

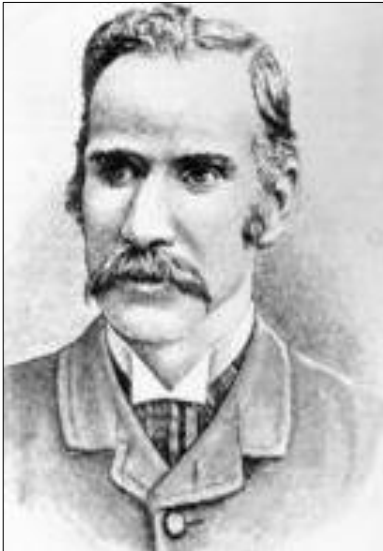
SUBMISSION TO THE
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY INTO
BUILT HERITAGE TOURISM
IN TASMANIA

BY WEST COAST HERITAGE LTD



West Coast Heritage Ltd operates the West Coast Heritage Centre at Zeehan on Tasmania's West Coast. Opening in 1963, it has operated continuously for over fifty years. The Centre provides visitors with a comprehensive insight into the cultural heritage and history of the region. It strives to foster an understanding of the sheer determination of the pioneers who opened up the West Coast.

History



Mr Frank Long

On Sunday afternoon, 8th December 1882, Frank Long and John Healy emerged from thick bush to their camp at the foot of Mt Zeehan. They were greeted by other members of the prospecting party, William Johnson and William Monks. Long and Healy had with them samples of silver lead found in a gossan formation on the bank of a creek. While Johnson and Monks did not attribute any great importance of the discovery, both Long and Healy pegged 80 acres each for the "Arthur and Long Plains Prospecting Company" and the "Dispatch Company". They packed up next day and left for Waratah arriving on 7th January 1883. The samples assayed at 75 – 80 oz of silver to the ton and the discovery caused some excitement in Waratah and Launceston.

Although the initial uptake was slow, mainly because of the difficulty in getting to the area, by 1891 over 4,000 people were on the Zeehan field and the township was growing fast.

By 1900 Zeehan had become the third largest town in Tasmania, after Hobart and Launceston, with a population of 10,000 people. The town boasted buildings such as the Gaiety Theatre-Grand Hotel, Post Office and Stock Exchange, and the Zeehan School of Mines and Metallurgy, along the mile long Main Street.

In a period of eighteen years, the pioneers carved a major township out of dense bush and created a mining industry which marked a new era in the history of Tasmania. By 1915 with the outbreak of World War 1 and ore deposits dwindling, the boom was over, mining slowed, and, with the big crash of 1929, only a few mines were operating.

People moved on to other places and by 1960 the town had a population of 300 people, three hotels, a hospital, and a school. The main employment for the town was the sawmill, with those working in the mining industry travelling to Rosebery and Queenstown to work. The downturn within the town doomed the School of Mines to close.



Zeehan circa 1900

The West Coast Pioneers' Museum

The Zeehan Progress Association with the support of the Tasmanian Government, moved to have the School of Mines and its collection preserved with the concept of creating a tribute to the pioneers. The West Coast Pioneers' Memorial Museum was officially opened by the Premier Mr E. E. Reece on Saturday 30th November 1963.



The West Coast Pioneer Memorial Museum circa 1963

“Mr Reece said it was a pleasure to commemorate the West Coast pioneers and 100 years of hard work in the mines, but he emphasised that it was the responsibility of local people to maintain the museum. However, the Government would assist when possible”. (Advocate Newspaper, 1963).

Importantly, the Murchison Highway opened at the same time and signalled the start of a tourism industry for the West Coast region.

The Museum steadily grew and was managed by a voluntary committee, chaired by Mr George Smith and consisted of local mine managers, business managers and government representatives, and was overseen by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG). These high profile industry figures commenced to collect equipment and artefacts from the mine sites around the west coast and the mine managers ensured any items of significance from their sites were not simply sold off for scrap but retained for exhibition at the museum.

Mr Smith also acted as an honorary Manager of the museum for nearly thirty years. In that time the original small museum was developed to an award winning regional mining museum, winning Museum of the Year in 1985 (awarded by the Museum Association of Australia Inc). His dedication, vision and energy assisted the Museum to grow and prosper. Expansion to include the first floor of the Post Office in the early 1980's enabled the Museum to showcase a pictorial history of the west coast. Each gallery was dedicated to a particular town on the west coast and gives visitors a comprehensive insight of the history of each area in visual format. These galleries were named in honour of Mr Smith.

West Coast Heritage Ltd (WCH Ltd)

In 1994 the management committee was converted to a company limited by guarantee – West Coast Heritage Ltd. This company is a not for profit organisation formed to manage the West Coast Pioneers' Memorial Museum. The Company as a legal entity owns the properties it occupies.

