

TOWARDS A NEW HOSPITAL

1941-1957

As early as 1941 the hospital board was seeking the provision of a new hospital and the then chairman, Walter Smith, interviewed the Minister for Health and the local Member. The old hospital, built in 1889 and subsequently altered and modernised over the years since that time, was no longer adequately serving the growing needs of the area.

Records show complaints of new babies being placed in boxes and patients on verandahs.

The hospital was also beginning to have major difficulties in attracting staff to what was rapidly becoming an obsolete hospital surviving only because of the loyalty and dedication of the hospital team comprising the matron, nursing staff, doctors and the hospital board and secretary.

In 1944 when approval was given and tenders called for the new nurses' home on the existing site, the board made very strenuous objections to this. As a consequence of the subsequent investigations, the current site was selected and the nurses' home constructed there and occupied in 1946.

Plans of the new hospital were drawn up and tenders called in 1947. The construction was to be steel reinforced concrete with brick facings (both scarce in post-war Australia) and the estimated cost (and Parliamentary provision) was £90,000. However, the lowest tender received was £120,000. The Treasurer and also Premier of the day, Mr. McGirr, refused additional funding.

The town of Bega fell behind the board in supporting it in its call for a new hospital, and this support was ably led by the Country Womens Association with Mrs. Mary Rogers in the fore. A major demonstration was organised and received double column headings in city press, drawing public attention to Bega and its anxiety to achieve a new hospital.

The protest was held on 29th August, 1948, and all of Bega and district supported the protest, all shops were closed. An abbreviated summary of the protest is as follows:

"Les Gowing and Cecil Squire led the parade with the banner 'Build our Hospital Now' (in bright red

letters). Following came Drum Major Roy Carroll and the Bega Band, then banner bearers for the 16 C.W.A. and Red Cross district branches — Bega and District, Bermagui, Tathra, Wolumla, Eden, Pambula, Merimbula, Tanja, Cobargo, Bombala, Candelo, Narooma, Kameruka, Quaama and Tilba. Then followed a solid band of C.W.A. and Red Cross members and a trickle of public which swelled into a mass as the parade progressed. The town closed down and the support became unanimous."

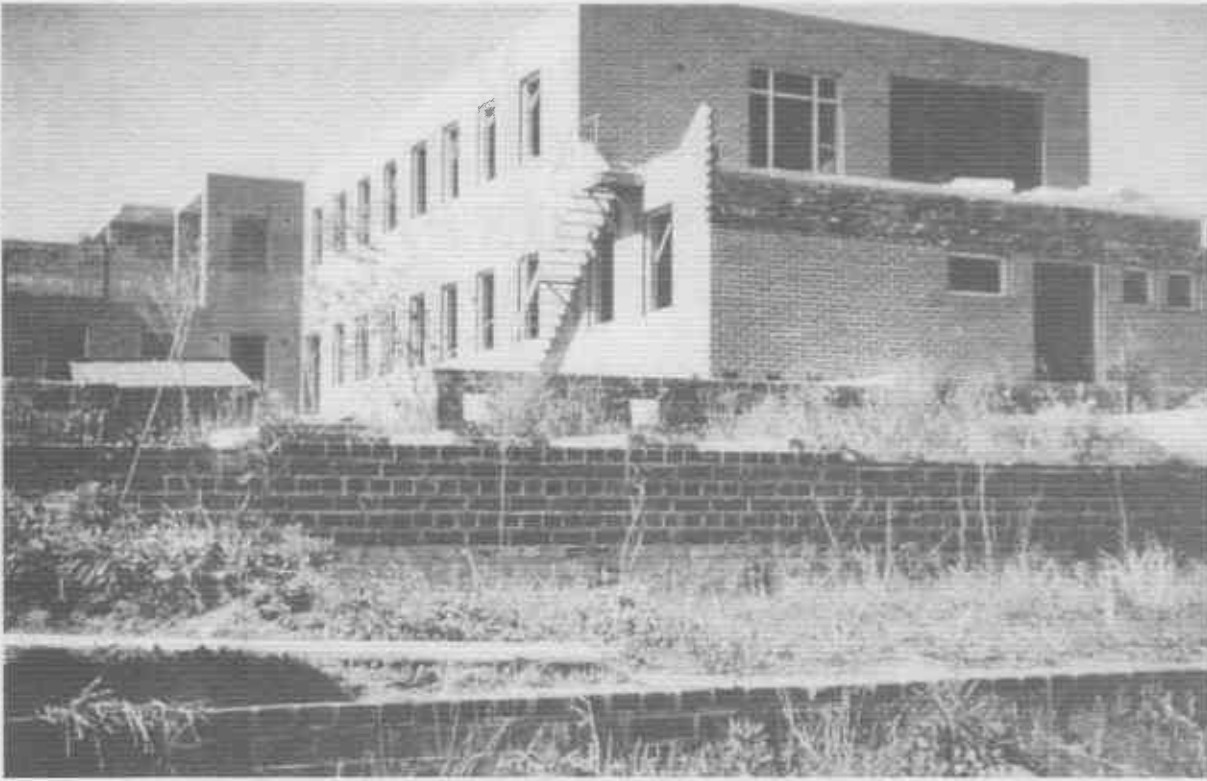
Movietone News filmed the parade, the meeting, and was later taken through the old hospital and was able to film for all moviegoers to see the very poor conditions including clouds of steam caused by operating the operating theatre steriliser.

