

## WENTWORTH FALLS NSW



Wentworth Falls School of Arts today: note the magnificent Norfolk pines in the background, planted by M R.M.Pitt, who while an alderman in the Manly Council (now part of the Northern Beaches Council) had instigated the famous row of pines on the beach on the Corso there.

**Name: Wentworth Falls School of Arts**

**Location: Corner of Adele Street and Great Western Highway  
Wentworth Falls NSW 2782**

### **The Place**

Dating from 1915, this building has had its highs and lows. At one stage it was even threatened with being demolished, but today is again a thriving centre for community activities.

Apart from being considered one of the most beautiful towns within the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, Wentworth Falls also offers possibly the most spectacular bushwalks and scenery. It is 95km from Sydney, taking around 89 minutes by car (although probably considerably less, depending on where the driver accesses the highway west owing to the tunnels and tollways now linking various districts of the city) and around 110 minutes by train from Central Station in Sydney.

In the 2016 census the population was 6,076 but as the town is a popular holiday spot this regularly swells in number, especially in mid-year school holidays.

## The founding of Wentworth Falls



In 1963 the above postage stamp was issued for the 150th anniversary of the crossing of the Blue Mountains

Wentworth Falls is historically also one of the most significant townships in the Blue Mountains. It bears the name of one of the trio of Gregory Blaxland, William Lawson and William Charles Wentworth, celebrated as the first Europeans to cross the Great Divide in 1813, along with four servants, four pack horses and five dogs. On 22 May they camped a little to the north of the present Wentworth Falls railway station on the side of a swamp with a little stream running through it, which was probably Jamison Creek, an area inextricably linked to the history of the School of Arts.

From not long after the colony of Sydney was established, the blue-tinted hills just to the west had tempted exploration (as explained in more detail in the *Short Bicentenary History of the Blue Mountains Crossing* by John Penlington). Then known as the Carmarthan Hills, they blocked expansion of the early settlement because attempts to traverse them were thwarted when explorers were faced with vertical cliffs. So, although they looked at first as if they would be easy to cross, expedition after expedition failed. In addition, by the early 1800s they also became a lure for convicts planning a desperate escape to China, where streets were said to be paved with gold and which, according to popular rumour, lay just on the further side. Many skeletons of optimistic but ill-fated escapees have been found over ensuing years.

For just over two decades these mountains had indeed hemmed in the colony. When Lachlan Macquarie arrived as Governor in 1809, he quickly sensed the urgency for western exploration and development. Sydney was already outgrowing its small coastal strip of land and could not supply the food needed for a flourishing colony. It was realised that more land was needed for men to farm instead of simply more men for the land.

The earliest approach to crossing the Blue Mountains had been based on the usual European practice of following rivers as far as feasible and climbing from there. But these first attempts stood no chance of conquering what is, basically, a giant uplifted and deeply dissected plateau. (See *Geological Sites of NSW* for a scientific overview.) Instead, Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth followed the ridge between two water catchments rather than tackling boulder-strewn valleys and carved out a route that is the main corridor for road and train to this day.

Not that the explorers' expedition was easy going, at times reducing the men to hacking their way laboriously through dense undergrowth for very little gain in distance and often hauling their supplies themselves when the horses were proving incapable of tackling these heavily forested slopes. Wentworth wrote in his journal on that 1813 crossing that *the area was a landscape that could, in my opinion, only have been produced by some mighty convulsion of nature.*



Crossing the Blue Mountains 1813.

This illustration from the *Sydney Mail*, December 25, 1880, is the earliest pictorial representation of the successful 1813 crossing of the Blue Mountains

On the eleventh day of the expedition that the trio came across a little stream of fresh water at the head of a well-watered swamp and pitched camp there. Another entry in Wentworth's journal noted the abundance of excellent water, which is everywhere to be found. The road builder, William Cox, chose that same spot to set up a stores depot, a weatherboard hut that, simple though it was, led to Weatherboard becoming the popular name for Wentworth Falls, and the famous falls themselves, for the next sixty-five years.

Although Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth did not actually complete the entire crossing in 1813, Governor Macquarie declared them to be triumphant. In 1814 he assigned George Evans, one of the assistant Land Surveyors (*in whose zeal and abilities for such an undertaking he had well branded reason to confide*, states the Government Order) to continue with the exploration to the point where Evans would describe the western slopes in the region to be known as the Bathurst Plains a *beautiful and champaign[sic] country*.

