

'Public Talk' Dugal James- 'A Man with a Vision' to the Bendigo Branch National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

The original Beehive store dates from the 1851 and was a small store facing the creek servicing the very early arrivals to Bendigo's booming gold rush. It was replaced mid 50's by a modest single-storey building and again a decade later by a two-storey building in 1864. The first two-storey Beehive building was similar to today's Beehive with first floor offices for sharebrokers handling the speculative financing of mining ventures in the Bendigo district.

In August 1871, this third Beehive building caught fire and was extensively damaged. Within 9 months the new Beehive Building as it stands was built with the facade and front portion of the building rising to three storeys and the rare section of the building held to two levels. The sharebrokers occupied a series of small offices on the first floor in an arcade surrounding a long central void surrounded by a balcony. Share trading would take place along these balconies, with traders on the ground floor and sometimes overflowing onto the street. In the 1870s and 1880s on a busy day there could be 2000 stock traders at work in the building and up to 5000 shareholders milling about to monitor their stocks.¹

The Architect behind the Beehive

Charles Webb (1821-1898), architect, was born on 26 November 1821 at Sudbury, Suffolk, England, son of William Webb, builder, and his wife Elizabeth. He was youngest of nine children and after his initial schooling was apprenticed to a London architect. In 1847 (at 26 years old) he was secretary of a short-lived London Architectural Students' Society. His 13-year older brother James had migrated to Van Diemen's Land in 1830. He married Susannah Wellard at Hobart Town in 1833 and crossed to Port Phillip in 1839 where he set up as a builder.

Charles with his sister and her husband joined James in Port Phillip on 2 June 1849. Charles lived with James at Brighton and in August they went into partnership as architects and surveyors. Another brother, Richard, followed later and became a timber merchant in Brighton.

Their most important early commission was in 1850 for St Paul's Church, Swanston Street; its construction was disrupted by the gold rush, and in December 1851 Charles then 30 years old briefly downed pencils and trekked up to try his luck with the gold rush at Bendigo, such was the 'unbridled exuberance' of the times. His enthusiasm waned and he returned to Melbourne and his former work. On 1 November 1853 he married Emma Bridges at St Paul's Church (which I believe he designed) and thereafter they lived in Brighton in a house that I believe he also designed and built.

Charles and James went on to build several private homes and warehouses in the Brighton area and then with James returning to England, Charles progressed to larger and more Grand commissions. These included a synagogue in the city and the galleries in John Knox Presbyterian Church, and continued the design of St Stephen's in Richmond. He then partnered with Thomas Taylor to design St Andrew's Church, Brighton, and receiving an

important commission for Melbourne Church of England Grammar School in 1855. In 1857 he added a tower and a slender spire to Scots Church, which James had built in 1841. From 1858 Charles went out in solo practice until 1888 when two of his sons joined him. Over these thirty years he designed Wesley College in 1864, the Alfred Hospital and the Royal Arcade in 1869, the South Melbourne Town Hall and the Melbourne Orphan Asylum in 1878 and the Grand Hotel (now the Windsor) in 1884. In 1865 he had designed, for Leigh his own home, in Park Street, Brighton, and in 1875 Mount Noorat.

He was described as having been an impeccably dressed, contemplative and dignified man who always worked with systematic neatness and painstaking care.

He was a founding member of the Victorian Institute of Architects in 1856 and was its president in 1882-83.

The Beehive

The property has seen many uses since its 19th century glory days as a mining exchange. In the early 20th Century, it was purchased by the Hendersons and became a grand shopping Emporium and apparently a staunch competitor to the Myers department store. The original traders' offices survived on the first floor in a fair state of repair but the central void was filled to create Allan's Walk, linking Pall Mall and Hargreaves Street. Fortunately the central pitched glass roof and ornamental ironwork, broadly comparable with Webb's Royal Arcade in Melbourne, was retained.

For most of the early 20th Century it continued as a shopping emporium and in different guises retail businesses traded there right through to the 1980's. Many Bendigonians still remember the visiting Allans Music Store, and the various Men and Women's fashion Garment stores it housed, the corner milk bar at the Pall Mall entrance and even the district's Gun Shop, Hartley's, where patrons apparently were permitted to shoot at targets along the full length of the store to true in their rifle sights.

