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Barcaldine and the Comet Masonic Temple

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Barcaldine is a town of Queensland's central west, set in sheep country about 600 km inland from Rockhampton. I first stopped there briefly in 1973 as a student doing research for a thesis about town conservation. At the end of that trip, amongst blurred impressions of a hundred towns, Barcaldine stuck in my mind. As I worked on my research, and as I looked more closely at this and other towns, I came to see why Barcaldine remains so memorable.

The circumstances and events of Barcaldine's history are the main determinants of its present character. The town was founded in the 1880s, flourished and grew quickly to a population of about 1,500 in its first few years and has maintained a fairly stable population and economic function since then. These circumstances have produced a town much of whose fabric is a clearly readable document of history. Barcaldine has changed and developed of course, but it has not been subjected to the wholesale rebuilding or radical economic changes which make some other towns so puzzling to read.

Barcaldine sprang into being with the arrival of the railway in 1886 and is 'the

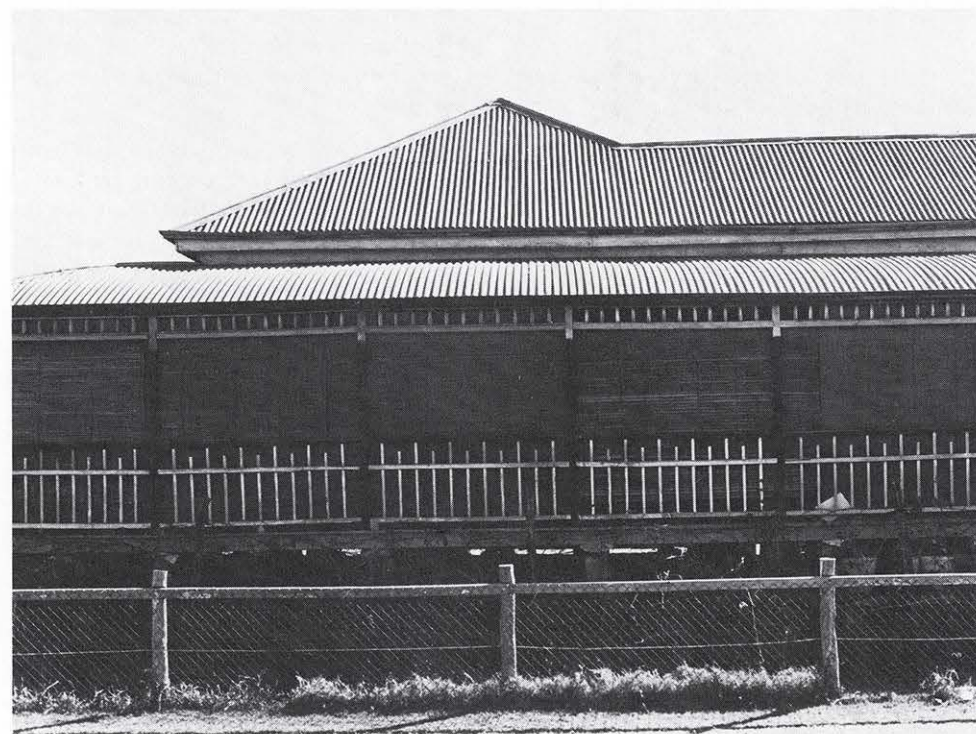
most notable of the "instant" railway towns' which flourished at the successive termini of the Central Railway as it was pushed westward from Rockhampton.¹ In 1891 the Western Champion Almanac described the formation of the town:

In September 1886, Lagoon Creek consisted of Shakespeare's Hotel, brought from Pine Hill, and several tents; but in a few weeks the exodus set in from Jericho, and when the station of Lagoon Creek (since called Barcaldine) was opened in December, the town had assumed formidable proportions. Although '358 miles' did not terminate the section — the line being actually carried over the downs 12 miles further west — the Government promised not to open the line at the twelve-mile, and subsequently further promised not to open a station between here and Longreach, 64 miles from Barcaldine, a place intended for a terminus, for some years to come. The 'rush' to Barcaldine was unprecedented in the annals of Central Railway history. Both Aramac and Blackall being in close proximity, each sent settlers to the new township. The proprietors of the 'Western Champion' newspaper removed their plant from Blackall, and one of Blackall's leading storekeepers also sent a portion of his stock and opened a branch. An Aramac storekeeper intended doing likewise, but noticing the place gave promise of being overdone, wisely remained where he was.²