On 14 July that same year Macquarie ordered William Cox, the leading magistrate at Windsor and a former captain in the NSW Corps, to select 30 convicts 'of good character' (who would be promised a pardon) to build a road. Leaving four days later, incredibly by the end of September Cox's party had gouged out a rough road four metres wide that reached the edge of the top of the plateau. In all, in just six months, they made 101 miles (163 km) of road through rugged mountain country, building over a dozen bridges and splitting hundreds of posts and rails without serious accident or loss of life.

Macquarie, after travelling over the road in 1815, praised Cox highly and named the steep descent down Mount York and the river at its foot after him. Cox was unaware he was founding the future Wentworth Falls when he stopped at the same spot where Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth had camped, noted as they had *how the situation on a ridge overlooking standing timber was very pleasant, and had a fine spring of water running through it*. He also observed that there was a hut erected to house the men and store their tools as they worked hard on forwarding what is now Blaxland Road. Cox named the straightest stretch Hobby's Reach after Lieutenant Thomas Hobby.

Today the Blue Mountains Historical Society is headquartered at Turella Cottage, Hobby's Reach, along with Hobby's Reach Research Centre (both invaluable when compiling this history). The *Nepean Times*, declared on 18 July 1914 that

*...soothly, no better 'second mate' for that memorable exercise could have been selected than the redoubtable Thomas Hobby, who was frequently, in Cox's unavoidable absences, in full charge of the enterprise...*

In his own journal, Cox wrote an enthusiastic description of the hut:

*The building is 17 feet [5.2m] x 12 feet [3.7m] with 3 feet [0.91m] sides, the whole weatherboarded; gable- ended weatherboards with a door on the east end [it] cost me eight men, ten days!*



**William Cox**, by Charles Rodius, 1830

By 1830, at the time this portrait was created, William Cox was a highly respected magistrate and pastoralist. Fifteen years prior, he had completed his most famous feat of building the first road across the blue Mountains. After which he was rewarded by Governor Macquarie, receiving 2000 acres of land, 300 PDS, and a salaried position of Commandant of Bathurst.

The hut was used as a military post, where soldiers checked the passes of any people permitted to use the road, but that ceased in 1832 and inns to cater for travellers were built.

The fledgling settlement had become known as Weatherboard—and so it officially became in 1847. However, in 1879 many features such as the 'weatherboard' railway, post office and the like were renamed Wentworth Falls, and the new township became Wentworth Falls as well. A concrete dam had been built across Jamison Creek the year before, and this created today's Wentworth Falls Lake north of the town.



The Weatherboard Hut, road maker William Cox's Second Depot by the artist John William Lewin who accompanied Governor Macquarie on his inspection tour of Cox's Road 1815. J.W.Lewin, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

In 1815, while on his way to Bathurst, Governor Macquarie camped in the same area and named most of the prominent features, such as Jamison Valley and Kings Tableland.

Kings Tableland, as Anne Dignan wrote for [weekend.notes.com](http://weekend.notes.com) 23 April 2013

*is an impressive rock plateau to the east of Wentworth Falls lookouts. There are a number of Aboriginal sites and over 3,000 artefacts of flaked stone have been discovered, while carbon dating has shown that Aborigines lived in the area at least 22,000 years ago.*

#### Who was Wentworth?

As outlined in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, by Michael Persse, 1964, William Charles Wentworth was a singular man. He was known as the son of a suspected highwayman D'Arcy Wentworth, who, to escape prosecution in England took the position of assistant surgeon in the new colony of New South Wales. Enroute to his new post, he fell in love with a convict girl, Catherine Crowley, on the transport ship Neptune and acknowledged her son as his, although born less than nine months after they met.

The boy, born on Norfolk Island, became an Australian explorer, journalist, politician, sheep-grazier and author. He also studied law at Cambridge University, and was admitted to the bar, and later travelled in Europe.

He returned to Australia in 1824 and after D'Arcy died in 1827, inherited his property becoming one of the wealthiest men in the colony. He built a mansion, Vaucluse House, after which the Sydney suburb is named. A remarkable journey for a remarkable man. Although his mother was sentenced to transportation for seven years and his father barely escaped being branded as a criminal, he is nowadays recognised as one of the founders of modern Australia.

The plateau was used by the local Gundungurra people as a place to meet with neighbouring groups and for sharpening spears and axe heads by grinding them against the rocks. It is noted as one of the first places where the Aborigines could keep an eye on the white men as they crossed distant ridges.

John Mills and Alexander Fraser, followed by William Boyles, were the first owners and licensees of the Weatherboard Inn (Wikipedia has a detailed account titled 'Weatherboard Inn archaeological site'). The initial licence was for 'The Bathurst Traveller' built on the site of Cox's depot (which by this time had burned down) but the depot itself had been known as Weatherboard

and Weatherboard Inn persisted as the name. In 1835 a memorable description of the Inn was left by the Quaker missionary, James Backhouse, who had planned to stay there.

