

THE MAYORS OF ROCKHAMPTON

Read Sept. 1959 by Mr. N. C. Crocombe

It is worthy of note that the proclamation of Queensland as a new colony, separated from the original larger New South Wales colony in December, 1859 almost coincides with the proclamation of Rockhampton as a Municipality in December, 1860, the exact date setting up Rockhampton as a municipality being December, 15th, 1860.

At the present time in our history, it would appear to be almost obligatory for us to look back over the one hundred years of our existence, and taking note of the activities of some of the more prominent men of Rockhampton, to pay some tribute to their memory for the Civic achievements they contributed to. As it is not possible within the limits of one comparatively short review to deal with the numerous Citizens of past generations who deserve our honour, this review is limited to providing a brief record of the work of the several men who have filled the important office of Mayor of Rockhampton from time to time, with some note of their quality. Included also are some records of civic movements which are hardly to be credited to any individual but rather to groups of men in co-operation, or to groups of men finalising the investigational and preparatory work of other groups.

There is a general tendency to take for granted the work of older generations, and it is one of the more important functions of this or any Historical Society to counteract this tendency.

Rockhampton has been well served in the quality of its public men, and this excellence is evident in the high average keenness and ability of the many men who have occupied the Mayoral Chair. From the almost accidental beginnings of Rockhampton with its obvious disadvantages of location, it has made remarkable progress. This may be summed up in the words of an article which appeared in the Morning Bulletin January 3rd, 1926 - "The position now is that Rockhampton is in some respects almost a model city with its broad straight spacious streets and footpaths and with convenient lanes to take off so much unsightly traffic. Maintenance of broad streets means extra cost but those broad thoroughfares prevent the traffic congestion so noticeable in cities with narrow crooked streets, and also on hot days and nights "leave breathing space so different from towns less artistically laid out"

Rockhampton was proclaimed a municipality in December, 1860, and on February 23rd, 1861, six Aldermen were elected: Messrs. John Palmer, Richard McKel'igett, John Ward, John Stevens, P.D. Mansfield, and Alexander Grant. John Palmer was elected Mayor - the first person to hold office in Rockhampton. John Palmer had succeeded his brother Richard Palmer in the proprietorship of a store opposite the Criterion Hotel. It was said of him - "He, was always held in esteem as a business man, and one whose whole heart was in the progress of the town".

John Palmer was succeeded as Mayor by P.D. Mansfield in 1862. He was also a general merchant and the first Post Master for Rockhampton. Mansfield was elected again in 1863, but did not complete the term and Richard McKel'igett acted for part of this year.

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Richard McKelligett in 1864, another merchant served the full term. In 1862 the firm Headrick & Livermore had commenced operations in the town and in 1865 Edward Pike Livermore of this firm was elected Mayor - It was said of him "Mr. Livermore concerned himself greatly with the progress and well being of the "budding city".

In 1866 and for the following three years Captain R. M. Hunter occupied the Mayoral position. He was a prominent business man, of whom it was said: "He was a genial old gentleman and respected by every person. He was connected in the early days with every movement for the benefit of Rockhampton".

Captain Hunter, having served as Mayor for four terms and as alderman for many years, was followed by two men, T. Macdonald Paterson and C. Skardon who shared the honour. Mr. Paterson was in partnership in the conduct of a butcher's shop in the town; he was later a member of parliament. Skardon seems to have been overshadowed by his colleague.

For three years - 1871, 1872, 1873 - Edward Pike Livermore was again the mayor of Rockhampton, followed in 1874 by William Pattison. Mr. William Pattison was one of the more notable figures in the early history of Rockhampton. He was prominent in the business life of the town and it was said of him "Anything and everything that was considered for the advancement of Rockhampton found a warm supporter and advocate in William Pattison".

In the years 1875 and 1876 John Macfarlane was mayor. If this story seems to deal somewhat briefly with Macfarlane, it is due to the fact that so far no very clear information of his performances is available. The fact that he was re-elected for a second term seems to be something in his favour.

William George Jackson was elected Mayor for the years 1877 and 1878. He was the proprietor of a general business in the town. He served the town efficiently during his tenure of the office of Mayor. Among his recorded activities may be mentioned his connection with the selection of the site for the Rockhampton Boys' Grammar School.

In 1879, Albrecht Feez was elected to the Mayoral position. Arriving here at the time of Caracra, he later became Colonel Feez. His quality may be summed up in the words of J. T. S. Bird: "His memory will always be cherished in Rockhampton".