Statements made at the ensuing public meeting included advice that the hospital served a district population of 18,000 people and had been under severe strain following closure of the Cobargo, Candelo and Bemboka Private Hospitals. Women were giving birth under deplorable conditions, with new born children being placed in beer boxes.

The average occupation was 25, all but four of which were from the country, as the doctors advised townspeople to stay at home but country folk had no choice but come in and take their chances or die at home with no care. The hospital itself was described as a shoddy worn out structure which should have been pulled down years ago.

The meeting passed the following motion: "That this public meeting, representative of all organisations of the Bega district, emphatically protests against the callous indifference shown by the Government to the hospital requirements of the district.

"Furthermore, that the State Treasurer, who, according to the Minister for Health and the Hospitals Commission, is entirely responsible for the delay, be requested to personally inspect the deplorable conditions under which the hospital functions, or accept the advice of his responsible Minister and immediately proceed with the construction of the new hospital."



The project at a standstill for almost 12 months in 1954.

The resolution having been passed, a deputation comprising Mr. Charles Ayres, Mayor of Bega, Mrs. K. G. Clifford, Mrs. J. D. (Mary) Rogers, Councillor C. N. Squire (Mumbulla Shire), Messrs. S. C. A. McNeil, F. Zingle, R. B. Bush and W. B. (Curly) Annabel, was formed to take the case to the Minister.

As a consequence of these actions, the plans for the hospital were changed to full brick and tenders called and accepted. The cost — £273,000.

The successful contractor, Perc Rimington, commenced work and this was progressing well until he was advised in August, 1952 that the allocation of funds for the project in 1952-53 was restricted to £30,000. The contractor advised the hospital board that he would continue at his present rate but funds would run out around Christmas with the hospital only partly finished. The board approached the local Member Jack Seiffert for support but the problem appears to have been political with a State Labor Government attempting, by restricting capital works, to embarrass a Federal Liberal National Party Government.

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A deputation from the hospital's board and Jack Beale, MLA, met the Minister for Health, Mr. M. O'Sullivan, in September, 1952. The Minister undertook to have a Hospitals Commissioner and the Chief Architect visit the hospital but he also stated that the hospital was only 25% completed. Mr. Jack Beale, however informed the Minister that it was closer to 50% completed. Mr. O'Sullivan also told the deputation that Premier Cahill had advised that extra funds for hospitals would be available if the current Commonwealth loan was a success.

Subsequently, funds were reduced by a further £5,000 and the contractor ceased work on 17th October, 1952. At that stage the first floor's brickwork was finished and part of the second floor, but the actual flooring had not been installed. No visit had at that stage been made by the Commissioner and Architect as promised by the Minister. With still no response the board wrote direct to Premier Cahill on 18th November, 1952 seeking action. Copies were also sent to all local State and Federal Members and local organisations, seeking support.

The leader of the State Opposition, Mr. Vernon Treatt (Liberal), promised support for the hospital if elected to power in the forthcoming elections. This support, indicated in February, 1953 was welcomed, but with caution, as the area was becoming cynical of politicians from the shabby way it was being treated.

With still no offer of funds the board approached the N.S.W. Government with a request to be allowed to raise a local loan to enable the hospital to be completed, the arrangements being that the Government could repay the loan when funds became available. This proposal was not accepted by the Government, and it advised the hospital that the last such proposal had been approved in 1944 and no Government guaranteed loans were to be offered, but instead hospitals were to be financed from the State's own borrowings.

Finally in August, 1953 the Minister for Health, Mr O'Sullivan, advised that a proposed allocation of funds had been made subject to Parliamentary approval. The board became aware in October that year of Glen Innes (£129,000) and Crookwell hospitals receiving funds and were not as far advanced as Bega in construction. However, good news by way of a letter

from the Department of Public Works addressed to the contractor was received on 8th October, 1953 instructing him to proceed with the work on an unrestricted basis.

The contractor advised the board that he would immediately start to reassemble his working organisation and materials and resume work on the project which by then had been at a standstill for almost twelve months. He further advised that at a normal rate of progress the work should be completed in approximately two years.