Lagoon Creek was no sprawling ad hoc encampment, but a properly laid out town with a rectangular grid of streets surveyed by Desgrand in September 1885 in accordance with the government regulations of the time. The town's situation on a slight ridge amidst flat terrain immediately to the south of the railway line permitted a perfectly regular street layout to be adopted and the pattern of building in the town has the same diagrammatic regularity. The half dozen hotels and the main stores and businesses are lined up along the south side of Oak Street, looking across at the railway line. The next street to the south contains the Court House, government buildings and churches. The rest of the town is filled out with wooden houses under great shady roofs, sitting on tall stumps on large sparsely planted allotments.

This layout makes the town oddly lop-sided, with its centre of gravity off to the south of the single-sided main street and nothing much but the railway and open ground to the north.

Street trees are notable features in the town and a reminder of the contribution artesian water has made in this part of Australia. The



Left. A typically well-shaded house

Top Right. The facade before conservation

Right. The painting finished

Far Right. The side of the building



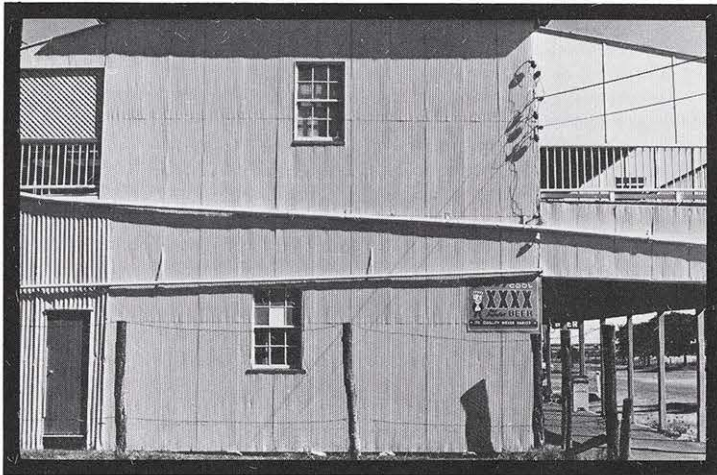
first deep bore in Queensland is said to have been sunk in Blackall in 1885, but local opinion suggests that a bore near Barcardine predates the first Blackall bore.³ In Barcardine, as in other towns of the inland plains, the town water tower is a strong visual element whose appearance on the horizon warns approaching travellers they are about to arrive.

The most notable of Barcardine's street trees is the so-called 'Tree of Knowledge' under which meetings were held during the great shearers' strike of 1891, which climaxed a bitter confrontation between the union shearers and the pastoralists on the issues of working conditions and 'freedom of contract'. The shearers '... in order to witness to their solidarity and to prevent the incursion of non-union labour, established themselves in camps at all the principal centres of the West and Barcardine came to be regarded as the headquarters of the movement because it was here that policy was laid down and decisions made'.⁴

The presence of three or four hundred men in Barcardine camp alarmed the government and a contingent of the Defence Force was despatched to the town. With the arrest of the strike committee and some of their supporters, the strike lost its impetus and strikers began drifting away. All but two of the fourteen men arrested were convicted of conspiracy and sentenced to three years' gaol. One of the two acquitted, Thomas J. Ryan, secretary of the Queensland Labourers Union, became the first endorsed Labor man elected to Parliament, in a by-election the next year.