Following Albrecht Feez in 1880, 1881 and again in 1883, John Ferguson occupied the Mayoral Chair. He might have continued but retired to concentrate upon his parliamentary duties. John Ferguson is commemorated in the building he caused to be erected in Ward Street, known as the Mansion, now the Mater Misericordiae Hospital. Less well remembered is the splendid garden he caused to be created there. For many years a glorious line of Jacaranda existed along Ward Street, and there remains in the property of Mrs. MacDonald, "Clancholla", one of the best specimens of the true Banyan to be found in Australia, which was planted by John Ferguson's gardeners.

In 1882, Robert Sharples interrupted the sequence of John Ferguson's service as Mayor. Mr. Sharples, a merchant operating for many years in Bolsover Street was prominent in the affairs of the town generally, and was considered to be a "capable and worthy Citizen". The honour of the Sharples name is well sustained by his descendants. Not much information is available regarding the Mayoralty of James Williamson, 1884 nor that of Jabez Wakefield, 1885. James Williamson was in partnership with Hugh Fiddes (who later occupied the Mayoral Chair) as carriers.

In 1886 and again in 1887 Thomas Kelly was Mayor of the town. Tom Kelly established a splendid record of Public service in the Municipal Council and in many other public organisations.

Sidney Williams was elected to the office in 1888 and again in 1889. He rendered valuable service to the town as well as serving as Alderman and Mayor. The extensive organisation, Messrs. Sidney Williams & co., managed at present by Mr. Wallace Williams, is a tribute to his enterprise.

In 1890, Thomas Kay Higson (not to be confused with his brother, the more notable William Kay Higson who served as an alderman later) was mayor of Rockhampton.

In the early nineties - 1891, 1892 and 1893 - Fred. A. Morgan was the mayor of Rockhampton. Mr. Morgan was prominent in the development of Mt. Morgan and also in the public life of the town.

The name Hugh Fiddes first appears in 1894 and re-appears in the years 1898 and 1899. Fiddes had been in partnership with James Williamson in a carrying business at an earlier date.

In the intervening years two names of importance appear in the list of former Mayors. In the year 1895, Stewart Williamson Hartley, a son of the Reverend Robert Hartley, was Mayor.

Of Stewart Hartley J. T. S. Bird has this to say: "In many respects Stewart Hartley was a townsman of the greatest importance being always ready and willing to take on disagreeable duties for the benefit of others. During several floods when townspeople and those living in the outskirts of the town had their premises surrounded by a steadily rising current, Mr. Hartley was always one of the first to join in the good and dangerous work of rescuing the beset family".

W. Wilson Littler was mayor in 1896 - 1897. He was an Iron Founder, in partnership firstly with John Lund who was later in charge of the Crescent Lagoon Waterworks, and later with a Mr. Bruce. He was a "valued alderman and Mayor for two years".

After Hugh Fiddes, in 1900 Thomas Penlington was elected Mayor. Penlington St., a thoroughfare of growing importance, was named in his honour. Penlington had a very attractive boot shop on the corner of Denham and East Street. It may be recorded of him that he maintained at his home on the corner of Penlington and Henry Streets, a stable with a pair of the showiest of the many handsome pair of small ponies which were to be seen around Rockhampton at the turn of the Century.

In 1901, Henry W. Johnson of the famous Belmore Arms Hotel, was Mayor. His fame rests rather upon his propensity to use Shakespearean quotation as advertising material than upon his mayoral activities.

Samuel Thomasson, a master Plumber, was mayor in 1902.

In 1903, Thomas Henderson served for one term, and during the period rendered conspicuous service to the town. Thomas was a sailor, and a lover of the poetry of Robert Burns, best described by that term "dour". Henderson was born in Scotland in the year Rockhampton was proclaimed a municipality. He was elected Mayor in the year Rockhampton was proclaimed a city. His principal service to the town may be recorded in his own words. Writing under the Nom de Plume 'Sancho' in the Morning Bulletin. He says -

"The office of Mayor as I found it was no sinecure. There was a huge overdraft at the bank and there was no less than £13000 outstanding in overdue rates but this was an opportunity after my heart. The mayor of a city is largely an autocrat in financial matters. Only his signature on a warrant is required for the collection of overdue rates. At once I instructed the Town Clerk to have the necessary warrants prepared and I promptly signed them and they were as promptly delivered. Some of the defaulters were among the wealthiest men of the city".