*After travelling fifteen miles, we arrived at the Weatherboard Inn Hut where we intended to lodge; but the only good room was occupied. One in which we had an excellent meal of beef and bread, with tea, was without glass in the windows and could not have the door shut, for the smoking of the wood fire.*

Charles Darwin, journeying through to Bathurst in 1836, on 17 January 1836 tethered his horse at a little inn, called the Weatherboard, then went on foot to the falls. As he recounts in *A Voyage of the Beagle*, 1839, Chapter XIX, he was more struck by the view, writing that

*It is exceedingly worth visiting. An immense gulf unexpectedly opens through the trees ...a depth of perhaps 1500 feet. Walking on a few yards, one stands on the brink of a vast precipice...the line of cliffs diverging on each side, and showing headland after headland, as on a bold sea coast. These cliffs are so absolutely vertical, that in any place a person standing on the edge and throwing a stone, can see it strike the trees in the abyss below.*

### **The settlement grows**

Convicts had carved out the road. Free men known as navvies from then on would build the railway. Hundreds of them worked through the 1860s and 1870s to achieve a single line across the mountains (later updated and doubled). In 1867 the railway arrived at a siding called Weatherboard, so that Weatherboard became a destination in its own right and was the end of the line for a year. However, the Weatherboard Inn was not able to remain in operation, because although still shown on the Railway Survey Plan in 1862, that very railway caused its closure.

By the 1880s the land was being sub-divided in earnest for holiday homes for Sydneysiders, churches, a small public school (in 1887, now replaced) and guest houses. There was even an additional village called Brasforth laid out south of the highway, but it existed for no more than 15 years before being absorbed into the larger new township.

## **The Building**

### **Generous gift for a Wentworth Falls School of Arts**

In those days, well before the advent of television and regular cinema offerings, people in the country communities looked for places apart from the local pub to gather and socialise, further their education, have concerts, card nights and dances.

A suitable place for such activities in the fledgling Wentworth Falls village was found in a wooden hall at 16 Armstrong Street. This became the Mechanics' Institute and also a meeting place for the Literary Institute. Mechanics' Institutes were so named because they originated as a place where 'artisans' or 'mechanics' (men who worked with their hands) could hear lectures after hours at little or no cost.

However, as was the case in Wentworth Falls, their range of activities quickly expanded, so that soon after the turn of the new century the Armstrong Street premises were proving to be too small to accommodate the many activities that took place there. On dance evenings, local newspaper reports described partygoers *dancing in the garden, while onlookers had to remain outside standing in the street.*

A hard-working committee raised 400 pounds and along with a government subsidy, plus the sale of the Armstrong Street building, a respectable amount of money was found to enable the building

of what would be the School of Arts for Wentworth Falls, an idea that had wide community support. There was also a generous bequest of land.

In 1896 the Weatherboard Inn property had been purchased by the Matcham Pitt family and used for stock grazing. On 30 November 1896 the land originally granted to the Boyles family was conveyed to Marie Emilie Eugenie, wife of Robert Matcham Pitt. After having caused a subdivision of land to be made in 1914, Mrs Pitt donated 5 1/2 perches to the trustees of Wentworth Falls Literary Institute, because the Institute was finding it needed a better venue for its activities. So, this became the site of the new Wentworth School of Arts incorporating not just the Literary Institute but also the Mechanics' Institute.

### **Laying the Foundation Stone**

*The Blue Mountain Echo* reported that it was a proud moment for the community on 13 November 1914, when

*in a most pleasing ceremony the formal dedication of the new School of Arts occurred, with Mrs R.M. Pitt laying the foundation stone bearing her name. Even though the weather looked threatening, the delighted and enthusiastic residents of Wentworth Falls rolled up in great numbers.*

*The function was the culmination of much hard work on the part of the Committee, led by Mr C.W Medcalf (Secretary) and Mr J.H. Ellis (Treasurer). The happy smiles that spread across their faces when Mrs Pitt declared the stone 'well and truly laid' showed that the success of the ceremony had amply repaid them for all their arduous labour.*

#### **The Matcham Pitts**

Robert Matcham Pitt (1888-1972) was head of Pitt, Son and Badgery Limited, one of the great stock and station agencies in NSW. He and his wife Marie were interested in local welfare and became patrons of the proposed School of Arts, while Robert pioneered the growing of daffodils. They built the property 'Coorah', which was used for them and their eight children as a mountain holiday home from 1889 until 1935.

Today it is the Blue Mountains Grammar School and in 2009 was where the first ADFAS Blue Mountains lectures were held, transferring the following year to the larger, better equipped facilities at the Wentworth Falls School of Arts across the road.

