

Would you build A TOWN HALL in a cemetery?



Russell Doust looks at the fascinating story of how the site for the Sydney Town Hall was gained

Well, would you? I think not—but that is just what the good burghers of Sydney Town did. Admittedly, the cemetery was not in active use, and indeed had not been for nearly 25 years, but when, in 1844, the members of the City Council first told Governor Sir George Gipps that they had their eye on the site, there was a good deal of public outcry.

But why did they want that particular site? Probably for several reasons: it was central to the city, it was next door to St Andrew's Anglican Church (later Cathedral)—which might give it special respectability and,

anyway, it was prime real estate with no buildings on it—and perhaps it could be acquired at no cost to the ratepayers.

By the 1840s, it had become clear that Sydney was changing from the convict settlement of 1788. In 1840, Gipps had attempted to have the Council pass a Bill to establish municipal corporations in New South Wales, but opposition by some free settlers to the proposal that emancipated convicts might be elected to local councils led him to withdraw the Bill and seek guidance from the Colonial Office back in London. A new *Sydney Corporation Bill* was passed in July 1842, and the resulting election for the City Council was without incident. In *A History of New South Wales* (2006), Beverley Kingston remarks that the Council was 'dominated by tradesmen, merchants and professional men from the

Unknown photographer
Devonshire Street Cemetery, Sydney
(NSW), 1902
b&w photograph; 19.0 x 16.0 cm
Courtesy State Records NSW
ID 17420_a014_a0140000258

On 7 August 2007, after this article was written, newspapers carried a report of twenty graves being discovered beneath the Town Hall basement.



above left:
N.S.
Plan of Old Burial Ground and Cathedral Close, George Street Sydney 1865
illustrated map; 42.4 x 28.9 cm
Map Collection
nla.map-f316

above right:
William Nicholas (1807–1854)
Portrait of Sir George Gipps, Late Governor of New South Wales, 1847
lithograph; 27.5 x 21.8 cm
Rex Nan Kivell Collection
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an8178112

'Australian' party, i.e. those born in New South Wales'.

The immediate effect was that Sydney's new City Council could begin to function as a body representative of its inhabitants. The City's affairs would no longer be entirely under the control of the Legislative Council with its high proportion of wealthy landowners, and of the Governor who was seen as the embodiment of the Home Government back in England. The brief of the City Council, whose members were in little doubt of their importance, included street lighting, sanitation, regulation of produce markets and the well-being of the people of Sydney in general. The newly elected aldermen met first in the George Street Market building and then at a variety of Sydney hotels. But a permanent home for the Council and its staff was now needed—where could it be?



It is unclear which other sites were considered by the City Council but, on 16 May 1844, a deputation from the Council met with the Governor and asked for part of the Old Burial Ground. Governor Gipps was not unsympathetic to the request. He had already drawn the attention of the Legislative Council to the pressing need for a new cemetery for Sydney. The Old Burial Ground had not been used since 1820 and the replacement cemetery, the 'New' Burial Ground at the intersection of Elizabeth Street and Devonshire Place (where Sydney's Central Railway Station now stands) was, by the 1840s, so overcrowded that burials were routinely being made on top of earlier ones.

The Sydney Morning Herald of 21 May, under its regular news heading 'City Council', reported that Governor Gipps had met the deputation with his usual courtesy the previous week, had listened to the request, and had said that, once the bones of the dead had been cleared from the Old Burial Ground, he would be pleased to grant a portion to the City Council as the site for a town hall.

Sydneysiders will know where the Cathedral and the adjacent Town Hall are; others may not. George Street in the 1840s was Sydney's most important street—so important that it had been renamed in honour of His Majesty King George. The Old Burial Ground was no more than a kilometre and a half from where the original mercantile and business heart of the town in the vicinity of Sydney Cove had been. Business was now moving north, and the Old Burial Ground site had the

wholly desirable advantage of being as far away as possible from Government House and from the Legislative Council sitting in Macquarie Street, on the other side of the city. The Mayor and the Aldermen, getting rich as a body corporate and no doubt also individually, were of a mind to make their mark by building a town hall which would rival or indeed surpass the town halls being built in the Mother Country.

