

An Overview of Rockhampton's History

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Introduction

If there is one characteristic that distinguishes generations of citizens of Rockhampton, it is a spirit of independence. This began with the Separation Movement in the nineteenth century and has been raised from time to time during the twentieth century by the New States Movement. A poster showing a cow with its head in the mineral and pastoral wealth of Central Queensland and its hindquarters in Brisbane carried the 1960s caption, "The longest milch cow in the world." Similar complaints concerning "the Brisbane octopus" had begun a century earlier and risen to a great climax in the 1890s.

According to Letters Patent signed by Queen Victoria in June 1859, Queensland was to be divided into three colonies (states) when the population justified it. But when Queensland was officially separated from New South Wales in December 1859, with Brisbane in its south-east corner as capital, the pattern was set for unsuccessful attempts by Rockhampton and Townsville to achieve autonomy for their rich mineral and pastoral regions. But, then as now, the greatest concentration of population was in the south-east corner of Queensland and therefore supremacy in numbers of political representatives ensured that, no matter which party was in power, Brisbane would continue to "milk the cow".

When the first parliament met in 1860 it recognised the need for some form of decentralisation in Australia's second-largest state, so before long railways began slowly creeping westward from the ports of Brisbane, Rockhampton and Townsville. By 1890 when the central Queensland Territorial Separation League was founded, separate states could have been formed with a minimum of disruption. Queensland was far more decentralised then, with three administrative divisions already in place. Rockhampton (and Townsville) already had branches of most government departments, also its own Supreme Court. The Queensland government, in cahoots with the British, made sure that official separation would not happen. The Federal referendum was used as "a red herring" to confuse the voters of Central and North Queensland. Even so, Rockhampton's spirit of independence, first noted in the 1860s, has undoubtedly been enhanced by its several attempts to become capital of a new state stretching westward from Keppel Bay to the Northern Territory border, south to the Dawes Range and north to Capt Palmerston (south of Sarina), as defined in the 1890s.

This spirit of independence has had both positive and negative effects on succeeding generations, perhaps best illustrated by political influence upon state governments. With the advantage of hindsight, the millions spent on dredging the Fitzroy River to keep the river port viable, might have been saved had Rockhampton agreed to support the use of Gladstone's magnificent natural harbour. Independence of spirit has also, at times negatively acted upon local government.

In a positive manner, however, independence has worked for the good of the city. This is perhaps best illustrated during the thirty year mayoralty of R.B.J. (Rex) Pilbeam, 1952-82. His independence as a civic leader changed Rockhampton from “a dusty cow town” to a beautiful city through such projects as the sealing of suburban streets and tree planting, two Olympic swimming pools, the barrage which finally gave the city dependable water supply, a fine theatre named by others for Pilbeam, and an art gallery with one of the best collections of Australian art in any regional gallery. He also obtained a sealed motor road to the summit of Mount Archer and this, like the majority of his achievements, was built without additional cost to rate-payers. Pilbeam had a vision for Rockhampton, possibly unsurpassed in its implementation since its European origins in the 1850s.

In the beginning

The indigenous Australians who lived for perhaps 40,000 years in what is now called central coastal Queensland, the Darambal people, knew the wide river on which Rockhampton is located as “Toonooba”. The river and its valley provided sustenance and, at times, plenteous food for the Darambal clans. They harvested its products, both animal and vegetable. They were conservationists in the true sense, gathering only sufficient food for their daily needs. The first Europeans to see the river, which they named Fitzroy to honour the Governor of New South Wales in whose territory it then was, were Charles and William Archer who sighted it from the Dee Range on 4 May 1853.

The Archer brothers and their party of employees were also the first Europeans to settle in the area, arriving at the site of their future homestead, Gracemere, on 10 August 1855. Three weeks later Colin Archer sailed the ketch *Ellida* up the river reaching the site of Rockhampton on 1 September 1855 with supplies for Gracemere. This was the first private vessel to navigate the river, being preceded several months earlier by a government mineral survey party. Rockhampton, however, did not receive its name until July 1856 when Lands Commissioner, William Henry Wiseman, conferred with Charles Archer and Richard Palmer who had established a store on the Fitzroy earlier that year. Wiseman, a graduate of Oxford University, suggested “Rockhampton”, the first part as a symbol for the rocky bar at the head of navigation, and “Hampton” as a traditional English name for a town near water. Rockhampton : “town by the rocks in the river”.