Through the 1970's and 80's, from the perspective of historical architecture in Bendigo, it seems to have taken a bit of a hit. Through the second half of the 20th century much of the Victoriana was stripped away or hidden with 'modern' cladding and signage, verandas were removed and many of the older buildings were stripped out to make way for more modern 'contemporary' interiors. It seems that Allan's Walk and the Victorian Arcade character had lost its appeal. With that interest in the Beehive waned and from the next 20 years it was left idle and sadly fell into a state of decay. The roof began to collapse letting the elements in, the paint and plaster began to breakdown, the pigeons invaded, vandalism took its toll and by the mid 90's the building was in a pretty decrepit state and demolition was threatened.

The Bendigo Council with the support of the National Trust and Heritage Victoria petitioned the State Government for funding support to undertake a reclamation. A State Government Grant with conditions on the Council enabled the building to be purchased in 1999 and start 'Essential restoration work' This most urgent issue was the roof and this was reclad from front to back together with repairs and reinforcement made to the trusses and principal

support structures. With completion of the roof alone the funds were consumed, the work was stopped and thereafter very little further progress was made. The building remained with some tenants trading in Allan's Walk with the first floor basically derelict. Over a further decade the Council commissioned a Conservation Management Plan and undertook repairs where a decision could be taken to try and attract a private enterprise 'Benefactor' or development group to take on the project. The building was put out for tender on the proviso that the purchaser would be obliged to complete a substantial restoration / renovation in a manner sympathetic to and respectful of the Buildings character and historical significance.

Pall Mall Nominees were the successful party and the building was sold to them in 2015. Over the next four years the group undertook an extensive restoration and remodelling. Their intention was to collaborate with another group developing the Thomas Jeweller site behind where a six-storey private Hotel was to be built opening onto The Hargreaves Mall. The grandeur of the Beehive's ground level arcade was to be incorporated as a lobby bar and function venue affiliated with the hotel.

Covid struck and the developers for the hotel complex were unable to proceed. Pall Mall Nominees continued their work at the Beehive through the first few covid years hoping to establish an alternate direction for its future use. As we know the covid pandemic dragged on for almost 4 years and has had a devastating impact on the hospitality and entertainment sector. Eventually the group felt obliged to relinquish their dream and offer the building up to a new investor.

The Building Today

I've been a lover of all things old, forever, be it gardens, buildings, vehicles, people but all things historic. My first paid work was in the building sphere and the people I worked with were in love with old buildings. I started buying and renovating old buildings and I've been afflicted with that disease ever since. I watched the Beehive coming up for sale 10 years ago and staunchly directed myself never go inside. I'd heard descriptions of the interior, it's history and present state. I knew once I'd seen inside, I'd love it and I'd have to have it but that I'd definitely be biting off more than I could chew. So, I didn't go inside, I averted my eyes to the right on every drive past and was relieved to hear it had been sold.

Covid

Mid Covid I'd been looking at another historical building in town that was subsequently withdrawn from sale. The agent, however, whispered furtively that the Beehive might be available 'off market' Out of sheer curiosity and against my better judgement I agreed to have a look through. My fears were realised, and my passion ignited. It was a magnificent building with huge potential to be realised and brought back into circulation. To my great relief most of the hard yards of the restoration had been completed not only to a high standard but in such a way as to pay homage to the building's rich and varied past. Just a little finishing off, I convinced myself, a bit of dusting and a lick of paint here and there. Well of course here I am two years later with my duster and bailing twine still just finishing a few things off....

