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Royal Princess Theatre

(Courtesy of Bendigo & District Historical Society)

Opened on 31 August 1874, the Royal Princess was a much needed facility for theatrical activity. The theatre cost pounds 12,000 to build and was on a scale to rival capital city theatres being of three levels and able to accommodate 2000 theatregoers. (1)

Sandhurst, as Bendigo was known until 1901, was nothing more than the locality of large sheep stations until gold was discovered in 1851.

By 1855 gold diggers, troops and traders were organising theatrical performances held in tents and the saloons attached to the large hotels. Among the organisations performing were the Sandhurst Amateur Dramatic Club, the Philanthropic Dramatic Club, the Pickwick Club and the Volunteer Rifles Dramatic Club. (1)

Among the venues they used were St. James' Hall, Lyceum Theatre (site of Bendigo Advertiser office in Pall Mall), Theatre Royal (on the site of a hotel that preceded the Shamrock (corner of Pall Mall & Williamson Street) and the original Princess Theatre located in the Criterion Hotel in Market Square. (1)

Gold was the life blood of the town and the dividends paid by the mines enabled local shareholders to enjoy a high standard of living in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Examples: New Chum United ù capital pounds 1.475 paid dividends of pounds 64,900. Garden Gully ù capital pounds 21.646 paid dividends of pounds 880,225. North Shenandoah ù capital pounds 1.800 paid dividends of pounds 34,500. There were many more generating like results. (2)

As well as the Royal Princess, that wealth was displayed in many of the public and private buildings of the period, many of which can be seen today, but unfortunately not the theatre. (3)

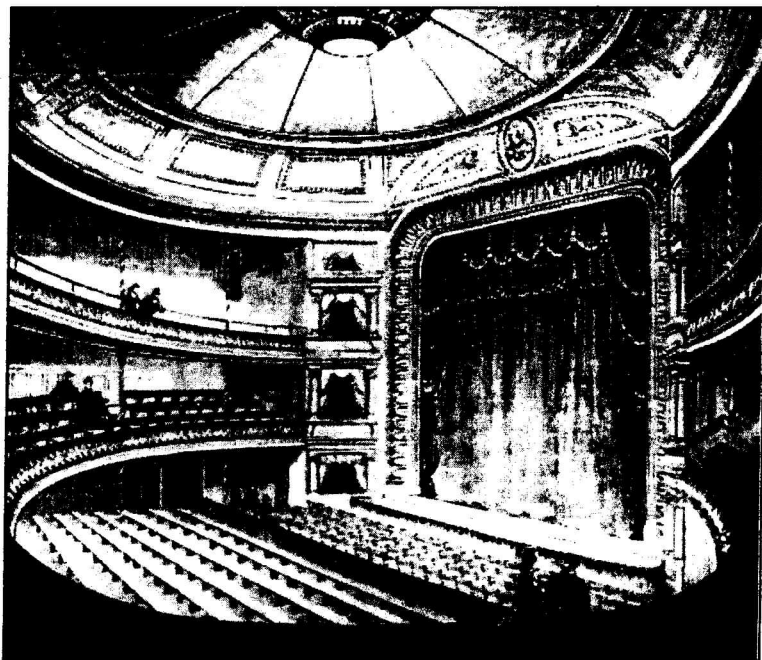
Tenders for the Royal Princess were called on 3 December 1873. It was designed by William Charles Vahland (1828-1915) a local architect using Melbourne architect George Johnson (architect of Melbourne's Prince of Wales Opera House, site of later Tivoli Theatre in Bourke Street) as a consultant. (4)

The site was on the corner of View and McKenzie Streets on a block measuring 135 ft in View Street by 80 ft in

McKenzie Street, the entrances being in View Street, the stage being at the McKenzie Street end. (5)

The proprietors of the theatre were William Heffernan and John Crowley. (1)

In a community which had only been in existence for twenty years the opening of the theatre was a momentous occasion. The opening address was given by Miss Clara Thompson, a leading player in the cast of "Grand Duchess Gerolstein", the opening attraction. The address was written by R. T. Easterby and was given a tumultuous reception. (1)



Princess At Time Of Opening - 1874

Australian Sketcher 1874

Seating in the three levels of the theatre held the following audience: Gallery 850, Dress Circle 250, Stalls 200, Pit 650. A further 50 were accommodated in the six stage boxes. The size of the auditorium was 80 ft wide by 60 ft deep; the stage was also 80 ft wide with a proscenium opening of 30 ft by 18 ft high with a depth of 56 ft. (6)

The opening performance was greeted with enthusiasm by the audience, but the critics on the staff of the local paper were not impressed. (7)

On entering the auditorium the eye catching features were the tasteful proscenium arch with stylish act drop and associated drapery and the large dome housing the "Austral Lustre Light", an 119 lamp gasolier designed locally by T. J. Connelly.

It measured 10 ft in diameter and its enameled glass casing contained an abundance of multi coloured glass and an immense number of glass pendants. (1)

Among the notable artists who performed at the theatre in its early days were Mille Ilme de Mursh (the Hungar-

ian Nightingale), Madam Ristori, Nellie Melba, J C Williamson and wife Maggie Moore. (1)

Stage lighting at the time of opening, like the auditorium was by gas until the Electric Supply Company of Victoria Limited made DC power available in 1898. The State Electricity Commission took over in 1931 and facilities were updated for AC supply.

