

# CAIRNS QUEENSLAND



**Cairns School of Arts Building, 2023.**

Photo: G. Ellis ADFAS Cairns

**Name: Cairns Museum/School of Arts Building**

**Address: Corner Lake and Shields Streets, Cairns, North Queensland**

## **The Town:**

This history of the Cairns School of Arts acknowledges the traditional owners of the Cairns city area, the Gimuy Walaburra Yidingi and Yirrkandji people, and pays respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Gimuy is the Yidingi traditional name for Cairns, meaning “slippery blue fig”, which grows in the region. Evidence of First Nations settlement in the area dates back at least 5,000 years, and certainly longer, given the extensive 60,000-year history of settlement in Australia.

The Yidingi people populated the coastal area south of the Barron River, whereas the Yirrkandji people lived north of the river. The plentiful supply of fish, shellfish, turtle and dugong, and the edible and medicinal rainforest fruits and plants in the area ensured a sustainable habitat and trade. (Cairns Regional Council 2023)

The first colonial visitor to the region was Captain James Cook, who gave the bay waters the European name Trinity Bay, as he sailed into it on Trinity Sunday 1770. Although Cook came ashore near Cape Grafton, there is no record of contact with local First Nations people.

Initial European settlement in the region in the 1860s was driven by beche de mer fishing, and the discovery of gold to the north (Palmer River field) and Atherton Tableland (Hodgkinson River field) saw the population begin to climb.

Cairns was officially founded in 1876 and named after the State Governor of the day, Sir William Wellington Cairns. It was formally declared a town in 1903 with a registered population of 3500.

As colonial settlement advanced in the region, First Nations people were forced out to the fringes of the new settlements, and many were relocated to missions.

Throughout the 1870s and early 1880s European and Chinese settlers opened up the region to agriculture generating a large enough population base for the borough of Cairns to be declared a municipality. The first mayor, R.A. Kingsford, was elected in 1885.

The development of the Cairns to Herberton rail line in 1886, and subsequent expansion from Redlynch to Myola, is widely considered the catalyst for the City's expansion. The rail line made travel through the difficult terrain easier and attracted a large number of immigrants during construction. Many of these immigrants settled in the region, establishing the sugarcane industry and extensive fruit orchards.

During World War II, Cairns was at the forefront of the Battle of the Coral Sea (1942) and the Pacific offensive (1943). Anti-aircraft gun emplacements were established along the Cairns Esplanade and Trinity Beach was used as a major training ground for defence forces for amphibious landings.

Today Cairns is a major tourism centre, promoted as the “gateway to the reef and rainforest” – the Great Barrier Reef and the World Heritage Wet Tropics Rainforests of Far North Queensland, as well as being a port, administrative centre for Far North Queensland, an international airport and the site of two major University campuses – James Cook University and Central Queensland University.

At the 2021 Census, the usual resident population of Cairns was 166,943 persons. The Cairns area includes the Cairns Regional Council area which takes in north to the Northern Beaches and south to the townships of Babinda and Miriwinni.

### **Establishment:**

The Cairns newspaper the *Cairns Post* initiated a campaign to establish a School of Arts in April 1884, although several attempts to raise public subscriptions at that time were not widely supported, as the town struggled to establish its economy. However, in the middle of 1885 a robust campaign commenced again, and the Cairns Progress Association passed a motion to establish a School of Arts and canvas for subscriptions. A School of Arts was established in Cairns in October 1885 in temporary premises donated by Fred Wimble in an empty building in Lake St, which was used as a reading room. By this time a public meeting had been held to elect a committee and funds of £182 were already raised for the erection of suitable meeting premises. The first Committee members included Messrs Chester, Wimble,

Dalgleish, Harvey, Hartley, Patience and Draper, who held their first Committee meeting on 19 November 1885. (Douglas 1965)

Tenders were submitted for construction, and Mr W.H. Provan's tender of \$360 was accepted by the Committee. The School's first building, a single-storey timber structure, was erected in 1886 in Shields Street to the west of the present building. In May that year the Queensland Premier, the Hon S.W. Griffiths MLA officially opened the building. (Douglas 1965, Brown 1984, Queensland Heritage Register 2022)



**The original Cairns School of Arts, built 1885 in Shields St.**

Photo courtesy of Cairns Historical Society Inc.