Things are Happening

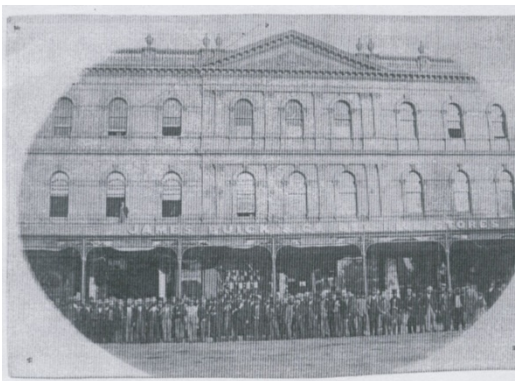
I'm very grateful that the Pall Mall Nominees certainly did the hard yards, I see my contribution completing their vision by bringing the building back to life and life back to the building. So, I've been working on sound, light, floor coverings, furnishings most importantly purpose and repopulation. There are three levels and both a front and rear to be considered. I'd like the large ground floor gallery to be used for just that, displays, exhibitions, functions and as an entertainment space. The first floor has a dozen small independent rooms that were the mining exchange offices. I'd like those rooms to be occupied by pervaders of passion, wine makers, distillers, condiment and confectioners, artists, sculptors, potters, jewellers, milliners, tailors; people who have a passion for what they do but lack an opportunity to share and present that to the community. There are two shops either side of the entrance from Pall Mall and I'd like these to be operated in collaboration with the emporium above, one may be a Provadore and the other display and sell craft items, ceramics, handmade jewellery, specialty garments and millenary.

The first floor has a ballroom at either end and the second floor another very large room. I intend to have these available for exhibitions, function and festival events such as The Book Week, The Writers Festival, collector groups, art exhibitions and film festivals. Bendigo and Central Victoria in general has a huge wealth of passionate creators and what we lack is a central precinct to support them.

It's taking some time but there's been good progress and we're not far off where we need to be.

And now I'd just like to share a few photos from the last 10 years of the building's life.

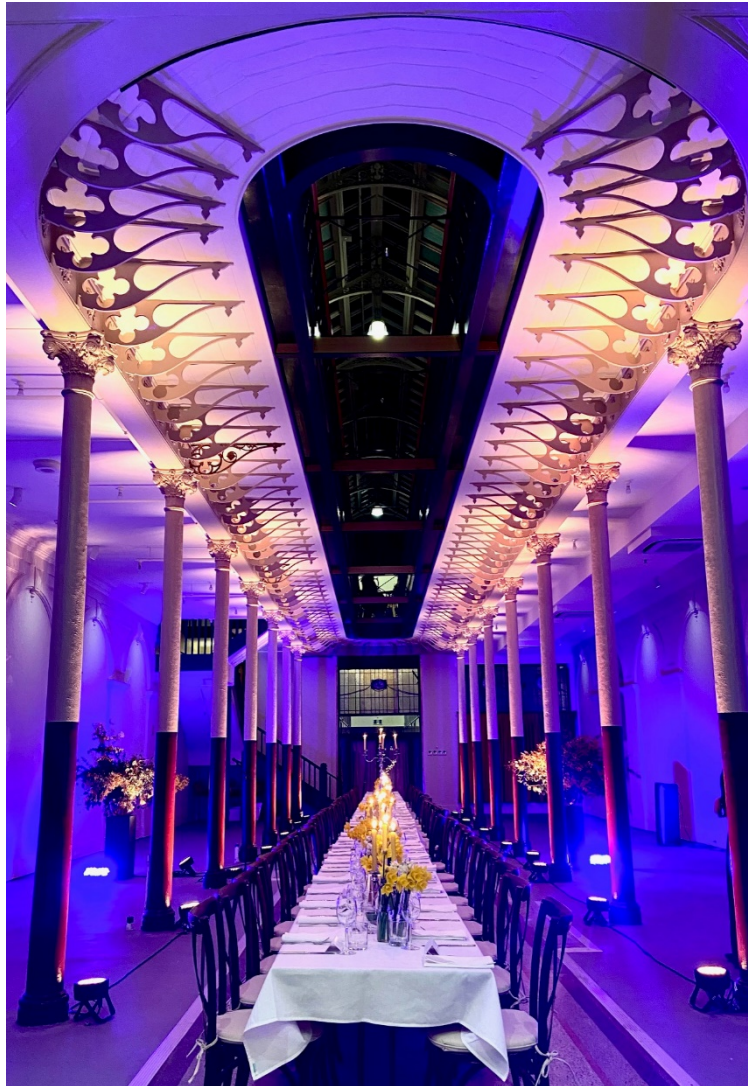
Dugal James
26 November 2024



The Beehive Building in Pall Mall



The former Sandhurst School, Dugal's Surgery



The following photos show the inside of the Beehive Building



