

FULL HISTORY

A seemingly insignificant scrap of notepaper, held with the Queensland State Archives Land and Works Office files, undated, marks the beginning of the story of Rockhampton's 'Old Railway House'.

The note, with the word Council and the initials A.M. (perhaps for the Minister, Arthur Macalister?) scrawled on one side, details the early planning for the establishment of the Northern Railway. Among preliminary plans for promoting Mr H T Plews to be Chief Commissioner of Northern Railways and filling other key roles in the new administration appears the line 'Railway offices to be built -for the meantime to be rented'.

On January 12, 1865, an advertisement (dated December 16, 1864) appeared in *The Bulletin* calling for tenders for the erection of the Offices and Out-buildings of the Great Northern Railway. Documents were available from the Office of the Chief Engineer in Rockhampton, then situated in Albrecht Feez's General Store, as well as from the Commissioner for Railways in Brisbane². The buildings were to be constructed at the Railway Reserve in Kent Street.

The decision to build a railway from Rockhampton was a highly political one and timing was important. The 'north' was incensed by the high cost of the Railway lines being built in the South East corner and many were talking of creating a new northern colony³. Political imperative, combined with the shortage of sawn timber in the district at the time⁴ may have contributed to the decision to erect a 'pre-cut' building as Rockhampton's first Railway building. The new State was having difficulty meeting the demand for government buildings and had already used 'pre-cut'

or prefabricated buildings in many areas⁵. The tender was awarded to local builders Lloyd and Hornby at a cost of 1478. The designer of the building remains in some doubt, although it is generally credited to Henry Plews, the Chief Engineer⁶. Although Plew's main expertise was in civil engineering, he designed an extension to the Hospital in Rockhampton in 1865⁷, and had a significant role in the design of the Terminal building two years later⁸. The local daily newspaper, *The Bulletin*, announced the awarding of the tender on March 16, 1865.

Offices are about to be constructed by Messrs Lloyd and Hornby, for the use, at present, of Mr Plews and staff, at the corner of Cambridge and Stanley Streets - this building being designed to serve ultimately as a manager's residence.

(In fact Cambridge and Stanley Streets run parallel, the new building was later described as being on the corner of Kent and Stanley Streets.)

There were some delays in building the new offices. Henry had to send to Brisbane for the tracings as they had not been returned after gaining departmental approval⁹. The builders had still not commenced by 18th April when Plews sent a memo to the Land and Works office seeking an advance of four hundred pounds for the contractors¹⁰. By 17th June 1865, the building was nearing completion¹¹ and painters were already at work on the premises. A near disaster was averted when quick thinking neighbours doused a fire which damaged skirting boards, floorboards and a carpenter's bench in the largest room, at the front of the building. William Batten, carpenter, a disgruntled former employee of the building contractors was

¹ Note, undated, Department of Lands and Works, LWO A16, 64/2325, AOQLD.

² 'Tender Notice', *The Bulletin*, Jan 12, 1865.

³ I. Hoch, *To the Setting Sun: A History of Railway Construction Rockhampton to Longreach 1865-1892*, 2nd edn, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, 1997, p. 9.

⁴ Engineer (Plews) Report 3.4.1866, *Votes and Proceedings of the Queensland Parliament*, Brisbane, Government Printer, 1866, p 1499.

⁵ Government Buildings at Port Albany, *Votes and Proceedings of the Queensland Parliament*, Thursday, 25 May 1865, Brisbane, Government Printer, 1865, p 51.

⁶ D. Watson & J. McKay, *Queensland Architects of the 19th Century*, Queensland Museum, Brisbane, 1994, p. 143.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 143.

⁸ Henry Plews to Charles Fox, London, 28 November, 1864, Department of Lands and Works, LWO A26, 64/2578, AOQLD, p. 6.

⁹ Henry Plews to Undersecretary of Works, 13 March, 1865, Department of Lands and Works, LWO A19, 65/575, AOQLD.

¹⁰ Henry Plews to ? for Land and Works, 18 April, 1865, Department of Lands and Works, LWO A20, 65/815, AOQLD.

¹¹ *The Bulletin*, June 22 1865.

subsequently charged with arson. At the ensuing trial, in spite of strong circumstantial evidence, and the finding that the fire was 'maliciously done and was the work of an incendiary...there was not sufficient evidence to show by whom it was caused'¹². The repairs necessitated by the fire meant that the building was not occupied by the Railway Department until July 24, 1865¹³.

Curiously, the building style seems not to have attracted a great deal of attention although, according to our current knowledge, it was innovative in construction. On the day of the fire, we know that a local architect had visited the site. He appears not to have had any connection to the buildings design or erection in any official capacity. He was merely 'visiting'¹⁴ Perhaps this indicates some interest in the construction style?