The current two-storey concrete building was erected in 1907 as the new and final premises for the Cairns School of Arts, replacing the earlier adjacent building in Shields Street. Of the 22 Schools of Arts eventually established in the Far North Queensland region, that have been identified by July 2023, the Cairns School of Arts building was the largest constructed, befitting the size of the town. Only one other School of Arts in the region pre-dates the original Cairns School: the Herberton School of Arts commenced in 1881 and is on the Queensland Heritage Register.

## The Building:

The following descriptions of the development of the 1907 School of Arts Building have been primarily reproduced from the Queensland Heritage Register website ([School of Arts, Cairns \(former\) | Environment, land and water | Queensland Government \(des.qld.gov.au\)](#))

As indicated, by the early 1900s the School was in need of larger premises. On 8 December 1906, the Cairns School of Arts Bill was passed through the Queensland Parliament, empowering the Trustees to mortgage the School of Arts Reserve at Cairns to the value of £2500, for the purpose of erecting a new building. A design competition was conducted for a new two-storey building, with upstairs accommodation for the School of Arts and the ground floor to be revenue-producing, the cost of which was not to exceed £2000. A design submitted by A.B. Polin was accepted, but rejected when tenders far exceeded the amount specified. The School of Arts Committee then commissioned Melbourne and North Queensland architects Tunbridge, Tunbridge and Lynch, who were Townsville-based but had a branch office in Cairns by 1907, to design a building to cost no more than the approved figure. Their work in Cairns around this time included the Harbour Board Offices (1907), the Central Hotel buildings (1908) and the rebuilding of the Court House Hotel (1908). Hanson & Sons won the subsequent School of Arts contract with a price of £2170, and the new building was opened officially on 5 December 1907.

The building incorporated an early use of reinforced concrete in Queensland, although not employed through the whole of the structure. The concrete walls of the ground floor were reinforced with 1/2-inch round steel rods, fused where they intersected at 12-inch intervals. The floors at ground level were poured without reinforcement, and for the upper-level walls, concrete was poured between timber formwork, without reinforcement.

The building has been subject to a number of alterations and extensions since 1907. A veranda and bathroom had been constructed upstairs at the rear by 1925, and in 1929 the Shields Street veranda was enclosed with windows. The enclosing of part of the Lake Street veranda probably dates to this period as well.

Major extensions/renovations were carried out in 1932, 1939, 1984 and 2016.

**The first major extension** was conducted in 1932. As early as 1925, the Committee was considering an extension of the building to accommodate more revenue-producing shops and offices. Plans were drawn by Committee member and architect SS Oxenham, but Cairns already had a glut of vacant shops for rent, and the concept was postponed until 1932, when the Committee commissioned Cairns architects R Hill & AJH Taylor to prepare fresh plans, and the veranda facade was extended along Lake Street at a cost of £2500. The extension provided more shop space at ground level and increased library accommodation upstairs. At this time, a decorative parapet was superimposed on the 1907 building to match that of the 1932 building.

The ground floor shop fronts were modernised in 1934-35, R Hill preparing the plans.

**A second major extension** to the building was carried out in 1939-40. Architects Hill & Taylor were again commissioned to extend the building along Lake Street to the boundary of the property. This time, the architects felt that an extension of the veranda was unnecessary and suggested that a cantilever awning would be suitable, and that the elevation be treated as a separate unit. Cairns builder A Ferrari constructed the art deco styled extensions at a cost of

approximately £4,000. At the same time, a terrazzo slab bearing the name School of Arts was placed in the concrete of the footpath at the corner of Lake and Shields Streets.



