Yallourn - The Years of Consolidation

This second article on the now-demolished town of Yallourn in Victoria's brown coal rich Latrobe Valley looks at the development and architectural character of some of the major community facilities which contributed to the blossoming of this fine example of 'garden city' planning in the 1920s and 1930s.

The 1920s in Yallourn presented the early inhabitants with a range of challenges often faced by the pioneering settlers of new urban areas. The provision of facilities and services tended to lag behind the rate of population and housing growth. The difficulties thus imposed appeared to be borne in good part by the fledgling community and assisted in the development of a strong community spirit and self-help ethic which were to be hallmarks of Yallourn until the commencement of its depopulation and demolition in the 1970s.

Spiritual needs preceded the more earthly community needs in Yallourn's early years and the first community building to be completed was an Anglican parish hall in 1923, a year after the first residents settled in the town. St John's Church of England parish hall was designed by Melbourne architects, Gawler and Drummond, to be fitted with a chancel so that it could be used for divine service until a church could be erected. The laying of the foundation stone on 3 February 1923 was a festive occasion with:

...gay bunting drawn from tree to tree, a small clearing in the primitive forest, the first brick foundation wall, the large stone suspended in an all-ready attitude, the Yallourn Town Band at its best, the assembled people parted as the procession of robed clergy followed by the Bishop passed by - all combined to produce dignity and splendour.

Similar multi-purpose thinking was evident in the construction of church halls by the Methodist (1924), Presbyterian (1925) and Roman Catholic (1926) congregations soon afterwards. Generally many years were to pass before more elaborate religious edifices were erected in Yallourn while the sturdy little Presbyterian church hall was to faithfully serve as a place of worship throughout the life of Yallourn. (illustration 1)
The educational needs of the Yallourn community were soon recognised with the completion in 1924 of a state primary school to accommodate 350 children. This school was designed by the Victorian Public Works Department under chief architect Evan Smith in the extended bungalow educational vernacular of the time. The initial enrolment in 1925 was 230 children and the school was to be Yallourn's main educational facility - both primary and secondary - until the construction of an Infants School in 1931 relieved some of the enrolment pressures which had built up at the school. A Catholic primary school opened in 1926 and also soon experienced enrolment pressures as the Electric Spark, Yallourn's own newspaper, reported:

\[\text{although recently erected, the Catholic school at Yallourn has been found much too small for requirements. Extensions are to be made and material is being assembled with the object of having extension made at an early date.}^{(3)}\]

The young town of Yallourn was not without its social problems, and difficulties resulting from the lack of a hotel in the town were recognised at an official level in the 1925 Annual Report of the State Electricity Commission (the town's construction authority):

\[\text{...The absence of hotel accommodation means that there is no accommodation at all for persons having business in the town or for other visitors. Sly grog selling, of which the recent prosecutions are evidence, is considered to be a direct outcome of the fact that no hotel has been provided. This is a position which, cannot, in the best interests of the Commission's employees and of the town be permitted to continue longer than can be avoided.}^{(4)}\]
During 1925-26 designs were prepared for a hotel to accommodate 45 lodgers and to provide facilities for the sale of liquor.

However, the Commission ran into a problem in relation to its legal capacity to be granted a licence. The matter was eventually resolved in 1927 after State Government approval and referral to the High Court. The hotel, which was designed by A R La Gerche, the Commission's architect, was next to the railway station on one of the town's principal corners. (Illustration 2). The two-storeyed hotel was opened on 1 October 1928 and cost approximately $30,000. The hotel was of classical proportions with Georgian fenestration and paid obeisance to Spanish Mission influences with its triple arches and minute central balcony identifying the entrance. The ascetic exterior of the hotel appeared to pressage the poverty-stricken 1930s. However, an appropriate aspect of the hotel was the extensive use of electricity with an all-electric kitchen and bar. The hotel included:

...two dining rooms, each with accommodation for 140 guests, a smokeroom and a women's lounge. In the dining room (which has Jacobean panelling) is a system of diffused lighting operating from a large light well in the roof. (5)

The hotel quickly proved to be a boon to the travelling public and townspeople alike and only two years after its opening the accommodation it provided was being heavily taxed by increasing numbers of visitors to Yallourn. The Yallourn Hotel was to have a pivotal location and role in the town for over fifty years and its yesteryear silver service, glass bread boxes and damask table cloths and napkins were maintained in the dining room until it closed in May 1981. (Illustration 3)

