NEW ENGLAND TABLELAND AND SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND
Links and Contrasts in Architectural Styles

by Jean Stewart

The historical links are well known and well documented. There are the paths of explorers, particularly Oxley who went first through New England and then later explored the Brisbane River, and Cunningham whose journey through north-western New South Wales near Warralda led him to the mountain areas at the edges of the Darling Downs.

They were followed by the squatters and pastoralists who followed the trails from the Hunter Valley, through the New England Tablelands to the Darling Downs and beyond, establishing the frontier society. Some established a chain of stations along the way, the so-called “string of pearls”, and moved their sheep and cattle regularly along the stock routes as the seasons dictated. Some graziers still own property in both northern New South Wales and Queensland, carrying out the modern equivalent of the former style of management.

Other links include the movement of people, especially those from a pastoral background in New England who became prominent in Queensland politics, such as M.H. Marsh, Gilbert Fisher, Arthur Hodgson, R.R. Mackenzie, Albert Norton and Albert Palmer. The surveyor J.J. Galloway, author of the town plan of Armidale, became Head of the Survey Office at Moreton Bay and established a parliamentary career.

The movement was not just in one direction. Many indentured German farmworkers found their way from Brisbane to New England. Among those to found a strong and significant dynasty were the Sommerlads of Tenterfield. Since the 1870s Armidale has had a strong pull as an educational centre.

The pastoral, mining, educational and ecclesiastical development of northern New South Wales had a significant effect on its urban architecture. In Armidale, Inverell, Glen Innes and Tenterfield, the legacy of buildings erected during the 1880s, 1890s and the first decade of this century, reflect the stolidity, strength, wealth and confidence of wool, mining and commerce. The commercial buildings, churches, court houses, town halls and houses of the elite bear testament to this wealth. They were built solidly of brick and elaborately decorated with the trappings of a flamboyant Victorian style. The climate played a part, as heavy brick buildings could be kept warm with great open fire places marked by immense chimneys.
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These features contrast with the buildings of country Queensland, many of which reflect a different lifestyle, warmer climate, and humbler economy. These mainly timber structures, built high on stumps, were frequently no less flamboyant in their decorative features reflecting the ideas and creativity of skilled craftsmen. In both New England and Queensland there was the desire to portray Gothic style.

I wish to concentrate on the buildings of Armidale. Many of its fine examples of domestic architecture, and fine churches and hotels date from the 1880s and 1890s. But Armidale also flourished in the 1930s and there are many Californian bungalows and art deco commercial buildings. The results of the new boom of the 1960s and 1970s are very clear, some blending in with the old, and some new and startling, reminders of the controversy and anger of the demolition of a much loved building once gracing the site.

The boom of the late 19th century produced a great spate of buildings. Substantial houses, often ornate and two-storied, were built on properties for people like Whites, Wright, Dangar, Morse and Marsh. These same families often built townshouses of generous proportions made of the famous Armidale bluebrick won from the quarry at Saumarez just outside Armidale.

These same families were also significant churchgoers, generously supporting the building of Anglican and Catholic cathedrals, and Wesleyan and Presbyterian churches which are today such an important and significant feature of Armidale.

The same names appear on the rolls of the growing numbers of schools in nineteenth century Armidale. Their influence is significant in raising funds for schools such as The Armidale School, designed by architect John Sulman.

The pastoral wealth fostered a significant architectural tradition, particularly through the patronage of the White family and to a lesser extent the Wrights. They employed the Canadian-born architect John Horbury Hunt to build their houses and through that contact, he was engaged to design St. Peter’s Cathedral, a great treasure, as well as many other churches in the area. He was also architect for Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle, and the Anglican Cathedral at Grafton. The architect John Pender of Maitland designed Saumarez (now a National Trust property) for F.J. White, as well as St. Paul’s Presbyterian church.

Hunt’s work includes St. John’s Primary School of the New England Girls’ School, Booloominbah, the administrative centre of the University of New England, and Trevenna, the residence of the
University’s Vice Chancellor. He also designed the original buildings on the site of the Armidale and New England Hospital but only a couple of well hidden gables remain. Except for St. John’s, a timber building originally built as an Anglican Theological College and Trevenna, all are built in Armidale blue brick. Each building bears the unmistakable stamp of Hunt who was much influenced by the Gothic style in vogue in Europe and North America at that time.

St. Peter’s is a small cathedral but Hunt’s consummate skill with his preferred materials — brick and timber — is well illustrated. Granite foundations were left to settle for 18 months. Each brick needed for the special decorative features was cast in its own mould, and the whole work reflects Hunt’s immense attention to detail. His windows are asymmetrical and in odd groups of twos and threes, while his very complicated roof line is set off with decorative features of truncated pyramids. The interior has a fine example of intricate timber ceiling rafters with the nave a different pattern from that used in the sanctuary, a common feature in his church buildings.

F.R. White commissioned Hunt to build Booloominbah for his large family, and in this building the heavy chimneys, verandahs, porches and gables are strong features. In the interior, the great oak fireplaces dominated by the massive Gordon window all reflect Hunt’s personal and individual style. Wonderful mottoes above the archways and fireplaces such as ‘Honest Labour Bears a Lovely Face’ were a constant reminder to the servants.

In nearby Trevenna, built for Mrs Wright, a different, strangely modern, style was employed. Walls of rough-trimmed uncoursed black basalt, and wooden shingles and painted wooden gables make a significant contrast with neighbouring Booloominbah.

Hunt was both prolific and idiosyncratic. He rode a specially-designed bicycle fitted with an attachment which could be swung up to rest on the handlebars and seat as a portable drafting board, complete with ink reservoir. He wore a specially designed top hat with a compartment to hold sheets of paper and his clothes had special pockets for his drawing instruments.

Hunt was meticulous in the inspection of work and materials, which often landed him in great conflicts with his employers and patrons. Furious rows, especially with church building committees, sometimes led to his services being terminated.

Hunt lived at Rose Bay in a house he designed. As commissions fell off, he was forced to sell all and died a pauper. His only possessions then were his spectacles, three gold rings, a silver pencil and eight shillings in cash.

Hunt’s admirers have formed the Horbury Hunt Club and make an annual inspection of some of his work. To Hunt, Armidale is greatly indebted for his legacy of interesting, significant and important buildings.