This election victory and the 1891 strike were parts of a great social movement

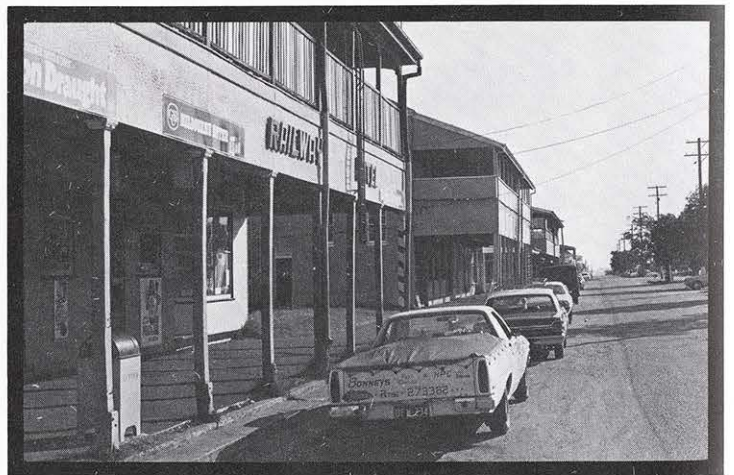
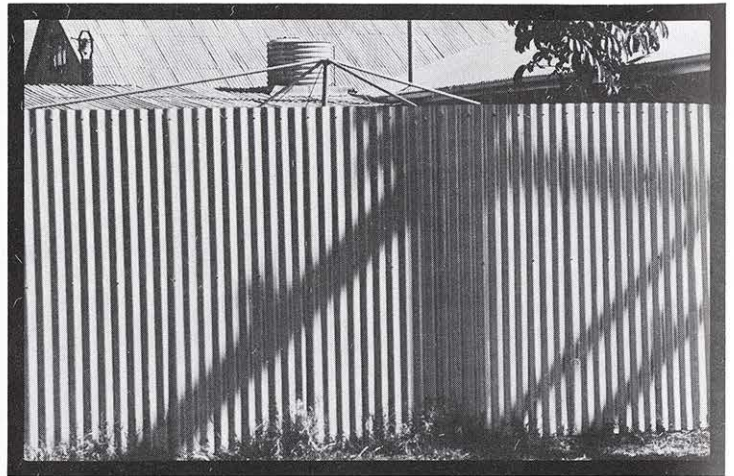
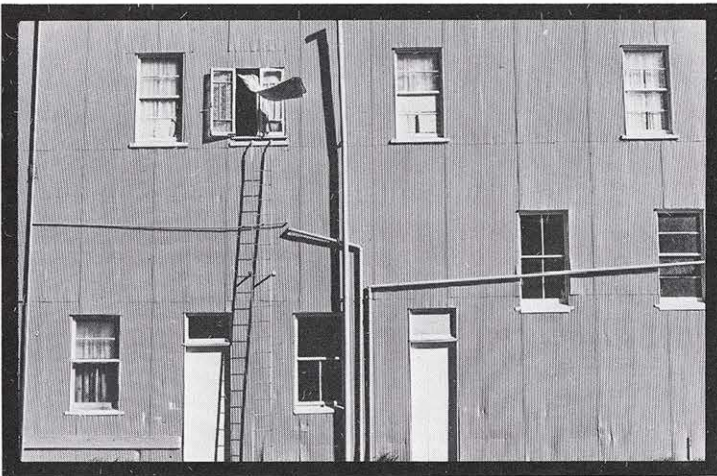




Left, Below Left, Below. Corrugated iron and timber are the ubiquitous materials of Barcaldine's buildings

Bottom. Oak Street, Barcaldine. All the hotels are lined up on one side of the main street and face the railway on the other side

Right. Beech Street from near the Masonic Lodge





which, although centred for a time in Barcaldine, has left few marks on the fabric of the town — a plaque commemorates the meetings held under the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ and scattered debris on the site of the strikers’ camp help to evoke the scene. Perhaps archaeological investigation would discover further fragments of information from this camp site, but the visible evidence is subtle indeed.

Other social activities of the early days of the town have left more tangible evidence. The way buildings were shifted in stages as the railway advanced was a remarkable feature of the development of the Central Railway line. As well as Shakespeare’s Hotel, already mentioned, the Methodist and Catholic Churches, the government school, various railway buildings, houses and the Masonic Hall, were all picked up and moved to Barcaldine. Some had already moved before, but all found their last resting place at Barcaldine. As the town pros-

pered, and as its future appeared secure, the light movable structures were replaced by more substantial and stylish ones.