Ludwig Leichhardt, a friend of the Archer brothers, had named the Fitzroy's chief tributaries Dawson, Comet, Mackenzie and Isaac on his expedition to Port Essington in 1844-45, and they had taken his advice to search for the confluence of these streams, the Fitzroy, which he correctly assumed would empty into Keppel Bay. It would be many years, however, before the Fitzroy Basin was recognised as Australia's second-greatest river system, after the Murray-Darling. Much of the mineral and pastoral wealth to nourish Rockhampton's commercial and industrial well-being to the present day comes from the Fitzroy Basin, overlapped by the Bowen Coal Basin.

Mineral Wealth

The Canoona gold rush in the second half of 1858 about 60 kilometres north of Rockhampton gave the young town an instant population. The government in distant Sydney sent demountable buildings as temporary hospital, customs house and court house, also officials to administer them and surveyors to lay out the streets and name them. Rockhampton was officially proclaimed “a town or village” on 25 October 1858. Although most of the thousands who had come to the muddy, crocodile infested banks of the Fitzroy expecting to pick up nuggets of gold, were returned south by governments in Sydney and Melbourne, a few hundred remained to set up businesses and services in the then northern most town in Australia. When Queensland became a separate colony on 10 December 1859, Rockhampton was on its way to becoming a flourishing river port. The Municipality of Rockhampton was proclaimed just one year later and the first Town Council was elected on

26 February 1861 with John Palmer as Mayor. This became "City Council" in 1903 by government proclamation.

What has been described as the "duffer rush to Canoona" for gold saved Rockhampton from the usual slow development of towns depending chiefly on agriculture or wool and beef. Almost all the building blocks in the original square mile of the town were sold at the first land sales on 17 and 18 November 1858. Rockhampton was also proclaimed a Port of Entry in that month and would remain so until 1965. Gold mining throughout the district, especially at Crocodile Creek (Bouldercombe) and Ridgeland, in the 1860s, continued to provide an impetus for development in the town. Ironically, only 38 kilometres south-west of Rockhampton was what later would be identified as the richest single gold mine in the world, Mount Morgan.

The Morgan brothers opened up the mine they named for themselves in 1882, did well from its rich gold, but mistakenly assumed that it would be a "jeweller's show mine" with its treasures on display near the surface. In 1886 they sold out to the Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company Limited, comprising a small group of Rockhampton business and professional men. William Knox D'Arcy, a solicitor, was one of several to become a millionaire as a result of Mount Morgan gold. He later almost lost that fortune in high living in England and in financing oil search in Persia before again making another fortune from oil. Mount Morgan, described as "a quarry of gold" brought many benefits to Rockhampton merchants and to Rockhampton Harbour Board, established in 1895, through exports of gold. Quay Street today retains many of the fine buildings erected through wealth from Mount Morgan. While the original company closed in 1927, believing its riches were exhausted, a new company, Mount Morgan Limited, was formed in 1928 and resumed operations in 1932. It remained profitable until selling out in 1968, after which mining continued until the 1980s.

In 2002-03 a new company began yet another search for gold in the vicinity of Mount Morgan.

It might have been gold which gave Rockhampton instant population in 1858 and from the 1880s wealth from the "mountain of gold" on its doorstep, but in the twentieth century it was the massive coal reserves in the Bowen Basin, stretching from Collinsville, west of Bowen, to Taroom in the south, which again added prominence to the city as a service centre for much of this huge area. There had been small mines in Blair Athol and near Blackwater for many years, but not until the 1950s and 1960s when Japanese and American mining interests invested both money and expertise, were the huge coal seams throughout the region opened up, with new railways to service them. By the year 2000 Greater Rockhampton had a population of about 80,000.