The Pitts did significant entertaining at Coorah, scoring their biggest social success by entertaining Dame Nellie Melba in 1911. At the time, Robert Pitt (who had a fine singing voice himself) was involved in the spectacular season of grand opera mounted by J.C. Williamson and Melba. The other stars of this season were John McCormack, Amelita Galli Curci and Enrico Caruso. They all also visited Coorah and Melba performed in the drawing room.

The stage at the Theatre Royal in Sydney was showered with Coorah daffodils every time Melba sang there.

Mrs Pitt was thanked for her generosity in donating the land and the committee declared its hopes that soon there would be a building in keeping with the progress of the town. Mr Pitt, in proposing a vote of thanks to the Minister, said that he must not take any credit for donating the land and replying on behalf of his wife said...*that if any land was required in Wentworth Falls for any public purpose, it could only be obtained as long as Mrs Pitt had it.* Great applause followed.

The estimated cost of the building was 3,000 pounds, of which the committee had raised 400 pounds, the sale of the Mechanics' Institute (on Armstrong Street) also assisting in meeting the final cost, plus a promised pound for pound government subsidy. Although Mr Pitt did not himself give the site to the community, he gave money which was a greatly appreciated, and the creditable amount of 550 pounds was also collected for the projected building. Then it was off to the refreshment tent, where tables were said to groan under the wealth of tempting things. To mark the occasion, a gaily decorated bazaar was held, followed by a ball that evening.

#### Timeline (from *The Blue Mountain Echo*, 1909-1928)

21 November 1913: Advertisement for a special meeting to be held to consider selling the present land and buildings in Armstrong Street and build a new School of Arts on land offered by Mr[s] Pitt.

6 March 1914: Reporting that another social would be held the following Wednesday to raise funds for the new School of Arts.

10 April 1914: Reporting that the Surveyor would survey the proposed site immediately after the holidays [Easter, 10-13 April].

24 July 1914: Advertisement for tenders to purchase land on the south-west corner of Boonara and Armstrong Streets [in the press at times also referred to as School of Arts as well as Mechanics' Institute].

3 October 1913: Advertisement for General Meeting of Subscribers on 9 October to consider the erection of a new School of Arts, and transfer to another site.

Among various fund-raising efforts for the proposed new School of Arts were three concerts generously given by Fraulein Jensen and her Ladies Orchestral Band on 28, 29 and 30 December, all very much enjoyed. Various items were said *to be rendered with a delightful musical correctness and excellent harmonie produced under the skilled conductorship of Fraulein Jensen*. That same year a social was held in connection with St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, that saw about 50 couples dancing until a late hour.

#### Wentworth Falls School of Arts

The physical description in the words of the NSW Environment & Heritage, is as follows: Hipped and gabled 1-2 storey building with slate roof and lead flashings.

Front (south) section has central entry porch facing south to Great Western Highway with hipped roof and rendered piers. symmetrical between two projecting gables. Gables clad with lapped boards.

Roughcast chimneys with brick corbels. Pair glazed entry doors between casement windows. Rear two storey section has jerkin head roof with 4 no. metal roof vents. Wide eaves with exposed rafters and timber boarding. Roughcast and rendered walls. Large 6 pane double hung windows. Roughcast 2 storey side (west) entry porch to north 2 storey wing has skillion metal roof.

The architect for the new building was Herbert Dennis of Sydney and the builder was H. Dine of Glenbrook. It had been decided to roof the building with slate instead of the tiles originally specified, which came to an extra cost of 60 pounds. However, local donations had helped cover this expense.

It was later noted that the construction work cost something over 2,000 pounds and that builder Mr Dine was complimented on the manner with which he carried out his work. The building was



said to be one of the finest of its kind west of Sydney. Built of reinforced concrete, the floors were of Tasmanian oak, the ceiling panelled in 3-ply walnut, and building was fitted with the latest Esse stove for heating and a 2,000-gallon water tank.

The *Lithgow Mercury* reported on 8 June 1915 that the building comprised a lecture room, committee room, billiard room

*lit from above and thoroughly equipped for the enjoyment of the king of indoor games, reported dining room, library, main hall 75ft. by 37ft. and capable of seating over 600 people, and dressing rooms.*

The *Mercury* further enthused:

*The fittings throughout are tasteful and luxurious whilst an acetylene gas plant provides an economical but fine light.*

### Opening Ceremony

A report 'from our own correspondent' appeared in *The Lithgow Mercury*, Wednesday, June 30 1915 and declared that the Minister of Agriculture, W.G. Ashford, had officially opened the new School of Arts. Owing to the bitter wind, the official opening at the front door was dispensed with and an adjournment made to the lecture room.