Shopping facilities in the township grew from canteens located in the construction camps housing workers building the power station and township to a general store which by 1925 was handling groceries, clothes, footwear, haberdashery, newspapers and books. By 1927, the Commission's general store had been extended to cover one block of the town square. Additional retail facilities were added gradually over the years so that all retail activities were located in two L-shaped flanking building groups enclosing one end of the town square. As Yallourn's fate was apparent by the time of the advent of supermarkets in the mid-1960s, the chain operators by-passed Yallourn. Thus the village scale of its shopping centre with generally single fronted shops was maintained intact until the shops closed one by one in the late 1970s.
To meet the banking requirements of the township, the National Bank was quick to establish a branch in 1924. The rather pompous symmetry of the rendered, Greek classical revival facade of this bank contrasted with its functional corrugated iron roof. (illustration 4). The Post Office and State Savings Banks, completed in 1925, occupied corresponding sites on both sides of the town square and represented an early (if not rare) example of Federal/State co-operation in terms of complementary design and mass. Both buildings were double storeyed and of domestic scale executed in cream brick with tiled hip roofs and boxed eaves. (illustrations 4a & 4b). Perhaps the complementarity of style was less an example of federal/state co-operation and more a toeing of the Commission's urban design line required to conform to the original planning concept of Yallourn.
4. The rather pompous symmetry of the rendered, Greek classical revival facade of the National Bank (1924) contrasted with its functional corrugated iron roof.

4a & 4b. The double-storeyed, bungalow State Savings Bank of Victoria and the Post Office (both 1925) occupied key corner sites on Yallourn's town square.
From the outset of the establishment of the town, considerable emphasis was put on developing public parks and gardens. A nursery was established by the Commission and plants, shrubs and trees were propagated and acclimatized for use in streets, public reserves and private gardens. The Commission provided a free supply not only of shrubs but also of soil and gravel for private gardens which:

...resulted in a remarkable improvement in the appearance of the town, the keeness of residents being further developed by the prizes for the best kept gardens... (6)

Many thousands of street trees were planted throughout the developed areas of the town in the 1920s which prompted the following description in 1931 –

Each street is lined on both sides with trees, the varieties mostly used being Oriental plane, English and American ash, English elm, silver birch, rowans, poplars and silky oaks. Deciduous trees were preferred to allow the surface of the streets to dry in the winter (7)

(illustration 5)

The development of Yallourn's sports facilities was an example of cooperative self-help based on

...the policy of the Commission to supply the materials for approved communal undertakings provided the residents furnish the necessary labour (8)

Tennis courts, a cricket/football oval, golf links and bowling greens were all developed on this basis and paid dividends in 1927 when

...Yallourn gained premier honours in country week cricket matches, and also the football premiership of Central Gippsland (9)

5. A deserted street of pollarded plane trees shading driveways to demolished or removed housing.
In a paternalistic manner, the same annual report further commented that these achievements were

...signs of virile sportsmanship and a healthy communal spirit. This spirit is further evidenced by the thriving nature of the various church and social societies, which contribute in full measure to the amenities of life in the town. (10)

The question of provision of a permanent health facilities in Yallourn had been engaging the attention of the Commission for some time during the late 1920s. By 1927,

...after considerable preliminary discussions with the British Medical Association, plans of a hospital to suit all requirements were prepared, and tenders for the necessary buildings will be shortly invited. (11)

The 24 bed hospital, designed by A R La Gerche, was opened on 13 January 1929 and

...during the course of a very interesting and inspiring address, Sir John Monash - chairman of the Commission - mentioned that the hospital, with equipment etc (sic) which had cost over $32,000 had been given as a gift to the people of Yallourn, by the people of Victoria.... (12)

The hospital exhibited a certain similarity of design to the hotel with its austere bungalow exterior and a tiled hip roof unbroken by chimneys, as the heating and all other services were operated electrically. (illustrated). A year later, it was noted that

the practical consideration of making the hospital as self-contained as possible in the matter of fruit and vegetables has not been overlooked, and in the area aside for the purpose 91 fruit trees have been planted (13)

Associated with the hospital was a medical health centre built on the town square which consisted of a dispensary, patients' consulting rooms, dental clinic and baby health centre. The recurrent costs of both the hospital and health centre were to be met by a mini-Medibank - the Yallourn Hospital and Medical Fund - which was to be funded by weekly contributions from each employee in the Yallourn territory (as the area was known because it was not incorporated into any local government area).
6. With a roofline unbroken by chimneys, the all-electric Yallourn Hospital (1928) exhibits a design austerity similar to the town's hotel. (Photo - State Electricity Commission of Victoria).

In 1931, Yallourn received a special prize in the Sun's Ideal Town Competition for towns with a population of between 1500 and 3000 people. In a competition based partly on popular votes and judgement by an expert panel, Yallourn was awarded a special prize of £200 because of the circumstances of its planning and development which singled it out from other towns in Victoria. In its report, the judging panel, which consisted of Colonel C E Merrett (chairman), Mr P Meldrum (architect), Mr F C Cook (town planner) and Mr H Herbert (artist) considered that

in many ways, Yallourn was the most interesting town visited, for it is the only one in the state built to a predetermined plan. It is an outstanding example of the good results which attend development along these lines.

Efficiency, comfort and convenience have been the objects of the designers, and the most modern principles of town planning have been put into practice to the advantage of the town.

...As might be expected, general layout, zoning, grouping of public buildings, gardens and parks, street planing and development and public services were of a much higher standard than those in towns which 'just grew'.

...There is no monotony in street grouping and the few public buildings set an agreeably high standard which should be maintained in future development. (14)
The $200 prize money was spent on fencing sports ovals with the object of providing some work for the local unemployed.