Beef capital

For more than a decade after Rockhampton was founded, land use implied sheep grazing and wool production, despite the unsuitability of native grasses and a tropical climate in the coastal areas. The only market for beef cattle, other than bullocks as draft animals, or female animals as breeding stock, was the wasteful boiling-down process for tallow. This changed after Lakes Creek Meatworks in Rockhampton began production in 1871 of canned beef, then frozen beef from 1880s, with the export of chilled beef to Europe in the 1930s. Although Lakes Creek had the usual chequered history of most such industries, it eventually became the largest meat works in the southern hemisphere. By the 1990s it was still second in Australia. A second export meatworks was opened on Rockhampton's eastern fringes in 1965.

Beef cattle breeds prior to the Second World War were almost all derived from British breeds – *Bos taurus*. Experimental imports of Zebu cattle – *Bos indicus* – to the Rockhampton district in 1933 were "rubbished" by local cattlemen. That is until a few cattle jumped the fences and interbred with their Hereford or Shorthorn cattle, immediately proving them to be

tick resistant and better “doers” in time of drought. After the Second World War both individuals and scientists began trials to determine the complicated system of cross-breeding to obtain the best results. This led to fixed breeds between what came to be known as Brahman cattle and variously, Hereford, Angus and Hereford-Shorthorn. New registered breeds of *Taurindicus* cattle developed in the Rockhampton district by the 1980s were : Braford, Brangus and Belmont Reds. The latter were developed at the CSIRO’s Belmont Tropical Cattle Research Centre on the northern outskirts of Rockhampton. Belmont Reds also have a dash of Africander blood as well as British. Today many cattle producers run pure Brahmans for their hardiness and easy care.

By 1970 the Fitzroy Statistical Division had the largest concentration of beef cattle in any Division in Australia, earning Rockhampton its title “Beef Capital”. There were over half a million Brahman-British fixed breed cattle and 165,000 pure Brahmans in the Fitzroy Statistical Division in 1982, also some straight British stock. The livestock “revolution” came of age in April 1983 with the holding of the first International Brahman Congress in Rockhampton. In 2003 Rockhampton retained its crown as “Beef Capital” when it held its seventh triennial Beef Exposition, again attracting Australia-wide and international visitors and cattle judges. Gracemere Saleyards in 1987 hosted the world’s largest bull sale of pure Brahmans, The “greatest livestock revolution in history” has, like most revolutions, matured. The breed structure is no longer revolutionary, but a means of economic survival among beef cattle producers within the tropics.

Body, mind and soul

While Rockhampton depended from its inception on the pastoral mining industries for its bread and butter, there were among the founding fathers those educated in the arts and science. From the opening of the first School of Arts in 1865 to that of the fine new theatre and art gallery in 1979, there has been a recognition that material progress needs to be accompanied by cultural, educational and religious institutions. A primitive timber building served as a church on Sundays, with the Customs Officer, William John Brown, reading the services, and as a day school during the week, from 1859 until the first churches were built in 1862, also the National School in 1862. St Paul’s Anglican Cathedral was consecrated in 1883 and St Joseph’s Catholic Cathedral in 1899. Both were constructed of local Stanwell stone. At the beginning of the twenty-first century there were forty-five churches and worship centres listed in Rockhampton. Anthony Trollope who visited the town in 1873 and described it as “the city of sin, sweat and sorrow” would be amazed by this statistic.

As the town grew, state schools were established in the suburbs, Catholic education was introduced by the Sisters of Mercy in 1873, and grew to include secondary schools with boarding facilities in the twentieth century. The Rockhampton Grammar School (a boarding and day school) opened in 1881, Rockhampton Girls Grammar School also offered boarding facilities for country girls from 1892, while the first State High School was established in Bolsover Street in 1919. Tertiary education began in 1971 with the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education which became Central Queensland University, 1991-94. With other campuses in Gladstone, Bundaberg and Mackay, as well as capital cities, it is now one of the leading provincial universities in Australia. Rockhampton has thus retained its educational service role to the wider community since the 1880s.