The Comet Lodge of Freemasons has ‘... had a career which is probably unique in the records of Freemasonry in this State. It holds its Warrant almost 300 miles distant from the town for which it was granted. It erected and re-erected its Masonic Hall six times at the several towns which became the temporary termini of the Central Railway during the first nine years of its existence.’⁵

The Lodge was formed in 1876 at Dingo Creek where a hall was erected. The building remained there only a short time before being moved to Cometville. After 18 months it was shifted to Emerald, two years later to Bogantungan, then to Pine Hill, then to Jericho and finally to Barcaldine.

‘The expense of continually pulling down and removing the hall and the purchase of land always kept the Lodge funds very low. However, when Barcaldine was reached it

was felt the Lodge was here to stay: the building was considerably improved internally . . .⁶ We read that in 1891 this building was ' . . . an unpretentious two-storeyed affair of iron, but beautifully furnished inside.'⁷ This hall served the Lodge until 1900 when £720 was raised to erect a new building.

The new Masonic Temple in Beech Street was dedicated in 1901. It shared some points of description with its well-travelled predecessor — it was two-storeyed, and so far as its back and sides are concerned, iron-clad and unpretentious. The front, however, is anything but unpretentious. This facade is a fantasy of fluted pilasters, string courses, scalloped friezes, arched openings and a tiny pedimental porch, all arranged in picture book symmetry and executed in timber boards and mouldings. This building is surely one of the gems of the town and 'discovering' it was one of the delights of my visit in 1973.

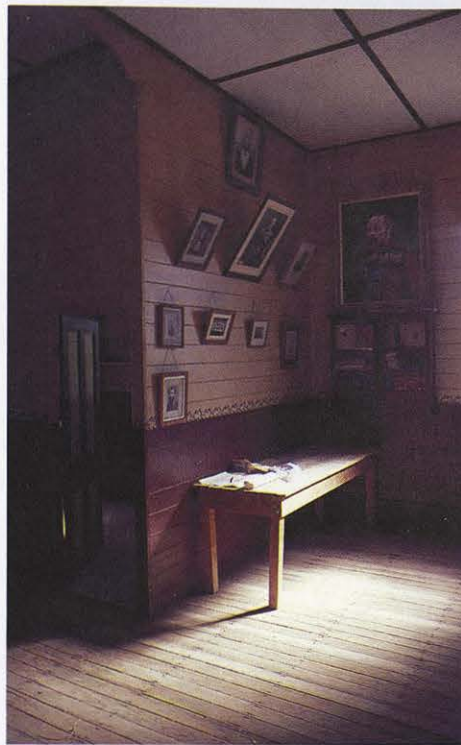
I was pleased to renew my acquaintance with Barcaldine in 1980 when Richard Allom: Architects, with whom I work, were engaged to advise on the care and conservation of the Masonic Temple, and it fell to me to do the work.

This was my first opportunity to see the marvellously intact and original interior of the building — the ground floor with its beige painted walls with dark brown dado and green stencilled frieze, and the upper chamber with curved ceiling, complex panelled linings and mouldings painted in different shades of blue, the whole most carefully executed in tongue-and-groove boards.

Among the photographs hanging in the ground floor meeting hall was one of the building itself taken soon after construction. This picture was to provide the key evidence for reconstructing the original extraordinary colour scheme of the facade. The photograph showed the building behind a long-lost picket fence, with the chamfer-boarded wall surfaces decorated in faceted ashlar stonework, apparently painted on, and covering the whole front.

There was sufficient detail in the photograph to allow me to mark out on the boards the pattern of 'stonework', complete with the mortar joints and the facets of the stone blocks. This preliminary marking out showed me just where to examine the paint surface to find if evidence of the old colours survived. From that point, the task became the accustomed one of scraping under magnification to note the sequence of colours.

To my delight, I found in the earliest layers of paint evidence confirming that the sham stonework had been the original colour scheme, and information about the actual colours used: not surprisingly, the facets of



Top & Centre. Comet Masonic Lodge — ground floor interior

Above. The interior of the upper chamber

the 'stone blocks' were painted in three different shades of stone colour, and the sham mortar joints were mid grey. Other parts of the facade had been originally painted in deep red, and various shades of stone and tan colours.