In calling on the Hon Ashford to open a building *not to be rivalled outside Sydney*, chairman of the Wentworth School of Arts Committee, Mr C.R. Hutchinson, said that it was not so very long ago that they were present for the laying of the foundation stone. The committee had had a great many difficulties to contend with owing to the war, but they had been overcome, and now they had one of the finest buildings in the Mountains as a result of their work.

During his speech, Mr Ashford announced that he had been assured by the Minister for Public Construction that a subsidy of 400 pounds would be available shortly. There may have been an outstanding debt of 2,250 pounds but this was gradually paid off by fund-raising ventures such as bazaars and euchre evenings, which were all the rage at the time, so that April 1930 the debt had been reduced to only 850 pounds.

Once the building was declared officially open, the crowd adjourned to the main hall where Mrs Ashford opened the ensuing bazaar. She was presented with a bouquet of flowers by Miss Lucy Medcalf and similarly handsome flowers were accorded to Mrs R.M. Pitt, amid great applause. The hall and the bazaar with its various stalls, said the *Echo*, presented an interesting picture as it was wartime so the stalls were decorated with patriotic colours and were filled with *such useful and pretty articles that at the conclusion of the day had totalled a large amount in sales*. It was noted as one of the happiest events yet held in Wentworth Falls.

The ball on the following Monday evening was a great success, rhapsodised *The Echo*. Many of the ladies, who were in the majority, wore pretty and becoming evening dress. Those present were delighted with having a fine, comfortable hall in which to 'trip the light fantastic'.

*All dancers know that a new floor is not the best to dance on, but the committee had been most energetic and spent many an hour in preparing a decent surface for the occasion.*

Their efforts were evidently successful because this so-described *lavish ball* continued until 2am.

### A sad note of patriotism

On 6 November 1915 Wentworth Falls gave the 'Coo-ees' a good reception when, right on schedule, the Coo-ees marched into the town, which had been gaily bedecked with flags for the occasion (for details of this remarkable event see *The Coo-ee March*,

1915, by local studies Librarian John Merriman. The word coo-ee originates from the Dharug language of the original inhabitants of the Sydney area. It means 'come here' and was quickly adopted by early settlers and is now widely used in Australia as a call over distances.

The Australian War Memorial ([awm.gov.au](http://awm.gov.au)) describes how in 1915 recruiting committees were formed in nearly every town in Australia—not always supported by some military authorities, who doubted that the numbers of men recruited would justify the effort and expense, not to mention possible problems of discipline.

Even so, a movement had begun in the central west of New South Wales which became known as the 'Gilgandra snowball'. Under the leadership of W.T. ('Captain Bill') Hitchen, around 20 men who had been determined to enlist set off to march to Sydney, swelling to some 300 by journey's end.

Why Coo-ees? This was the word used on many recruiting posters of the time. The men halted in front of the School of Arts, where Mr H.A. Hickman welcomed the so-called 'snowball army' on behalf of the Recruiting Association. A road worker downed tools and stepped into the ranks to rousing coo-ees from the men, although his two mates decided to think it over. Later refreshments were served in the hall, a musical program being rendered during the repast. On behalf of the Recruiting Association, the Red Cross Society and the citizens of Wentworth Falls, the men were presented with tobacco and other presents, and wished every luck on their journey to Gallipoli. Off they marched to the accompaniment of heartfelt cheers from the Wentworth Falls residents. Little did they know, full

of high hopes and heroism, they would be on their way to a hell on earth.



### Uses

The purpose of this new building was for 'the promotion and diffusion of knowledge', as well as today being the setting for the varied and fascinating ADFAS lectures. The building proved very popular with the community, as was the inclusion of a new library; by 1918 the library could record an annual borrowing figure of 11,000 books. At that time the building was also the venue for the annual agricultural show. A daffodil fair was inspired by Robert Matcham Pitt, who as we have seen had pioneered extensive daffodil cultivation at his home 'Coorah'. From 1905 to 1914 the Daffodil Fair had been held at the Mechanics' Institute and from 1915 onwards at the new School of Arts, with many blooms donated by the Pitt family. Thereafter the Daffodil Fair developed into a wider local fete and art display.