Health services might have been basic in the early years compared with today’s scientific advances, but they were of primary importance, with a temporary hospital erected in 1858 on the site of the later St John’s Private Hospital in Victoria Parade. A new public hospital was built on the crest of Athelstane Range in 1868. Today’s Rockhampton Base Hospital is on the same site, but providing “state of the art” medical services undreamed of by early doctors and nurses, whose care of patients was no less dedicated. Without government welfare or pensions in the nineteenth century, and only minimally better until after World War II, many doctors provided free treatment to the needy. Doctor Vivian Voss, who was one of these,

established his own Hillcrest Hospital in 1900, equipped with the new x-ray equipment. The Sisters of Mercy began their service to body, mind and soul with the opening of the Mater Private hospital in 1915, housed in the former mansion, Kenmore, built in 1894 and intended as a future Government House for Central Queensland. Other private hospitals, usually established by doctors, have come and gone over the years. One thing remains unchanged. Rockhampton is still a centre for medical specialist services.

The School of Arts has played a pivotal role in Rockhampton's cultural and social life. A library and museum incorporated in the 1865 building served until a new, grand building designed by Rockhampton's most distinguished colonial architect, John William Wilson, was opened in 1894. While this continued to provide educational and art classes as well as an enlarged library, the attached hall was a fine venue for both local and visiting orchestras, drama groups and concerts. In addition to the earlier formal balls, debutante balls were popular from the 1930s. For some marvellous though inexplicable reason, Rockhampton has since the 1890s produced world class singers, instrumentalists and ballet dancers.

The natural environment

The Berserker Range, rising to about 609 metres and named by Norwegian-educated Charles Archer in 1853, provides a brooding backdrop to the city and its beautiful, wide brown river. It was a scientific Frenchman, Anthelme Thozet, who first drew attention in 1867 to the fact that the first settlers in the town had chopped down all the trees. He had arrived during the Canoona gold rush in 1858, made money through building hotels, and in the early 1860s established experimental gardens in North Rockhampton. He was the first citizen of the young town to enhance its natural beauty by planting an avenue of native plums and figs along the river bank in Quay Street in 1867. He had propagated these in his nursery and had them planted at his own expense. Many are still there providing shade and adding beauty to the wide river which flows through the city centre.

Thozet also contributed to the establishment of the city's Botanic Gardens, opened in 1873. They are now considered the best tropical gardens in Australia. Thozet's greatest gift to today's people, both indigenous and European, is a small booklet he published at his own expense in 1866 : *Roots, Tubers, Bulbs, and Fruits, used as Vegetable food, by the Aborigines of Northern Queensland, Australia*. This not only identifies the plants and tells how they were prepared, but also gives their native as well as scientific names. This was at a time when indigenous men, women and children were still being hunted "like wild dogs" and many shot by the Native Police.

The natural environment in the Fitzroy River valley is today under close scrutiny by scientists, historians and land-holders, not only in evaluating damage done by tree clearing and agricultural and pastoral pursuits, but also in working out ways in which damage to river and the Great Barrier Reef may be repaired and perhaps prevented in the future. It is only in recent years that people have become aware of such matters and the possible effect of tree clearing upon climate.

Where were the women?

Women were usually invisible during Rockhampton's early years, at least in a public sense. But there was at least one exception in relation to the wives and daughters of leading citizens. The Benevolent Society, founded in 1866, although chaired by a clergyman, had an all-women committee. It was women who drew up the constitution and by and large raised the money to help homeless and impoverished women and children. With minimal government assistance they built the town's first orphanage in 1873, the first residential care building in 1879, the Children's Hospital in 1885 and also the Lady Norman Women's Hospital, free of debt by 1895. All three were later taken over by the government, but in 2003

the Benevolent Homes Society remains on its original site in West Street, but with modern hostel type accommodation and nursing home care, chiefly for women, but men have also been admitted in recent years.