Once the investigation was complete, and drawings and specification for the repairs and painting had been prepared, the difficulties of getting the work done had to be faced. In a small, remote town like Barcaldine, skilled specialist tradesmen are not available on call. The task of finding and co-ordinating tradesmen was undertaken by Kevin Kerr, an engineer and Barcaldine resident.

Minor repairs were made to the timber work; new pieces of capitals and astragals were run to match the originals where parts were missing; sills and flashings were repaired. Then the surface preparation and painting were carried out, by an out-of-town signwriter and two local house-painters. The result, as I saw on a recent visit, was an admirable piece of conservation work, which reveals again an important aspect of this curious building. While pressed metal sham stonework facades on timber buildings do survive, exterior paintwork seldom lasts longer than twenty or thirty years and I do not know of an original painted mock-stone facade in Queensland. The accurate reconstruction of this charming and naive wall treatment at Barcaldine is, I think, valuable for its power to evoke the past.

This project shows how the National Estate Program, even with its present meagre resources, can work very effectively for the preservation of important things which might otherwise be so easily lost. The small grant made to the Lodge in 1980, and a grant announced in 1984 for further repairs, like other grants made under the National Estate Program, provide the community with real value for money. Before they heard about the Program, the Brethren of the Comet Masonic Lodge even planned to solve their maintenance problem with aluminium siding!

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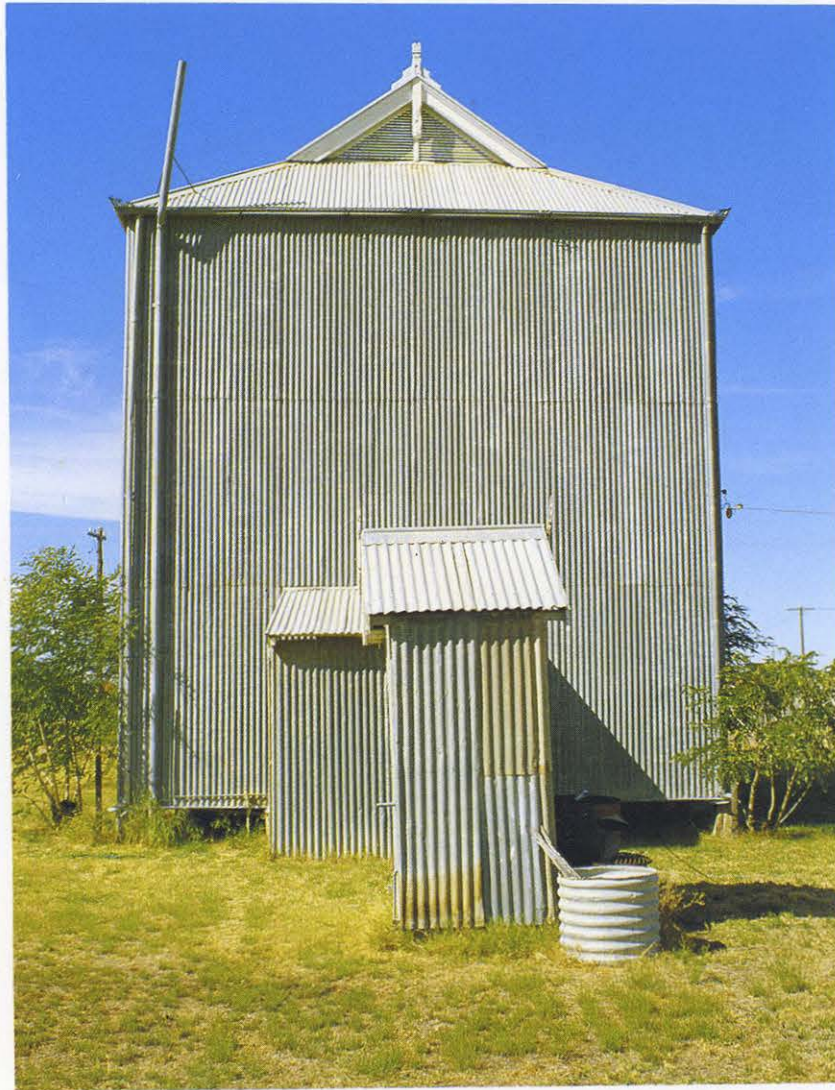
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