The Wentworth Falls School of Arts was much appreciated and well used for the next decades. For example, 9 March 1928 was designated Dahlia Night—with *The Echo* commenting on the high standard of blooms at the opening of the Monthly Flower Show of the Agricultural, Horticultural & Industrial Society, especially coming so soon after the big Annual Show of the week before and adding that the attendance was very good. As for the Annual Show itself, one delightful item was mentioned by *The Echo*:

*Good music has been one of the features of the Annual Show, and last week's Show was no exception. The splendid programme voluntarily rendered by Mrs T.W.R. Fowler and Mrs D. Furniss was greatly appreciated. It was a relief to many to get away for a time from the blatant and noisy jazz.*

### **A cue for billiards**

A 'mugs' billiard tournament' was of the more unusual happenings at the School of Arts, which *The Echo* recounted on 18 January 1918, had attracted a fair number of entries. However, it continued, some of the 'cracks' objected to the term applied to the competition. This was countered by a take on how Robbie Burns would have phrased it: *cracks there are, and cracks there be, but a mug's a mug for a' that...*

On Tuesday 15 November 1935, *The Katoomba Daily* listed pastimes at the School of Arts. These included the ever-popular *500 parties, which have been held fortnightly but now, in consideration of numerous requests the committee has decided to hold them weekly*, euchre, solo, bridge, and whist. But as the newspaper report continued:

*the ever-puzzling question of how to revive interest in billiards and snooker received serious consideration...After much scratching of heads and deep puffs of pipes, the committee believes it has a plan that should appeal to all knights of the cue, from Blackheath to Lawson.*

Billiards was played every night to 11pm at the School of Arts, until the billiard room was closed in the 1940s. Over the years it seems billiards received a mixed reaction from local residents, some apparently thinking it not all seemly for a community centre. But others suggested it was an asset, helping keep young bloods off the streets at night.

### **Toll of the passing years—and a question of money**

The School of Arts lost favour in the 1950s owing to the increasing popularity of television in the home and the club boom. At that point of time its income had begun to shrink and the funds which had formerly been poured into its maintenance lapsed to a trickle. During the ensuing 30 years the building was allowed to run down and so its users became even fewer in number.

Attempts were made to generate interest during that period but the dilapidated appearance of the building and vandalism plus the ever-increasing costs of maintenance, balanced against a decreasing income, saw it reach a sad stage of decrepitude at which time the Trustees handed it over to the Blue Mountains City Council. Reports at the time suggest that the Council was almost embarrassed by this 'gift' and in 1981 an Advisory Committee of Citizens was convened by the Town Clerk to decide what could and should be done with the building. Its future looked bleak and there was even talk of pulling it down.

The Committee met seven times and after close consideration of some 24 submissions by groups and individuals within the community, a plan was devised (with an accompanying model made by committee member, Mr Kit Denton) for the building's rejuvenation according to the concept outlined by the Committee. This included the necessity of sealing the building against water penetration, the rearrangement of all drainage, the addition of extra toilets, and eventual appointment of a caretaker.

The Council Engineer's Department proceeded to brief an architect (not chosen from the Committee's preferred list). He came up with a plan for a costly development at the rear, which was felt to be out of keeping with the community's requirements — not to mention Council's cash-

strapped position. However, work did begin in September 1982 on the roof of the building. Drains were installed underneath, and the existing one 'ladies' and two 'gents' toilets repainted. Some parts of the floors were repaired where rotten.

Despite raised hopes, little more was accomplished. On Saturday, 23 October 1982, nearly 100 people gathered in front of the Wentworth Falls School of Arts to protest against the Blue Mountains City Council's inaction regarding the future of the building. The meeting, chaired by Mr John McIntyre, was addressed by Messrs Gil Clarke, Bruce Forbes, Jim Smith, Nigel Bell and Ald. Claude Papesch.

As reported by *The Blue Mountains Gazette*, on 27 October 1982, the meeting stated that the concept of a multi-purpose building for community use was under threat by a forthcoming development proposal to establish a timber yard on adjacent land. Mr Gil Clarke, in his address to the meeting noted also that the building *had been constructed in 1914 but the condition of it resembled a building constructed in 1514...* The then city administrator, Mr John Wickham, had \$100,000 set aside for the School of Arts but this was later allocated elsewhere. Mr Clarke added *nothing has been done on the building during the past 14 months and it was only last Wednesday workmen started repairs on the roof.*

Luckily for us today, a group of local residents decided to prove to Council that the building was worth saving, leading on November 9 1982 to the formation of the 'Friends of the School of Arts'. Over a period of several weeks the Friends, led principally by John McIntyre and Bruce Forbes, worked hard to show what could be done to restore the School of Arts to as near as possible its original condition. Initially the Friends went in armed only with paint, brushes and trowels, plus enthusiasm by the bucket load and the aim to revert even just a few rooms into sustainable spaces.