The month of November, 1953 was a busy time for the hospital's board, as discussions took place on several occasions regarding the new work, fittings and nurses' home extensions. The board's chairman, Mr. R. M. Bush, also met the Minister (O'Sullivan) in Sydney. The achievements obtained in these various meetings were 12 new bedrooms at the nurses' home and a resident medical officer's bedroom, to be provided in the new plans.

The board was also advised in 1953 that the Health Commission would furnish three private wards on completion (cost £270) and the Commonwealth Government desired to erect a 10 bed TB clinic with associated staff quarters. The need for additional maternity accommodation was also discussed, as 10 beds had been provided in the plans but currently there were 14 maternity patients on a regular basis.

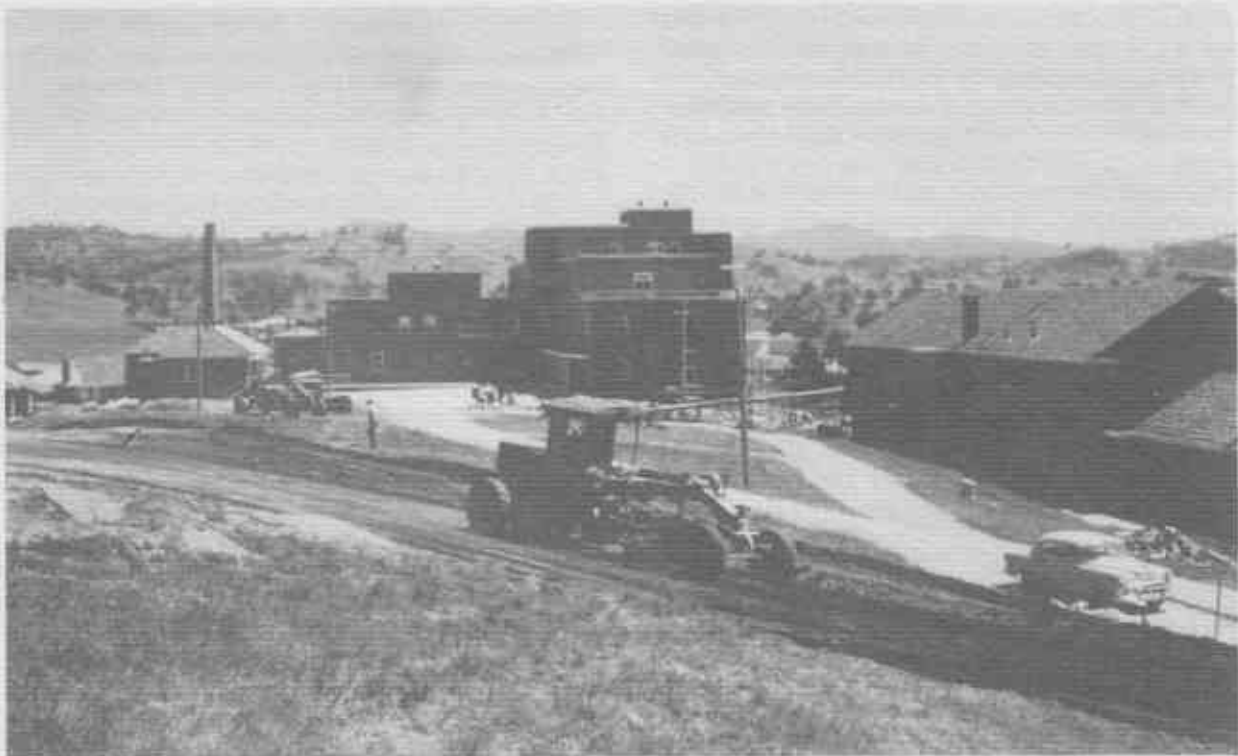
The Department of Public Works also wished to install coal burning boilers in the new hospital.

However, the board wanted wood. The Public Works Department advised that wood required three shifts with a man on duty at all times. The coal burners were automatic with a man only required to go near the boilers about twice a day with the modern automatic feeders.

By March, 1955 work was progressing so well that the Health Commission had asked the board to submit a list of equipment necessary to furnish the hospital. The Bega Municipal Council was also asked to construct the road between Eden and Auckland Streets to the south side of the new building. The Bega Rotary Club undertook (May, 1955) to plan for and plant trees around the new hospital, and subsequently did so to the hospital's benefit.

In May, 1955 the Health Commission advised the board that the nurses' quarters would be steam heated from the boilers at the new hospital. This work would be undertaken when the additional 12 units were constructed, and the old fuel burning systems would then be removed.

The Bega District News, in an editorial in its issue of 12th August, 1955 described the current progress on the hospital and the struggle to get it started, and then restarted, as a noble piece of Bega's history. It told of a community's urge to care for the sick and suffering and not to be put off by smooth words written and spoken by officials who did not understand how lamentably the district had fallen behind in hospital facilities.