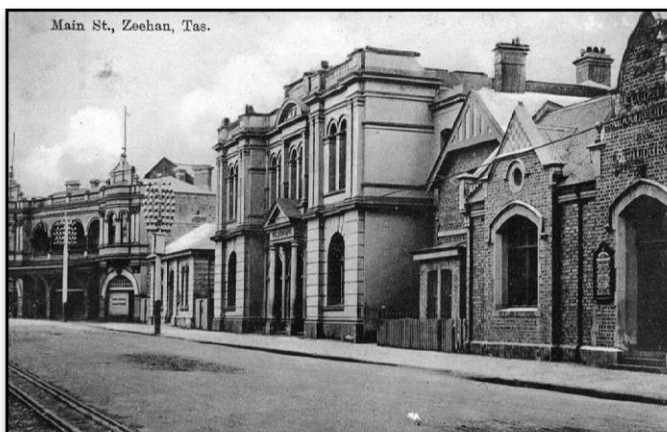
Under WCH Ltd there has been continuous development and expansion of both the yard exhibits and acquisition of the nearby historic Gaiety Theatre-Grand Hotel and Police Station-Court House as additional attractions for visitors. The addition of the Gaiety Theatre- Grand Hotel and the Police Station-Court House extended the museum complex to now include the whole row of historic buildings in the Main street streetscape. The Gaiety Theatre-Grand Hotel is one of the most significant developments for the business and is an important drawcard. Renovated room by room with the assistance of the Friends of the Gaiety, a small sub-committee of WCH Ltd, the ground floor of this elegant building has been restored. The renovation of the Theatre itself has allowed for live productions to once again be performed and is another source of revenue for the company. An Edwardian film show project, officially opened in April 2011 and financed by grants secured by Cradle Coast Authority, has enhanced the visitor experience. Visitors are able to sit in the Theatre and enjoy films such as Jewelled Nights and The Story of the Kelly Gang.

In 2011 the Board of Management decided to register a new business name which better reflects the business and became the West Coast Heritage Centre, Zeehan. The Centre provides a comprehensive insight into the lives of the pioneers and the establishment of industry in the rugged wilderness of the West Coast.

Buildings

The State Government transferred the titles of the Zeehan School of Mines and Metallurgy, Post Office, Police Station-Court House and Gaiety Theatre-Grand Hotel to West Coast Heritage in 2009. Each title has a caveat attached in the event West Coast Heritage Ltd winds up, that the titles revert to the Crown.

Each of the buildings date back to the 1890s – 1900s



Main Street Zeehan then and now
(L-R) Gaiety Theatre Grand Hotel, Police Station - Court House, Post Office and Zeehan School of Mines & Metallurgy

Government Financial Assistance since 1994

With the creation of West Coast Heritage Ltd in 1994, a yearly grant has been provided through Arts Tasmania to assist with the operational costs of the organisation. Originally \$135,000.00 per annum, this was increased around 2008 to \$145,000.00. The balance of the operational costs comes from door charges and merchandise sales in the museum gift shop.

Representation has been made each year over the past fifteen years to have the Arts Tasmania grant reviewed and linked at least to CPI. These efforts have been to no avail.

Maintenance and Upkeep

West Coast Heritage Ltd commits as much as it can afford to the buildings upkeep and maintenance each year.

Applications are also submitted regularly to the Tasmanian Community Fund and have been successful on many occasions, especially with restoration works in the Gaiety Theatre.

Our current essential maintenance plan for buildings includes repairs and maintenance including painting the main street facades at a cost of \$72,000.00; Train shelter repairs and painting \$37,000.00; and the Gaiety balcony floor repairs \$29,000.00. These works are necessary and all unfunded at this time.

Value to Tourism

West Coast Heritage Ltd and the museum complex attracts 17,000 visitors per year and is an important part of tourism on the West Coast. The organisation has been recognised by the following awards:

1985 Museum of the Year

2012 Cradle Coast Regional Tourism Awards – Certificate of commendation

2014 Cradle Coast Regional Tourism Awards – Winner Heritage and Cultural Tourism

2014 Tasmanian Tourism Awards – Finalist Heritage and Cultural Tourism
(runner up to Port Arthur Historic Site)

Into the Future

Whilst West Coast Heritage Ltd continues to “hold its own” financially over time without some form of capital investment in the historic buildings they will fall into disrepair.

Our built heritage is an important part of the Tasmanian tourism industry. Our historic Gaiety Theatre is a perfect example, with around \$1 million spent over 15 years to bring it back to life. It is now enjoyed daily by our visitors who are amazed it exists today.



**Volunteers working on the Gaiety Theatre
Cloakroom restoration**



**Gaiety Theatre-Grand Hotel façade
undergoing a clean**