### 1939 Art Deco Extensions

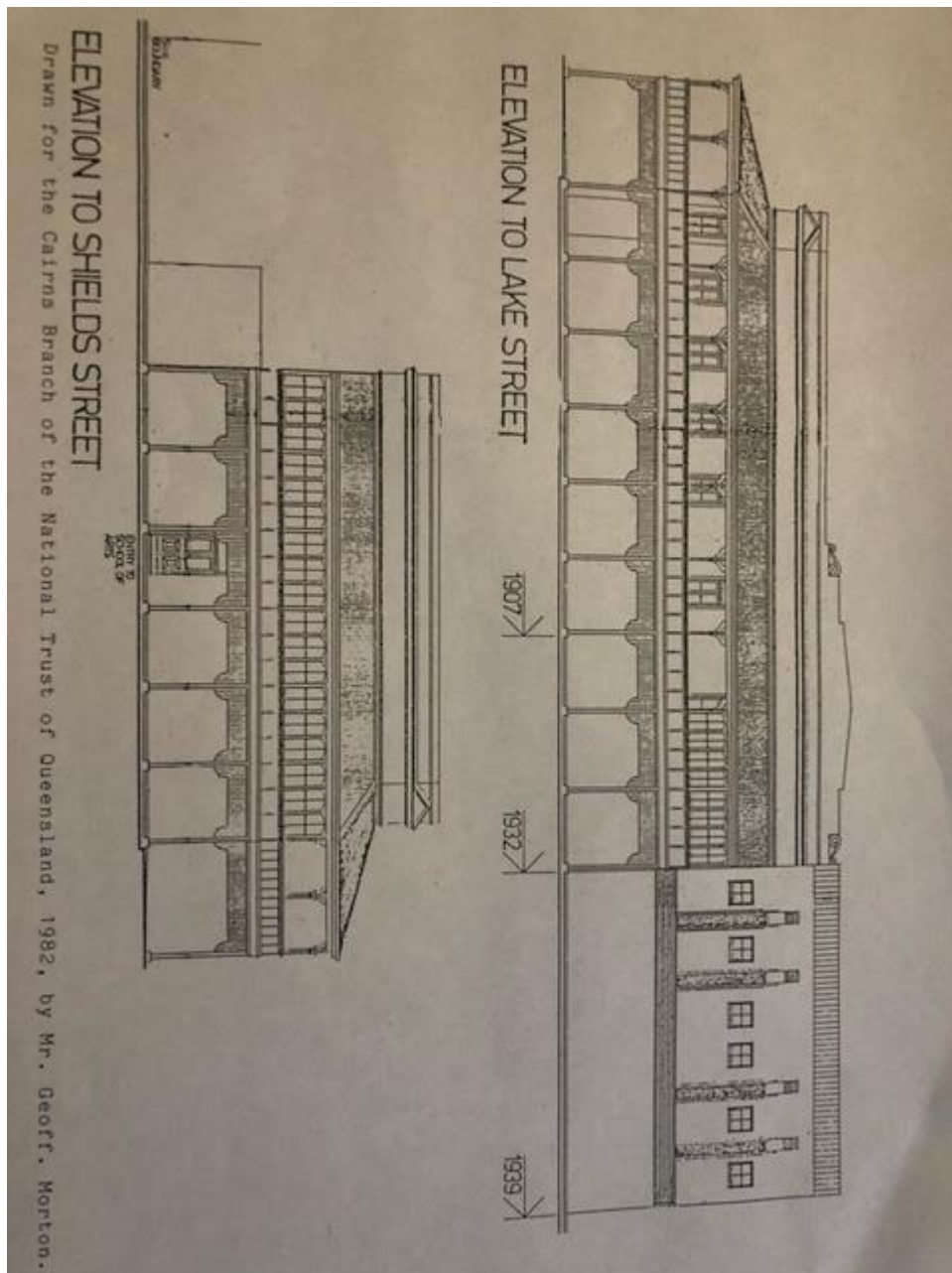
ADFAS Cairns Society Facebook photo.

Hill & Taylor designed new male and female bathrooms in 1941 in what is believed to have been an enclosed first floor veranda. The original bathroom, beside the meeting room, was probably converted to a kitchen at that time.

The ground floor of the Shields Street facade was extended c1956, to connect the School of Arts to the Penny Savings Bank. Both the bank and the 1950s extensions have been demolished.

Detail of an original Plan illustrating the extensions to the building from establishment in 1907 through to the 1939 Art Deco extension is detailed overleaf (Brown, 1989).

**Extensions to the Cairns School of Arts, 1907 – 1939.**



**The third major extension** in 1984 saw the building restored to be compatible with the original 1907 section’s architecture and appearance (Brown 1984). Brown describes the restorations as including air-conditioning and special lighting, the enclosure of the Shields and Lake St verandas with clear glass sheeting including canvas blinds. The cast-iron balustrade was removed and replaced with cast aluminium, and the earlier bathrooms were removed.