When a submission prepared by Town Clerk Mr Ron Fennell was presented to the aldermen it was decided that the building should indeed be restored, with renovations in keeping with the appropriate style of the building. So, it was declared that the residents of Wentworth Falls would again have a *hall of which they can be justly proud* to use again for public functions.

In addition, the Friends of the School of Arts was able to lodge an application for funding under the Federal Government's Community Employment Programme (CEP) to help people with short-term employment at a time of low demand. Mr Ross Free, MP, was obviously happy to be able to announce a grant of \$56,062 to employ three labourers and a carpenter for six months. The Friends would be responsible for overseeing the restoration work.

So impressive was their enduring commitment and lobbying that thirteen years later the CEP and BMCC followed their lead. Money was injected and resources supplied to complement the energy provided by the Friends. The small community library was expanded; the remainder of the front half of the building was fully restored.

Everyone concerned agreed that the building, although very run-down, was a potentially valuable asset, not only to the Council but also to the communities of Wentworth Falls and elsewhere in the Blue Mountains. Subsequently it was decided that after a feasibility study more work would be done in stages as funds were forthcoming.

Despite what seemed a promising start, money woes again intervened, so that by 27 March 1985 *The Echo* reported a lively debate in a Council meeting, which had the heading

*School of Arts escapes by whisker, gets \$200,000 or is it \$300,000, \$500,000, or maybe just a few bob?*

*BMCC has decided to take the plunge and spend more than \$200,000 renovating the Wentworth Falls School of Arts.*

But the decision was a close one, with a Lower Blue Mountains alderman questioning the value of pumping so much money into the old building.

At first it appeared that the Friends of the Wentworth Falls School of Arts would be left to struggle on alone, after the City Mayor voted to maintain the status quo. However, when Alderman Geoff McLoughlin stood up in favour of the proposition a division of Council was called for. Alderman Ralph Williams protested the lack of funds

*I am concerned that we will end up with a half- baked job, he said. It is not a lot of money, \$200,000 plus CEP (Community Employment Programme) ...we all know CEP funds don't go as far as they should.*

These sentiments were echoed by Alderman Bob Chance, adding that the cost of the project would run as high as \$500,000.

Then other aldermen spoke passionately in favour, claiming that new life would be injected into Wentworth Falls, while the Deputy Mayor asserted, *he would not have the intestinal fortitude to demolish the building and that the only sensible alternative was to renovate it.*

### **Success**

Stan Cove, a founder member of The Friends and then secretary of the Management Committee recalls,

*I just answered an ad for help in the local paper and I have been involved ever since. When the front half of the building was officially opened in 1985, we partied for two days.*

Members of the Friends of the School of Arts were delighted with the Council's decision to fund the work. The Friends' President, Mr John McIntyre, declared it would have been futile spending only the \$56,000 promised by the Community Employment Programme.

He explained what this money will do repairing the floor and painting the walls of the old building, but that the key to the success of the project was bringing the building up to licencing standard as a public hall. *...It represents the end of a long hard road for us and the beginning of a new one,* he said, adding that he was disappointed by the lack of support shown by Lower Mountains aldermen, which he described as a very short-sighted attitude.

The *Blue Mountains Gazette* on 22 February 1995, stated that

*when you are an ageing and steadily dilapidating building standing prominent and yet forlorn on the edge of the main highway, the approach of 'Friends' with vision is a bolstering sight.*

And so it was with Wentworth Falls School of Arts.

After the front half of the building was renovated, in 1995 the main auditorium and rear foyers were renovated and extra toilets and an off-street parking area for 28 vehicles constructed at the rear. Designed to eventually accommodate 250 seats in the raked auditorium, it was said to be as much a tribute of the years of voluntary endeavour by the Friends of the School of Arts as it was to the building's octogenarian anniversary. The Blue Mountains City Council made a commitment of \$280,000 for restoring the stage and auditorium said to have presented little entertainment over

the last 30 years. A complete facelift in keeping with its heritage status would stretch these funds to the limit, but Mr Tony Atwood, chairman of the 1995 management committee explained:

Foremost of the committee's priorities is to actively service the requirements of local groups with a facility that the community can truly be a part of, and not just a spectator. An ever-optimistic spokesman for the committee added:

*and equip a theatre with all the expected facilities for under \$400,000 will be a fair achievement to restore. We're hardly the Capitol Theatre, but I think we can present a reasonable case.*

## Currently

### The Library

The original Wentworth Falls School of Arts Library opened in 1915 but had fallen into disuse by the 1970s. In 1988 it moved from alternative premises in the shopping centre back to its original home in the School of Arts as part of the Bicentennial renovation of the building. The branch was again refurbished in 2007 with the installation of air conditioning and improved lighting.