Council equipment constructing roadworks for the new hospital.



The new hospital dominating the skyline of Bega.

The Hospital Ladies' Auxiliary also advised that the people of Bega needed to round off the work provided by the Government, and unless the citizens assisted, the hospital would never be able to provide the service for which it was capable.

One sidelight of the development of the new hospital came in September, 1955 when the Board was trying to obtain £300 from the Commissioner for dormant funds. This money was held for a hospital at Candelo and the Candelo residents wanted the money spent in Candelo. The Board wanted it as "Bega needed it". The results of these negotiations are not known to the author.

By September, 1955, it was anticipated that the transfer to the new hospital would occur in early 1956. At that time (September) the main structure was almost complete with internal work of plastering, tiling and painting currently being carried out.

On Remembrance Day, 11th November, 1955, there were still two major projects still not undertaken, the access road from Auckland Street, council advised that it had no funds and no one else seemed to have any either, and the nurses' home extensions, the contractor had no instruction to do this work. On 2nd December, the Bega Municipal Council agreed to take over the proposed new road between Auckland and Spindler Streets on condition that the Health Commission paid the full cost of construction or constructed the road and handed it over on completion.

With construction now reaching its final stage, the Health Commission advised that it would make £28,500 available for furnishings, but sought advice as to what amount the hospital could provide - not much was the board's feeling, and only about £250 could be found. The happy state of progress was eagerly

reported in the Bega District News of 16th March, 1956, when it was advised that the lights of the new hospital had been switched on one night in the previous week and felt that "this symbolised the near approach of its opening, so illuminated by its vast lighting system, it stood as a beacon to mark the result of agitation which began more than 20 years ago for its construction".

The new building was said to be the biggest hospital south of Wollongong, with provision for 70 beds in wards of a maximum of four beds, others two and one. There were two modern operating theatres, one for major the other for minor surgery, air conditioned and having the most modern facilities. The kitchen was set out in gleaming stainless steel. The overall building was centrally heated with spacious windows to let in natural light and equipped with modern well appointed bathrooms. Spacious well designed quarters were provided for staff and all building set in spacious grounds with trees already well advanced.

The board, at its meeting on 27th March, 1956, on the motion of director Mary Rogers, seconded director Mr. Stowe, resolved to take over the new main hospital building as from 28th March, 1956, "with all possible precautions attended to, particularly with regard to insurance". This motion was approved unanimously by the board.

One other matter of interest was discussed at the same meeting this being the proposal to conduct tours of the new hospital by the Ladies' Auxiliary in order to raise funds. The Board approved of such tours prior to the official opening and for a fee to be charged. The tours were to be restricted to adults "as children may dirty or damage the structure".

With the hospital complex coming close to completion, two matters still remained hurdles to be overcome. The first was the access road, as funds still had not been made available and the Municipal Council was endeavouring to have other road grant funds diverted to the work. The other was the telephone system, although the equipment had been ordered two years earlier it had, on someone's whim in the PMG, been sent elsewhere. The Postmaster General's Department officially advised that there was a shortage of equipment. Some other services still had to be installed and tested including steam pipes in the laundry, refrigeration and air conditioning units.

The board, at its meeting on 29th May, 1956, decided to name four sections of the hospital in honour of four special people. The operating theatre block was named the Dr. John McKee Theatre Block after Dr. John McKee, who had been in practice over 40 years in Bega and (almost as long) was the Government Medical Officer. One male wing was named the R.B. Bush Wing after the chairman and member of the board for 30 years. A second male wing

was named the H.B. Blomfield Wing after Mr. H.B. Blomfield, who had served on the board for 50 years, many as chairman. The X-ray unit was named the Amy Wood X-ray unit after a long and faithful friend and supporter of the hospital.

On 2nd July, with the assistance of the Bega Voluntary Ambulance Service, all existing patients in the old hospital were transferred to the new hospital.

On 3rd July, the board held its first meeting in the hospital board room. The chairman, Mr. R.B. Bush, in a printed statement said (among other things) "I now commend this hospital to the public in the hope that those who follow us in its administration will see that it always reflects the highest ideals of the medical, nursing and healing professions".

This chapter of the District Hospital draws to close on 11th May, 1957, when the then Governor of New South Wales, Lieutenant General Sir John Northcott, in the presence of a large crowd of invited guests and interested residents and visitors, declared the hospital officially open.



Official opening ceremony 2nd July, 1957.



A view of the hospital from the south.



Three hundred medallions were struck
to commemorate the occasion.

**EACH SERVING STAFF MEMBER, IN-PATIENTS, MEMBERS OF
THE BOARD, AND VISITING MEDICAL OFFICERS
WERE PRESENTED WITH A MEDALLION.**