On 21 October 1992, the School of Arts building was entered on the Queensland Heritage Register.

**The fourth major extension** was a \$6M renovation which commenced in April 2016, funded by Cairns Regional Council, which had assumed control of the building in 1977. TPG Architects and Hutchinson Builders brought the original building back to its heritage design, and added a two-storey extension to the Shields St frontage, which houses an extension to the Cairns Museum. Upgrades to the mechanical, electrical and accessibility aspects of the building brought them up to current Australian standards. An elevator was added, and the Art Deco awnings and façade replaced. The ground floor space was upgraded and made available for commercial use, with six tenanted spaces available (Campbell 2016)

TPG Architects were awarded the Queensland Architecture Eddie Oribin Award for Building of the Year in 2017 for the Cairns Museum/School of Arts building, as well as the AIA Don Roderick Medal for Heritage Architecture in the same year.



**The 2016 extension, housing the Cairns Museum**

Photo G. Ellis ADFAS Cairns

## Uses and Social History

During the second half of the 1880s the Cairns School of Arts flourished in the original building, and a museum was established. The economic depression of the early 1890s, however, forced the School to close temporarily at the end of 1895, re-opening in 1897. The School of Arts was responding to the education and training needs of the local people as early

as 1891, when the local paper advertised the following Evening Classes at the School of Arts (Brown, 1984):

- Book-keeping
- General Commercial Education.

Interest in providing classes at the School of Arts increased during the late 1890's and a Technical College Committee was formed. By July 1899, the following classes were available through the School of Arts Technical College. (Brown 1984)

- |                                     |                           |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| • Botany                            | • Shorthand               |
| • Book-keeping                      | • Dressmaking             |
| • Domestic Economy                  | • Cookery                 |
| • Elementary Education              | • Ambulance and First Aid |
| • Theory of music and voice culture | • English Literature.     |

Technical College classes were taken over by the Department of Public Instruction in 1911, which saw the demise of many classes and the eventual development of stand-alone Technical Colleges in major centres of Queensland, replacing the previous functions of the Schools of Arts. The Cairns School of Arts however, retained the Technical College classes in its premises until 1923, when the department took over full control and established its own college building. (Stephens 1977).

Educational classes took many forms, however. The *Cairns Post* of 6<sup>th</sup> July 1909 contained the following notice:

#### *Dressmaking Methods*

*A lady of high attainments as an instructor in dressmaking, Madame A.E. Halkier, intends giving a demonstration in the latest methods of dress cutting tomorrow afternoon at 3 o'clock at the School of Arts.... the demonstration is free, and all ladies are invited. If sufficient inducement offers Madame Halkier will open classes in Cairns.*

Throughout the 1930's, the School of Arts prospered, despite the Depression.

#### *Presidents' Report*

*In his annual report, the president expressed pleasure that the balance sheet was the healthiest on record. Progress has been good and steady and there was no doubt that the ensuing year would show further progress.*

*Cairns Post 19 Feb 1930*

By 1934, the mood was a little more sombre, but the School of Arts was still prospering, as this extract from the President's Annual Report (*Cairns Post* 21 Feb 1934) indicates:

*Judging from Press reports and observations, and reports from southern visitors from time to time, things in general appear to be no better than the year 1932. Unemployed, depression and heavy exchange are still with us, and while some declare we have just turned the "corner" others declare it is not even in sight. Notwithstanding the above this institution has*



*made, slow but steady headway. The subscriptions received for the year have reached a figure never before reached: in fact, a record.*

Later in the decade, war impacted the School of Arts. The Cairns Branch of the Red Cross was accommodated in the building throughout its wartime activities in the second World War (Stephens 1977).

Post-war, from the late 1940's onwards, the School of Arts considerably branched out into providing premises for various community groups and adult education classes. Details from the *Cairns Post* newspaper during 1949 indicate that the School was used by the Cairns Photography Club for meetings. A Chess Club was formed at the School of Arts on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1953 (*Cairns Post*), although a Club existed in the original School building as early as September 1898 (Brown 1984). An Astronomy interest group also met at the School in 1949, and the Cairns Harbourmaster, Captain Sullivan, is noted as giving a free adult education lecture on Navigation in October 1948. A Naturalists Club also met at the School during the 1940's and 50's.