### Looking to the future

In 2001 the Blue Mountains City Council engaged town planning consultants Travis McEwen Group to prepare an updated Plan of Management for the Wentworth School of Arts. (Read its extensive detail online at *Local Government Act 1993*, NSW.) The council notice for a public meeting to be held in the School of Arts on May 23, 2001, stated

*The Wentworth Falls School of Arts is recognised as a valuable community asset. The development of a clear understanding of the needs and desires of the community is essential to the development of suitable management guidelines for the facility.*

*As well as being a requirement of the Act, the plan of management defines and provides a level of certainty for the future use of the building and can help increase community interest in the facility. The School of Arts is classified as Community Land under the Local Government Act 1993 (the Act). Pursuant to the Act, Community Land must be used and managed in accordance with the Plan of Management applying to the land.*

Signed by Deborah Sutherland TMG, and Martin Ryman, Council Facilities Officer.

### Community acclaim

Over the years we can see how the School of Arts was and still is regarded as having contemporary cultural significance in addition to its undoubted heritage value. Varied events, particularly in the visual and performing arts, meetings of varied clubs and groups, community markets and festivals take place within its walls and it is also available for private and commercial hire.

ADFAS lectures have taken place here since 2010. The Society of Mountain Artists holds monthly meetings on the third Wednesday of any month from February to November, featuring a guest demonstrator revealing how to use various techniques in different mediums, followed by afternoon tea, plus the chance to borrow art books free of charge and DVDs for a small loan fee. The Blue Mountains Conservation Society holds regular meetings three or four times a year, with an important annual event being the Mick Dark Talk for the Future (co-hosted with 'Varuna', The Writers' House, Katoomba), presented by an authority on aspects of climate variability and

change. The Wentworth Falls Garden Club, which has been going for over 30 years meets on the second Thursday of the month.

Dance groups and shows are varied and popular–Afro-Cuban jazz, Salsa, Latino among them such as a lively Celebration of Dance concert, organised by Cancer Wellness on 23 November 2019 that showcased tap-dancing, clogging and Zumba among other styles, and was an outstanding success.



Celebration of Dance, concert organised by Cancer Wellness, November 23 2019

The Blue Mountains Heritage Dance Group held first of its popular Regency weekends on Saturday October 31, 2015 to celebrate 200 years of Wentworth Falls, with an afternoon dance workshop followed by a ball, and many options such as Regency card games, and a picnic at Wentworth Falls Lake for the Sunday.

Every Queens Birthday long weekend the annual bentART exhibition is held at the School of Arts. Established in the Blue Mountains in 2005, bentART celebrates works in the visual arts by Australian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) artists.



bentART was established in the Blue Mountains in 2003 to celebrate works in the visual arts of Australian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (“LGBTI”) artists.

### **2020 vision**

Written in 2020-2021, due to due to COVID-19 only a few events returned to the Wentworth Falls School of Arts with strict guidelines and with limited numbers of attendees. At the time of writing, the best advice is to contact group directly for the activities that interest you.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Acknowledgements**

Blue Mountains Historical Society and Hobby's Reach Research Centre, 99 Blaxland Road, Wentworth Falls 2782; (02) 4757 3824.

## **References**

*Australian Dictionary of Biography*

*Blue Mountains Crossing Bicentenary Wentworth Falls 1813-2013, Short Bicentenary History.* John Penlington, Published by Wentworth Falls Chamber of Commerce Inc.

*The Journal of Gregory Blaxland, 1813, Journal Of A Tour Of Discovery Across The Blue Mountains.* Published in London, 1823.

William Lawson, *Journal of an expedition across the Blue Mountains, 11 May - 6 June 1813, together with wax impression of Lawson's seal, 1813, 181.* State Library New South Wales

William Charles Wentworth, *'Journal of an expedition across the Blue Mountains, 11 May-6 June 1813,* 'State Library New South Wales

*Memoirs of William Cox, J.P, Lieutenant and Paymaster of N.S.W. Corps, of 102nd Regiment, Late of Clarendon, Windsor.* Accessed as NLA digitised item

*Memoirs of William Cox, JP,* William Brooks & Co. 1901

Blue Mountains City Council notices, various dates

Newspapers, various dates:

*The Blue Mountains Echo*

*The Lithgow Mercury*

*Blue Mountains Gazette*

*The Katoomba Daily*

*The Nepean Times*

## **Contributors**

**Patsy Hollis, Katrina Sims and Kay West,** members ADFAS Blue Mountains

with thanks to John Merriman, Local Studies Librarian, and Helen Creagh, Gill Green and Janey Smith of ADFAS.

**ADFAS Blue Mountains**

**July 2021**