Governor Gipps' first intended Bill about a new cemetery had lapsed at the close of the 1844 Session of the Legislative Council but, in the new Session of August 1845, he asked the Council to consider a new Bill. This time it not only proposed a new general cemetery for Sydney, but also the removal elsewhere of the remains of the long-since dead in the Old Burial Ground. The town hall was not specifically mentioned in the Bill but, following the report of the deputation to the Governor the previous year, there had already been widespread public comment. When the Bill came before the Legislative Council, members were appalled by the idea of disturbing the dead and, since most of them were by now elected, not appointed, they might have had some private concerns about their electoral future. They appointed a Select Committee to take advice from the community, and to advise the full Council how it should proceed with the Bill.

The members of this Select Committee were of course all Legislative Council members, but some carefully selected witnesses were called to give evidence before it. The first was the old Archdeacon, William Cowper, father of Charles Cowper, by then a prominent member of the Legislative Council. Other witnesses included Sir Thomas Livingston Mitchell, the Surveyor General, and John Tooth, landowner, businessman and brewer. Cowper reassured the Committee that, to the best of his knowledge, 'I am inclined to think that the Old Burial Ground was never consecrated'. Tooth was righteously against any proposal to use the site for any secular purpose:

It struck me when I heard of it as a monstrous sacrilege. You think once having been appropriated to a solemn and sacred purpose, it ought never to be applied to any other.

With the assistance of the witnesses, the Select Committee had no difficulty in

arguing strongly against the proposal to use the Old Burial Ground—it thought the area would be better developed as much needed open space in the centre of the city—but it also put forward a number of helpful suggestions as to other sites for a town hall. The preferred site seems to have been in the middle of Hyde Park. There were other suggestions for suitable cemetery sites—Grose Farm (which became the University of Sydney's first site) had already been considered, but Garden Island (adjacent to Woolloomooloo and now a naval base) in particular seemed to be favoured.

The City Council did not get the Old Burial Ground site until 1869 when the *Cathedral Close Act* gave the city half an acre specifically for its town hall. The human remains were removed, mostly to the new necropolis at Rookwood in western Sydney. Regrettably the memorial stones were not transferred and their whereabouts are unknown. However, once the site was confirmed, the City Council set about building its monument to the greatness of Sydney. Of course, Sydney was not the only colonial capital to practise self-advertisement in this way—they all did, in greater or lesser degrees of grandeur.

The first section of the Sydney Town Hall was completed and occupied in 1874. It might not be too fanciful to suggest that its design could have been influenced by what Melbourne, rich from the gold rush,



above:
Walter G. Mason
Portrait of the Venerable Archdeacon Cowper, D.D. 1857
wood engraving; 14.5 x 10.8 cm
Rex Nan Kivell Collection
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7978970

below:
Frank Hurley (1885–1962)
The Town Hall [Sydney] c.1930
b&w glass negative
16.3 x 21.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23136567





above:
 Frank Hurley (1885–1962)
*General View of the Grand Organ,
 Town Hall [Sydney] c.1940*
 glass negative; full plate
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an23381824

below:
 Charles Bayliss (1850–1897)
*Cathedral and Town Hall
 [Sydney] 1879*
 b&w photograph; 26.5 x 33.0 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an10697078-24

had built in 1870. But Sydney's prosperity was not fuelled by gold and the first part of the building was no more than the present vestibule—in itself a large and impressive space which was originally used for meetings—and some offices for the Mayor, Councillors and staff. But building went on: the clock tower, second highest in Sydney, in 1881; the main hall, designated the Centennial Hall in 1889 (a year too late for the centenary); and its pride and joy, the great William Hill pipe organ, at the

time the largest pipe organ in the world. The City of Sydney website remarks that the Town Hall shares 'design concepts with the much grander City Hall in Philadelphia (1871–1901)'.

So Sydney got its 'wedding cake', or Victorian/Beaux Arts (Second Empire), Town Hall, next door to the equally ornate Perpendicular Gothic St Andrews Cathedral, and it has graced the centre of Sydney for 120 years. But alas, all is not well. Despite the extensive, expensive and quite beautiful restoration completed in 1991 to celebrate 150 years of the City Council, a press release from the Lord Mayor, Clover Moore, reported in *ABC News Online* on 24 April 2007, warned that:

the building ... has endured Sydney's weather and increasing pollution from cars and buses and this has taken its toll on the sandstone façade ... We're now at a point in the building's future that we need to carry out extensive external restorations and at the same time upgrade its internal services ... She expects Town Hall to be closed for about 12 months [from 2008].

We can only wish the Town Hall well for its next hundred years or more.

RUSSELL DOUST, a former State Librarian of New South Wales, is a cultural and social historian, mainly of the 19th century—and has actually played the Town Hall organ (once)