On Saturday 20 August 1949, the following item appeared in the *Cairns Post*:

#### *Adult Education*

*In the Cairns School of Arts building this week, the following lectures will be given: Monday "Your Garden this Month" by Mr. J. C. Gould; Tuesday: "Portraiture" by Mr. Lionel Lawr; Thursday: "Common Illnesses of Pre-School Age" by a Cairns doctor.*

TROVE records indicate that Adult Education (as distinct from Technical Education) was not limited to lectures, as this extract from the *Cairns Post* of Thursday 1 September 1949 (TROVE) shows.

#### *Film Evening*

*Tonight, Thursday, in the Cairns School of Arts building, the following educational sound films will be shown: "The Mississippi River" (USA) "Hawaii", "The Child Went Forth", "Old Wives Tales" (old beliefs), Dance of the Eyes (native dances in Bali), and "The Swan". Adult Education is free, and all are cordially invited.*

Adult Education also included a monthly *music appreciation recordings* group that met regularly in the School of Arts (*Cairns Post* 28 Sept. 1948).

The major use of the Cairns School of Arts over the years was its library service. For seventy years, the first floor of the School of Arts building housed the only public library in Cairns, a subscription library with up to 1,000 members. The library service provided in the original one-level building in Shields St from 1886 onwards contributes to a total ninety-year history of School of Arts library provision. Stephens (1977), a former librarian in the School, recounts how the library grew from a few hundred books in 1899 to over 40,000 volumes in 1976. It was run by the School of Arts Committee and financed from the rents obtained from the shops and offices on the ground floor, a necessity after the Government subsidy to Schools of Arts was withdrawn by the Government in 1931.

Developments in the Library service included the setting-up of a separate junior library service in 1946, which secured its own rooms on the Lake St veranda in 1959 (Stephens

1977). In 1956 the University of Queensland (the only university in Queensland at that time) began arranging for the development of regional libraries for its external students. These came to be known as Ringrose Memorial Libraries, named after the benefactors, the Ringrose family. Cairns School of Arts successfully applied for a Ringrose Library, which opened on May 30, 1959 (Stephens 1977).

From the early 1960's the School of Arts Library provided a country borrowers' service in the area from Thursday Island in the north, to Normanton and Mt. Isa in the south-west. A personal travelling library was also set up during this period, for the existing aged care facilities in Cairns (Stephens 1977).

By the mid-1970s, the library was the sole function of the School of Arts, which was struggling to provide an appropriate library service to a city the size of Cairns. On 30 June 1977, the School of Arts building and its library was transferred to the ownership of the then Cairns City Council (now the Cairns Regional Council), which moved the library into a new structure in Lake Street in 1979. (Queensland Heritage Register 2022).

### **Currently (2023)**

In 1980 the Cairns Historical Society, as new lessees of the building, opened a museum in the vacated first floor following the transfer of the Library to a Cairns City Council building in Lake St. The Museum has continued to grow and expand in size, particularly with the completion of the additional Shields St. building during the 2016 renovations.

The Cairns Historical Society continues to operate the Cairns Museum, as the building is now known. A well-patronised volunteer contingent supports the permanent staff. Besides highlighting the history of the Cairns area, the Museum and the Historical Society actively support an extensive Research Centre, and the History on the Move School Trailer Project. The Meeting Room and veranda space have been utilised for book launches by local authors, and for other community uses. School Holiday programs are held throughout the major school vacation periods.

The Research Centre contains over 60,000 items. In addition, the Photographic collection holds over 46,000 digitised images. Five major galleries showcase the Cairns and Far North Region, and additional specialised exhibitions are staged throughout the year.

The Cairns School of Arts building maintains its 116-year presence in the Central Business District of Cairns, and its newer life as an energetic and popular museum for locals and tourists is ensured.



**The School of Arts today 2023– Home of the Cairns Museum.**

Photo: G. Ellis ADFAS Cairns



**Footpath information and history plaque – Lake St. 2023**

Photo: G. Ellis ADFAS Cairns

**Acknowledgements:**

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**References:**

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This report on the Cairns School of Arts building has been undertaken as an assignment for a course in Heritage conservation in Australia, for an Associate Diploma in Local & Applied History, through the Armidale College of Advanced Education, N.S.W. It was also utilised in the application for Queensland Heritage registration.

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