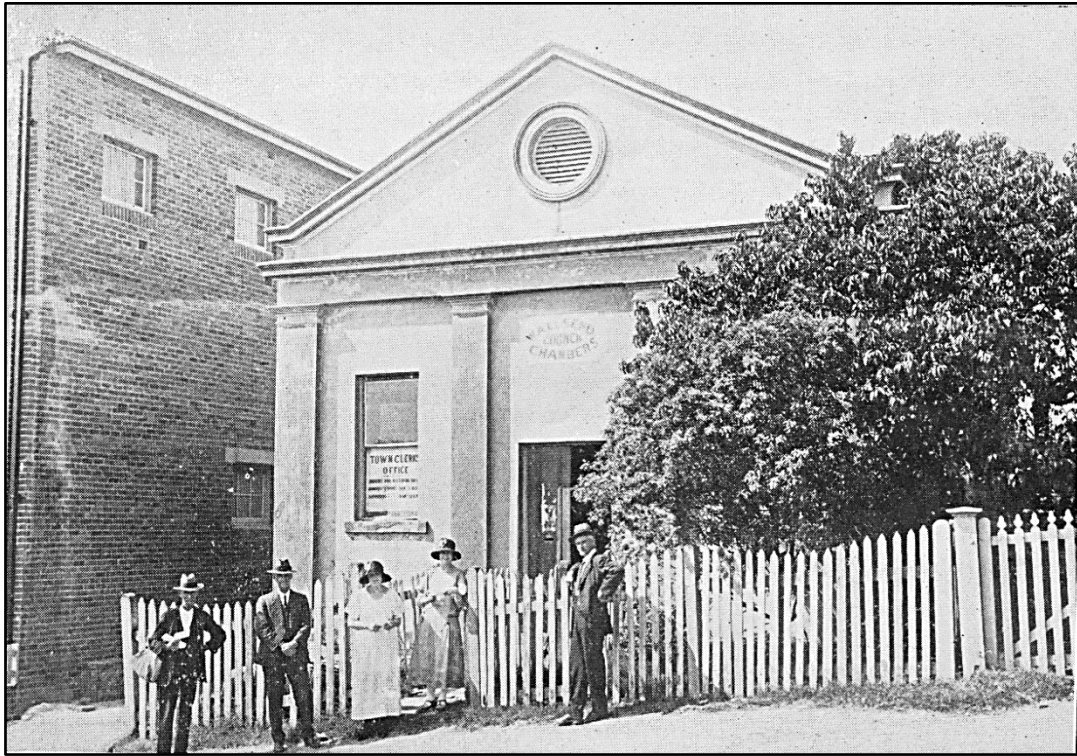
Refer: **Wallsend School of Arts - 2**





Both Wallsend School of Arts buildings are on the southern side of the map, opposite the railway line. The first was in the block bounded by Metcalfe and Brown Streets the second building in Kemp Street, opposite the Railway Station.

*Wilson's Newcastle Street Directory and Tourist Guide which sold for one shilling in 1919*



Council Chambers in 1924 at the time of the Wallsend Jubilee Celebrations

After the move to new premises in Cowper/Kemp Street the School of Arts first building was sold to Wallsend Council in 1879 and used as a Council Chambers for Wallsend until 1929. It was used as a Court House at one stage. The photograph below taken in 1955, although derelict, shows clearly the EIIR above the door but the crown has been removed.







Photo: Newcastle Historical Society held at the University of Newcastle

Above: The School of Arts in 1984 when it was the Jehovah's Witnesses Hall. In 1988 it was used as a dance studio.

Below: The Newcastle Muslim Association purchased the building in 1992 and after renovation it became the Newcastle Mosque.



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  - <sup>2</sup> *Newcastle Chronicle* 15 April 1868 p3
  - <sup>3</sup> *Miners Advocate & Northumberland Recorder* 6 February 1875 p7
  - <sup>4</sup> *Newcastle Chronicle* 2 March 1875 p3
  - <sup>5</sup> *Newcastle Chronicle* 17 June 1875 p6
  - <sup>6</sup> *Maitland Mercury & Hunter River Advertiser* 28 November 1876 p4
  - <sup>7</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate* 22 January 1877 p2
  - <sup>8</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate* 17 August 1877 p2

**Contributor:** Lesley C Gent OAM -  
Member ADFAS Newcastle