Remarkable, up to the time of demolition, the earlier gas and DC equipment remained in place alongside that for alternating current. (8)

Not far up the hill on the opposite side of View Street the same architect designed the largest Masonic centre outside Melbourne which opened only two months after the theatre. Upstairs was a concert hall/ballroom that was variously known as the Masonic, New Britannia and Capital Theatre and was the venue for the first demonstrations of cinematography in the region being serviced by travelling picture show men. (3)

In 1910 the Royal Princess became the first permanent picture house in Bendigo. (1)

The theatre continued to be used for live shows and in the silent era live acts supported the film programs. The orchestra was retained for both entertainment formats.

Further cinema competition was soon forthcoming with the start of building of the Lyric Theatre, a purpose designed venue the following year (1911). (9)

Both encountered competition from the Tivoli Gardens open air show whose proprietor made much of the danger associated with nitrate film in enclosed spaces. (1)

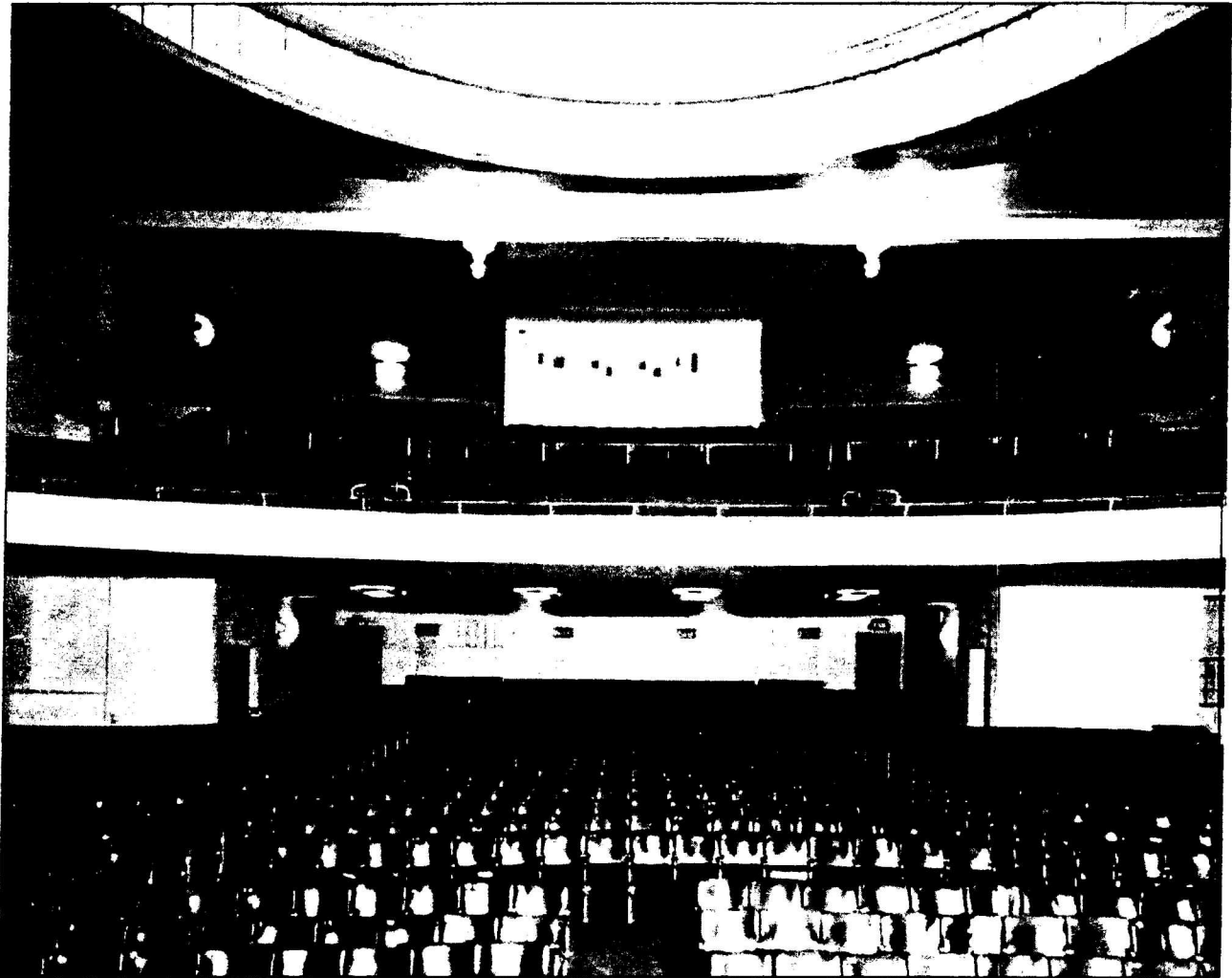
By 1936 the theatre was unable to compete with the recently built Plaza (opened December 1934) due to its dated design for cinema use, especially the troublesome posts supporting the dress circle and gallery.

The old theatre closed on 3 October 1936 with the films "Hot Trip" and "Air Hawkes". Cowper, Murphy and Appleford were retained to redesign the auditorium and foyers into the then current art-deco style.

During the two months that rebuilding was underway, film programs were transferred to the Capital. (10)

The New Royal Princess opened on 4 December 1936 screening "Front Page Woman"

Live shows were not forgotten with several J C Williamson plays being performed as well as local companies doing all manner of performance including ballet.



Interior After Conversion To A "Moderne" Cinema in 1936

Photo: CATHS-V Archives

High profile concert artists also appeared at regular intervals.

Like venues elsewhere, television caused a fall off in patronage by the early 1960's resulting in the decision to sell the site.

The last show was "The Guns of Navarone" on 3 May 1963.

A service station was built on the site that survived about 25 years to be replaced by several shops.

The Royal Princess Theatre's old rival from earlier in the century, the Capital, still functions as an updated modern live theatre.

Over \$7,000,000 was recently spent on the Capital to make it an up-to-date performance venue. (11).

References:

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