Educational pressures began to compound by the end of the 1920s and in 1928 higher elementary classes were introduced at the Yallourn Elementary School. Pending the construction of permanent higher elementary and technical school buildings by the Education Department, the Commission provided the shells of two cottages as temporary facilities for secondary and technical classes. By 1931 a permanent Technical School had not eventuated but construction of an Infants' School relieved congestion at the Higher Elementary School. Continued increases in technical enrolments and repeated community representations to the Minister for Education led to the Minister announcing in 1933 that

...if the State Electricity Commission would contribute 25 per cent of the cost of a new school, he would recommend Cabinet to approve of the balance of the expenditure being provided from Unemployment Relief Funds. The Commission agreed to this proposal, provided that its share does not exceed $2000 and that the design of the building is in accordance with the importance of the central site already made available to the department. (15)

The design of the Yallourn Technical School, which was opened in May 1936, more than realized the desires of the Commission. (illustration 7).

The Public Works Department, under the Chief Architect, Percy Everett, designed the first major building in Yallourn to fully acknowledge the European architectural imperatives of the 1920s. The Yallourn Technical School was an over-styled, top heavy manifestation of the European style realized in bichrome brickwork with a flat roof hidden behind a decorative brick parapet. The northern elevation of the school was dominated by a massive vertical feature finished with a tripartite flat support. This feature had no apparent practical function (it actually contained store rooms rather than stairs) except possibly to be a fitting background to the foundation stone set in the base and with its vertical fenestration bears little relationship to the horizontality of the rest of the building. The streamlined styling of the Technical School was in sharp contrast to the stolid, bungalow public buildings and houses which had characterized Yallourn to that time. The School was an example of the architectural oeuvre of the Victorian Public Works Department under Percy Everett, which also included the Collingwood Technical College and the Willian Angliss College, both in Melbourne.
Modernism comes to Yallourn in 1936 in the guise of the Public Works Department's European-inspired Technical School. (Photo - State Electricity Commission of Victoria).

Another step along the road of architectural modernism in Yallourn was evidenced by the opening in 1939 of a picture theatre and public hall. (Illustration 8). A contemporary description of the theatre, designed by Melbourne architect and acoustic consultant, H Vivian Taylor, stated that

the theatre, which will face the town square, will seat 725 in the circle and stalls. Appointments will include a 'crying room' from which the mothers may view the pictures without their babies disturbing the rest of the audience.

The theatre will be designed on simple modern lines, the exterior generally faced with Yallourn pink bricks relieved at the central entrance with cream bricks. It will be air-conditioned and heated. A special study has been made of the acoustic requirements which have influenced the shape and decorative treatment of the auditorium.

The stage will be well equipped for dramatic and orchestral performances and will meet a pressing need of the town.

The heavily symmetrical facade of the theatre with its receding plans was counterpointed by the virtuosity of the Flemish bond brickwork which curved outwards ever so gently.
The Yallourn Theatre represented an architectural high point for the town because during the Second World War and in the years immediately after it, Yallourn experienced slow building development. By 1946, it was reported that

*except for minor extensions, the Town will be at its maximum development when the 49 houses under construction are completed* (17)

The only major public buildings to be completed in the town after the War were a fire station with residential quarters (1947), a pre-school centre of most modern design to accommodate 55 children (1947), an infant welfare centre (1949) and a public hall (1959). By 1947, housing developments for the Commission's employees were commenced in Moe and by 1949 'Operation Snail' (pre-cut English houses were brought out by boat at the same time as English migrants destined for the Latrobe Valley), was underway to establish a new residential area at nearby Newborough. By 1953 the Yallourn Territory had ceased to rate a separate section in the Commission's Annual Report and the town entered an Indian summer which was to last until the late 1960s when a decision was taken to dismantle the town in order to exploit the brown coal underlying the town.

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NOTES:

1,2 Morwell Advertiser and Gazette, 9 February 1923, p 5

3 Electric Spark, 26 May 1927, p 5

4 State Electricity Commission of Victoria Sixth Annual Report, 1925 p 17

5 Morwell Advertiser and Gazette, 5 October 1928, p 3


7 Sun, 11 November 1931, p 19.

8 State Electricity Commission of Victoria Fifth Annual Report (1924) p 17

9, 10 State Electricity Commission of Victoria Ninth Annual Report, (1928) p 12

11 State Electricity Commission of Victoria Eighth Annual Report (1927), p 12

12 State Electricity Commission of Victoria Eleventh Annual Report, (1930) p 11

13 Sun, 1 December 1931, p 10

14 Morwell Advertiser and Gazette, 18 February 1929, p 3

15 State Electricity Commission of Victoria Fourteenth Annual Report (1933), p 10

16 Morwell Advertiser and Gazette 6 October 1939, p 6

17 State Electricity Commission of Victoria Twenty-seventh Annual Report (1946) p 12

Note: The co-operation of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria by supplying photographs and allowing access to files is gratefully acknowledged.