Henderson pays a tribute to the collector, Mr. Bryson for his co-operation. Possibly because of his vigorous policy of rate collecting, Thomas Henderson did not secure a second term of office and he was replaced by Arthur Horatio Parnell in 1904. Parnell re-appears in 1907 and again in 1912. His administration may be described as being careful, which was perhaps its worst fault.

In 1905, after Parnell's first term, a different figure appears in the person of Harry Medcraf who also served three terms in 1905, 1908 and 1911. Harry Medcraf was a very good host; having a spacious home, he also had the willingness to use it. He was a keen lover of gardens, although the responsibilities of his factory where excellent biscuits and lollies were turned out, did not give him much enjoyment. Medcraf was keen to secure the improvement of the town by planting. During his administration there was a very showy garden at the Council chambers.

Thomas Connolly, following Harry Medcraf was elected as an alderman in 1898 and Mayor in 1906. He served only one term. His administration was not spectacular but sound. He discharged his duties fairly and promptly.

Parnell returned in 1907 and Medcraf in 1908 with little or no change in their respective policies.

In 1909, John Edgar appears as Mayor for one year only, although he served for many years as an alderman. His administration was sound and it was during his term of office that the first seven miles of tramway were opened by Hon. William Kidston. In the year 1910, George Wilkinson was elected to the office of Mayor. At his passing this tribute appeared in the Morning Bulletin "His career was distinguished by probity and honour and his service in a public capacity was devoted and sincere". During his tenure of the Mayoral office he did good work towards reorganising the Tramway service. He disappeared from the council in 1918 and about at that time retired from his active participation in public affairs.

After a final term by Harry Medcraf in 1911 and a final appearance by A. H. Parnell in 1912. In the year 1913, T. B. Renshaw, an alderman with considerable experience and a very energetic person whose tact did not always keep pace with his keenness. After Renshaw, the popular William Farrell was elected Mayor in 1914. The year 1914 was a somewhat worrying time with the declaration of war and probably Farrell (affectionately known as Bill) had had enough of the job at the end of it.

Theo Kingel appears as mayor for the first time in 1915 with John Morrison. In 1916 John Morrison occupied the chair to be replaced in 1917 by Theo Kingel who was followed in 1918 by Charles Oliver Gough. At about this time the greater Rookhampton area which had been discussed for some years was established. After Gough, Theo Kingel was mayor in 1919, and Robert Hartley in 1920. During the several terms during which Theo Kingel was mayor he rendered a great deal of public service without making much fuss about it. Robert Hartley on the other hand, who was also chairman of the Harbour Board held his opinions more vigorously. He was at times in a minority, sometimes a minority of one, but time has shown him to be sound in many of his ideas and opinions.

And a prominent builder of the city. Penoblan Am 9

With the establishment of the greater Rookhampton area, considerable subsidiary changes were introduced. Among these changes may be mentioned the fact that a different method of electing the mayor was introduced. For many years it had been the practice of allowing the elected Aldermen to elect from their numbers the mayor who was to act for the year. This was a very amiable practice, permitting as it did a vast amount of lobbying. In the main it did not work out too badly. The quality of the mayors elected was as has been claimed on the whole as good as possible, but some good material was left by the way-side. As an example, the case of William Kay Higson may be cited. He served as an alderman for fifteen years, and was also a member of the Queensland parliament. Quoting from the files of the Morning Bulletin:-

"He served about fifteen years on the city council. When this fact is remembered it will be surprising to most people that he was never chosen for the Mayoralty. That he deserved the honour no one will doubt and had it rested with the ratepayers it is morally certain that the Mayor's chair would have been occupied by him. The writer has often wondered at the reason he missed the position and has come to the conclusion that Mr. Higson was not sufficiently diplomatic and plausible with his conferees".

In another direction some of the aldermen and occupants of the Mayoral chair at the end of the last century and in the earlier years of this century failed to realise that tremendous movements were being initiated. At the turn of the century John Willis appeared in the municipal council as a staunch supporter of the infant labour movement. His presence was tolerated but many of his colleagues failed to realise that he was in a manner of speaking a portent, and that much more notice of the ideas and opinions he expressed would have to be taken as the years went by.

The inauguration of the greater Rookhampton approach to civic affairs might be taken (perhaps arbitrarily) to mark a change in the overall policy of the council. During the earlier years it was a fundamental principle with almost all of the candidates for aldermanic honours that there must be no increase in the rates levied. Certainly at odd times rises did occur, but these rises did not indicate any vast change of policy. In later years there is a more or less general agreement regarding some very substantial rises. If we do not have any increase in the actual rate we do have an increase in the valuation, which while permitting a reduction in the rate, tends to involve the ratepayer in increased payments.

