

Silverton Gaol Museum

Ross Wecker

This year, 2018, has seen the *fiftieth* anniversary of Silverton Gaol's opening as a local historical museum—a considerable achievement for the Broken Hill Historical Society. Yet, this historical opening almost didn't occur.

The Silverton Gaol was erected in October 1889. RHB Kearns noted that:

The original Gaol consisted of a makeshift wood and iron structure. Prisoners were secured at night with leg-irons to prevent their escape and, when the limited cell accommodation overflowed, were chained to a nearby peppercorn tree (Kearns 1968).



Silverton Gaol as erected in 1889
(Ralph Wallace Research Centre archives)

Kearns (1968) also noted that following the opening of a Gaol in Broken Hill in 1892, the establishment of the courts there, and a decreasing population in Silverton, that Gaol was then used only for short-term prisoners, such as overnight lock-ups. By the 1930s the property had been abandoned, becoming a target for vandalism, until the intervention of the Broken Hill Historical Society in 1966 saw its transformation into a museum (Kearns 1968, p. 7).

The following extract from a letter in March 1987 by the then Honorary Secretary of the Society, RR Wallace, to a Professor T Bennett at Griffith University, notes: 'In 1966 the Lands Department advertised the building for sale to be demolished' (Wallace 1987).

The sale was announced first in the *Barrier Miner* newspaper on December 17, 1965:

FOR SALE —ONE POLICE STATION

A 2-acre Crown land block at Silverton will be offered for sale at public auction on Wednesday, January 19, 1966.

Announcing this today the Minister for Lands and Mines, Mr. Tom Lewis, M.L.A., said that the block ... was formerly the old Silverton police premises. Included in

the reserve price of £250 are the buildings, which comprise the old police premises. These buildings have been unoccupied for some time and are in a bad state of repair. (*Barrier Miner* 1965a)

Wallace (1987) notes that the December 17 advertisement led to 'an urgent appeal to the Minister with a plan for alternative use as a museum'.

By December 18, 1965, only one day after the initial announcement, the *Barrier Miner* (1965b) was reporting that '[t]he Broken Hill Historical Society is to take steps to have the Silverton Police Station retained as a historical and tourist attraction.'

The Society sent telegrams to the sitting members for the then electorates of Sturt and Cobar, and to the current Minister for Lands.

Telegram from then President of the Society, JJ Prendergast, to the then member for Sturt, Mr WE Wattison, at Parliament House NSW, 1965 (Ralph Wallace Research Centre Archives)

The telegrams saved the day.

Kearns notes:

The Broken Hill Historical Society was instrumental in setting up a special Trust in 1966, and the premises were ceded to the Trust by the N.S.W. Department of Lands early in 1968 ... A historical museum has been established in the Gaol for the display of photographs, documents, household, pastoral and mining equipment and other items ...

The Silverton Gaol and Historical Museum was officially opened for public inspection on 15 September 1968. (Kearns 1968, p. 7)

The comprehensive collection, and its detailing, at the Gaol Museum were put together by a large number of people up until this point, and thereafter.

Exhibitions

There are many individual exhibitions at the Silverton Gaol Museum but one that gains attention from visitors is the figure of Richard O'Connell along with a photo of Trooper JP Flood. Trooper Flood served at the Gaol in the Mounted Police, from 1863 to 1910.

In August 2018, Kylie Flury came from Switzerland to explore Trooper Flood's background, as he was her great-great-grandfather.

After her visit, we sent her this photograph of JP Flood, which pleased the family enormously, because they had never had a photograph of him.



Trooper JP Flood who served in the Mounted Police at Silverton

Visits

Many individual visitors and small groups have come to the Gaol Museum this year. Tour buses have come regularly once or twice a month, with from 25 to 35 people each time, from Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and much further afield, often on a several-week tour into the outback.