The building housed 23 railway officers and provided a base from which both the line west (to Westwood) and the new terminal were designed. The building featured in Rockhampton's celebrations when the Governor turned the sod for the commencement of construction of the line¹⁵. With the completion of the terminal building and the opening of the railway line in September 1867, the former offices became the residence of .William Bullen, the first manager of the Great Northern Railway¹⁶. The line was not successful¹⁷, and in late 1868, with the Government in financial crisis¹⁸, plans for any extension beyond the first 30 miles were shelved. The Chief Engineer for Roads took over the management of the Railway as well. Henry Plews had, by this time, taken over as Engineer in Chief for Railways in Queensland.

The manager's residence, formerly the office, was advertised for rent on the 6th August, 1868. The Bulletin was vitriolic in its attack.

An ingeniously worded advertisement appeared in our last issue, informing the public that 'the house in Stanley street, lately occupied by W. Bullen, Esq. was to let'. This is mild periphrasis for 'Rockhampton Railway Offices to let'...We expect the railway itself to be let next, and it would be a fortunate thing if the Government could find some one to take it off their hands'¹⁹

There was only one way to make the line pay and that was to extend it. The next leg of the line west was commenced in 1872. Andrew Craig was promoted from Station Master to Traffic Manager in this year and the Post Office directory shows him in residence in the former offices, now manager's house, in 1874

The building was originally elevated only slightly off

the ground at construction and a memo, dated May 26th 1891, to The Chief Engineer in Brisbane from the Superintendent of Maintenance, Mr Rodger, in Rockhampton, requests funding to raise the building to seven foot. The memo writer confirms the age of the house and uses its age as an argument for upgrading. 'The house was built in 1865 and is therefore 26 years old. The size of it including verandahs is 54ft x 61ft and it has three roofs with a valley between falling to the back'.²⁰ The memo gives a clear description of the home, with the detached servants and kitchen wing and the 'flimsy' 26' long covered way that connected the kitchen to the house. It appears that this request was denied as the letter book has entries for June 23, 1891 and July 4th, 1891 which seem to indicate an unwillingness on the part of the Administration to spend anything but the most trifling sum doing bare essentials to the Traffic Manager's house.

In 1897 a plan showing the building on high stumps, with an extra room added was sent to Brisbane with a memo which has unfortunately not survived. W H Ball was contracted to carry out the work on 20th July 1897. When first completed, the windows of the house were casements. The 1897 plan shows the windows as originally built, and also carries a note that refers to the approval of '4 French lights' in place of opening windows. Another significant Rockhampton district home, Gracemere homestead, which dates to 1858, was also fitted with casement windows. The casements on the Traffic Manager's home were fitted with a 'fanlight' window above the main window. These survive above the french doors. All original casements have disappeared over time. As well as the french doors mentioned on the plan for alterations in 1897, double hung sash windows have taken their place in other locations. The original placement of two sets of casement windows on each side of the central door on the Front elevation has been replaced by a single set of french doors on each side.

The room was added, and the house today is largely as depicted in the plan²¹. In 1911²² the house was cut into four portions and relocated onto land the Railway had purchased in George Street²³ where it remained the Traffic Managers residence until 1974 when it passed to private hands. Stanley and Gwendoline Laidler (Graziers) purchased the property as a town residence and sold it in 1993 to the Strelow family, the current owners, who fulfilled a long held dream and opened the home as a Bed and Breakfast in 2008.

¹² *The Bulletin*, June 21 1865, n.p.

¹³ *The Bulletin*, July 27, 1865, n.p.

¹⁴ *The Bulletin*, June 21, 1865, n.p.

¹⁵ *The Bulletin* September 28, 1865, n.p.

¹⁶ *Government Gazette*, 19 October, 1867, Brisbane, Government Printer, 1867.

¹⁷ L. McDonald, *Rockhampton a History of City and District*. University of Queensland Press, Melbourne, 1981, p. 162.

¹⁸ Hock, op. Cit., p. 13.

¹⁹ *The Bulletin*, 8 October, 1868, n.p.

²⁰ Supt. Maintenance to Chief Engineer, 26 May, 1891, William Rodger's Letterbook, 1891, original held at Rockhampton Railway, p. 455.

²¹ Alterations to District Traffic Manager's House, Rockhampton, (Blueprint), 11 June, 1897, Railway Department, Chief Engineer's Office, PD172-PD 241, Plan C177, AOQLD.

²² *The Bulletin*, 23 May, 1911.

²³ Certificate of Title issued to The Commissioner for Railways, 11 May 1911, Registrar of Titles, Volume 1. XiX, folio 209.