It has been suggested that civic improvements are not necessarily the results of any particular individuals work nor of the work of a single group of men. This is particularly true of the Water supply which we now enjoy. For many years dissatisfaction was freely expressed at the quality of the Rookhampton Water Supply which was drawn from the lagoons west of the Athelstane range. After years of discussion investigation and planning the whole business was brought to a head with the establishment of the Yasmba Pumping Station and the filtration works at Mt. Charlton. To this end the services of William Charlton, mayor of Rookhampton during 1921, 1922, and 1923 are commemorated in the naming of the important plant established at the hill which has been aptly named after him. Alderman Charlton was a good mayor, somewhat handicapped by established practices at the City Council but aided by a vigorous, and progressive council much good work was done. Charlton had excellent ideas for the development of Mt. Charlton as a civic resort, but unfortunately his ideas were carried out only in part.

Having served Rookhampton effectively as mayor for the three years, Charlton was replaced in 1924 by Theo Kingel who continued a sound administration for three years to be replaced in turn by Thomas Alberto Dunlop who served for the years, 1927, 1928 and part of 1929.

'Tommy' Dunlop, as he was commonly called, might be considered one of the more interesting personalities occupying the Mayoral Chair in Rockhampton. He had definite sympathies with the Labour Movement, but his uncompromising integrity and independence of thought had the inevitable result that he lost favour to some extent with that section of the electorate. The vigour of his opinions frequently outran the clarity of his speech. He was at all times intensely concerned with the well-being of Rockhampton and its citizens, and whatever the faults of his utterances or his actions might be, his sincerity is unassailable.

Towards the end of the third year of Dunlop's administration, a considerable disturbance occurred in the city council. Alderman Joseph Jeffries, with a good record of public service and as the manager of a very successful timber merchant's business, was elected and he served only long enough to have his name recorded as one of the mayors of the city. Actually Jeffries deserved better treatment at the hands of his colleagues.

Robert Cousins, a valuable alderman with a long and successful record of service to the town, completed the period to the end of 1929.

He was replaced in 1930 by Thomas Joseph Lee. The value of the work carried out by Tom Lee while he occupied the Mayoral Chair and as an alderman previously, is at times obscured by a lack of understanding on the part of his detractors. Being himself a vigorous and consistent supporter of the Labour Movement, he had the remarkable ability in that he could secure the wholehearted co-operation of the aldermen of his time, whatever their political opinions might be. During the term he served as Chairman of the General Purposes Committee of the City Council, he established the practice of requiring the attendance at all committee meetings and inspections of those officers of the council who were in charge of what are often referred to as the minor departments. During his term, he, with his colleagues, lifted the administration of matters in connection with the parks of the city to its proper place in the general setup.

Tom Lee's work in connection with the installation of the sewerage scheme in Rockhampton remains at least as important as that of any other individual. His term in office unfortunately coincided with the general depression throughout the country, consequently expenditures were restricted involving a curtailment of civic development at work.

R. W. Evans, a much travelled citizen who had developed a large transport service in the city with other commercial activities, took over the mayor's chair from Tom Lee. Here again a major disaster - the outbreak of war - had the effect of limiting the work undertaken during his term of office given a less interrupted period to develop his ideas for the advancement of the city, the Evans administration would have produced much greater progress.

During the period of R. Will Evan's Mayoralty the New city hall was completed and opened. The long discussed proposals for the elimination of the clumsy tramway service, in favour of the more mobile bus system was advanced to a point which permitted the change over to be completed under the administration of Henry Jeffries.

Henry Jeffries who served for three terms - 1943 to 1952 - had also a difficult period having to deal with matters influenced by the aftermath of the war.

Among other achievements the period of Henry Jeffries service was marked by the commencement of the new Fitzroy bridge. In this connection it is important to record that a modification of the first proposals securing a very necessary widening of the bridge was insisted upon.

The present mayor, R. B. J. Pilbeam was elected in 1953 and has been re-elected at each subsequent election.

This brief summary of the work of the leaders in the civic administration of affairs in Rockhampton might well end here. At the present time the ratepayers have become more or less reconciled to the job paying large amounts for civic services and the execution of these services is now easier. The lapse of time will be required to permit a proper evaluation of more recent events.

H. G. Simmons