Responses to the Silverton Gaol Museum are always good, with many really taken back in time by finding some items they are familiar with. The response of visitors almost always comes with a touch of amazement at the good condition of the items the Museum holds.

Acquisitions

Amongst a number of acquisitions this year was a quite rare 63-years-old 'Rosebud' plastic teddy bear donated by former Broken Hill resident Vicky Taylor. Rosebud was a brand name of Nene Plastics in the United Kingdom. Nene Plastics started making toys with the 'Rosebud' imprint stamped into their back around 1947.

This particular bear not only has the 'Rosebud' stamp, but also has 'Patent pending', which suggests it comes from a very early phase of production. Nene Plastics were bought out in 1967 by Mattel, but they have retained the Rosebud imprint.

Also donated were toy versions of 'Mrs Potts' cold-handle, 'sad' irons ('sad' in this instance meaning 'heavy'), and a very old date-stamp carousel holder still carrying some date stamps.

The toy 'Mrs Potts' irons and the date-stamp holder were donated by the White family, formerly of Wonnaminta Station.

'Mrs Potts' irons were US-made and sold from the mid to late 1870s until almost the 1950s. Their value lay in having a removable wooden handle that didn't radiate heat back upwards to the user, and a hollow base that could also be filled with a material, like plaster of Paris, that also helped prevent the radiating of heat into the user's hand. The irons in the photograph are toy versions only of the irons the Mrs Potts brand manufactured and sold, and are consequently, quite rare.



'Rosebud' plastic teddy bear



'Mrs Potts' toy irons



Date stamp carousel holder with remaining date stamps

Renovations

Some major renovations occurred at the Silverton Gaol Museum during 2018.

Because sections of the Museum have ceilings made from floorboards, dust that had accumulated over decades had been leaking down onto the exhibits in the Hospital Wing. To address this issue, 120 square metres of fine sand was shovelled and vacuumed out of the Hospital Wing ceiling space. While this was occurring, some fell through the ceilings onto dust cloths below.



Dust cloths over items in the Hospital Wing while the ceiling was being vacuumed

The old verandah was riddled with dry rot and white ants and could not be used, so it was replaced during 2018. Importantly, the main reason for replacing the verandah was that visitors with disabilities, in wheelchairs, for example, couldn't enter the Museum via the steps at the side of the building. The verandah is now ready for wheelchair and disability access. Funding for the repairs came from a state government grant, and the work was undertaken by James Tarasenko, a former local builder.



The old boards are gone



New beams being built

Part of the verandah repair included placing rubber ramp mats both outside and inside the entrance door to help wheelchair access through the doorway. Also mended, inside the access door, was an inspection/manhole square, which required maintenance repairs.



The completed new verandah

A separate repair that took place this year was the replacement of the roof gables on the Hospital Wing. Replacement was undertaken because the timbers of the gables had dry rot. This meant some timbers were falling out, which unfortunately was allowing access for birds into the overall roof space.



One of the newly replaced gables on the Hospital Wing

Acknowledgments in memoriam

The Silverton Gaol Museum Coordinator wishes to acknowledge, in memoriam, the volunteer help and assistance given over recent years by the late BHHSoc member Ken McLauchlan. Ken had been the Coordinator of the Museum for approximately nine years, and also undertook ongoing general maintenance of grounds and buildings.

References

Barrier Miner 1965a, 'For sale – one police station', Dec. 17.

Barrier Miner 1965b, 'Moves to retain Silverton Gaol', Dec. 18.

Kearns, RHB 1968, *Broken Hill Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, vol. 4, December, pp. 6–7.

Wallace, RR 1987, Society correspondence to Associate Professor T Bennett, Griffith University, Qld, held Ralph Wallace Research Centre, Broken Hill.

About the author: Ross Wecker is a BHHSoc. member and took over the Coordinator position from Ken McLaughlan at the Silverton Gaol Museum in late 2017. Ross has had a life-time interest in history generally, and in local history particularly.