Prior to the First World War opportunities for women in the workforce were restricted to domestic service, nursing and school teaching, and in the latter period, limited secretarial work. The great majority of girls simply waited at home for offers of marriage, filling in the time embroidering afternoon tea cloths or crocheting. There was at least one early notable exception in Rockhampton. Beatrice May Hutton, born in 1893 and enrolled at Rockhampton Girls Grammar School in 1908, on gaining her Senior Certificate, was apprenticed to E.J. Hockings, a local architect. On completing her three years as an articulated pupil, she applied for Membership of the Queensland Institute of Architects, its first application from a woman. She was admitted as an Associate on 30 October 1916. Beatrice Hutton (1893-1990) is believed to have been the first female architect in Australia granted membership. Virtually all professions are now open to women, with many choosing the Central Queensland University in Rockhampton for under-graduate and post-graduate study.

Rockhampton's built heritage

Rockhampton has never suffered from a boom and bust economy, but maintained steady progress. This has enabled the city to retain many of its fine, heritage-listed public and commercial buildings and also some of its "quaint gables" and old Queenslander style timber homes. These have a distinct architectural character, not found outside Queensland. Even the California bungalow which was built in brick in southern capital cities after the First World War, was modified to Queensland conditions and many of these attractive timber houses still survive in suburban Rockhampton. A gracious heritage-listed private home in Agnes Street, designed by Beatrice Hutton, remains virtually unchanged since its construction for Frank Rudd in 1923.

No less than three city blocks in Quay Street were classified by the Queensland National Trust in 1976. Since the Queensland Heritage Act of 1992, many of these buildings have been listed as part of the state's cultural heritage. Outstanding among these is the impressive, domed Customs House, completed and opened in 1901. This has been described as one of the best government buildings in Australia. It was the third on the site including the 1858 prefabricated Customs House. Passers-by today may wonder what on earth a Customs House is doing in Rockhampton, 45 kilometres from the coast, but between 1858 and its closure in 1965, Rockhampton was a busy river port. While business declined to a certain extent after the railway was connected to Brisbane in December 1903, coastal shipping continued as a significant form of cargo transport until interrupted by the Second World War. The Customs House, now under ownership of Rockhampton City Council was restored and re-opened in February 2003 as part of the Queensland Heritage Trails Network. The building now includes an interpretive centre, featuring history of the river port.

A second heritage-listed building in Quay Street which is also linked to the river port, is the former Harbour Board Office, designed by J.W. Wilson and built in 1898. Wilson was Rockhampton's most significant colonial architect whose designs included 201 public and commercial buildings and private homes. While many have disappeared, others in Quay Street to survive are the grand three-story Heritage Tavern originally the Commercial Hotel built in 1898, also the Trustee Chambers built in 1877 as Dr William Callaghan's private residence. Wilson also designed the School of Arts in Bolsover Street which was opened in 1894 and, although not in use in 2003 it remains a beloved icon to many older citizens.

Conclusion

The above “overview” of Rockhampton’s history covers only a few of the many themes that make up the warp and weft of the city’s existence. This essay is based chiefly upon my 640 page book, *Rockhampton, A History of City and District* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1981). Sources for each theme may be consulted in this book. A second edition was published in 1994 with an up-dated Preface which ends as follows:

“Rockhampton has changed more gracefully than many Australian cities, retaining much of its natural and built heritage. While each generation adopts its own lifestyle ... neither the bitter conflicts nor the great achievements [of the past] are forgotten. This is aptly demonstrated in relation to the Darambal people – often treated like “wild dogs” in the 1860s, but respected in the 1990s [among other things] for their resourcefulness in founding the Dreamtime Cultural Centre.

‘The “rocks in the river” which inspired the naming of the embryo city in 1856 continue to symbolise its rock-solid economic character. Charles Archer on his steed, Sleipner, sculpted by Arthur Murch and cast in bronze, has gazed down the river since its unveiling in 1981, just as he did in real life in 1855. He was then watching anxiously for the arrival of his brother Colin in the ketch *Ellida*, bringing much needed supplies for the first settlers, but now he confidently awaits the future.”