

PLOD ESSAY: Wonthaggi becomes a Borough; elects a Council

In order to figure out exactly how Wonthaggi became a Borough in 1911, one year and five months after the first shaft was opened at the State Coal Mine, we have to go back to the moment the first post office, church, hospital, barber, tea room, or wine bar was established in Tent Town. We have to go back to the first complaint by a tent dweller. For it was then that a committee of citizens was formed to take care of all municipal issues in a town that was not really a town, but a camp owned and controlled by the Mine and the government that owned it.

The first progress association, called the Powlett Progress Association, was in full swing on 11 June 1910 when the *Sentinel Times* published its first issue, although it was not yet such a stable entity as it was to become. At that time the Progress Association had a lot on its plate because Tent Town was already being pulled down in an attempt to convince people to shift into the Model Town that was about to become Wonthaggi.

In the beginning tents had been provided for temporary accommodation of State Coal Mine employees, but it was never intended that they should be permanently housed under canvas. The State thought ample time had passed (eight months) for people to make their own arrangements for housing and boarding. Unfortunately, not enough blocks had so far been surveyed, and, so, demand for Freehold Blocks far out weighed the number for sale. The State thought private enterprise in the way of boarding houses that had gone up on leased land could provide miners with accommodation. At exorbitant cost. Which was so high because the State charged big rentals for business sections in the new town.

This was an issue for the Progress Association. The Secretary sent letter after letter to the State and deputation after deputation. In September an ad was put in the paper addressed to the miners: "Freehold Blocks from £15 in Wonthaggi Township - £5 deposit, balance about 2s a week without interest. Houses built to order, Cash or Terms, from £10 deposit, balance as rent." So, they had won something but there was a long way to go.

Another thing the Progress Association argued for was a proper post office. Finally, on the 6th of October 1910, the Deputy Post Master General wrote to Mr Laidlaw, the new President

of the Progress Association, that the "Powlett coal mine post office to be changed to 'Wonthaggi' on the 17th October, and the name of the present Wonthaggi post office to be altered to 'St. Clair' on the same date".

So, the Powlett Progress Association became the Wonthaggi Progress Association.

The WPA was concerned about the train depot in town being situated in a quagmire of mud up to a horse's belly; they argued for the passenger train to come through from Nyora; they asked for proper roads from Archies Creek and to Cape Paterson; they requested the use of Mine electricity for Wonthaggi houses and businesses; they argued long and hard for coal from the State mine to be sold to the public so the mine could be more prosperous and miner's wages not be beholden to the whims of the railway; they were deeply involved in the issue of licensing rights for pubs and clubs; they campaigned for the State Primary School; and they even fought for regulations requiring citizens to tie up their stray dogs, and one member of the Association, Mr Guilfoyle, spent much energy getting a public urinal put in by January 1911.

The most important responsibility the WPA took on was the Hospital. It began as a tent in Tent Town, became another tent on Graham Street (a much opposed situation, Dr Sleeman refusing to work there) and finally was given a site by the State for a proper building. You can read all about it in Sam Gatto's wonderfully informative and beautifully written book, *Accepting the Challenge* (for sale at the museum for \$32). It is exciting to read in the old newspapers of the enthusiasm shown by the townspeople, the miners and all their families for the hospital. The election of the Hospital Committee consumed the interest of everyone and was a precursor to what went on when Wonthaggi finally got a chance to elect its own Borough Council

As businesses built up on Graham and McKenzie Streets, their owners became active in the town's progress. They formed a Traders Association. Calling for electricity, more police to maintain law and order, better streets, sewerage, more land for sale. More Free Land for sale! The WPA heard their cries. At the end of October the Crown Law Department announced the establishment of a Court of Petty Sessions.

As the town progressed many committees responsible for the growth of the new town were formed and the remarkable Mr Laidlaw seemed to hold the chair for many of them. Often the meetings would be held in his cycle shop! There was the WPA, the Caledonia Club, the Traders' Association, The Political Labor Council (PLC), the Victorian Coal Miners' Association (VCMA), as well as a committee for every church and sporting group in the District including the Races. *The Sentinel* printed this statement in their humorous and opinionated 'Man in the Street Says' column: "That every fourth man in Wonthaggi is a member of some committee or other. Presidents and vice-presidents are many."

This was the first indication that with the hint of Wonthaggi becoming a Borough necessitating an elected Council, a great deal of political manoeuvring began amongst the men who felt they ran the town. *The Sentinel* even began calling Mr Laidlaw the "Mayor" in their 'Man in the Street' column (with tongue in cheek).

In January 1911, *The Sentinel* reported, "That the bill constituting Wonthaggi a Borough has been passed and speculation is rife as to who are likely to be the first Councillors and who will be the first Mayor. The names of several have been mentioned and a few have definitely announced themselves as candidates. The present 'Mayor' is expected to put up a fight."

Mr. James Hector Wishart, who owned Universal Providers, seemed to be pushing his way to the front of the race well before the race had actually begun. He moved from the Traders Association to the Progress Association just in time to go to Melbourne with a deputation to the Premier, Mr Murray. There he finished his protracted declamation about the future of Wonthaggi, the importance of the mine and especially the significance of Freehold land with the words, "I think the Minister is getting rather tired o me. [laughter from his cohort – other members of the WPA and some PLC people]" The minister and the Premier were impressed.

Later, when the Premier came to Wonthaggi to see for himself what a go-ahead town it was, Wishart again insinuated himself as the group of dignitaries approached the primary school saying the "conditions which obtain are altogether wrong and should never exist. It is not fair to the children or their parents. As a suitable school building is urgently required, the government should erect a temporary building and make provision for drinking water and proper sanitary conveniences".

Wishart was a man of action.

After Mr Scanlon, the valuer appointed by the Government, evaluated the property and made a roll of ratepayers eligible to vote, the election for Wonthaggi Borough Councillors was called.

The Sentinel declared that the Progress Association had outlived its usefulness.

Headlines in the paper from 24 March 1911 through April 7 read: "Election of Councillors – Twelve PLC Candidates for the Selection Ballot – Polling Day: Wednesday April 5th – Nine Candidates nominated by PLC – Five Independents – Municipal Election! Result of the Poll – Labor Candidates Sweep the Board – Brilliant Victory for the Party."

The first meeting of the Borough Council was held on 27 April 1911. Although Mr Laidlaw had been elected to the first Council, it was J. H. Wishart who was appointed Mayor. The Mayoral allowance was fixed at £10. Mr Wishart thanked his colleagues for appointing him first Mayor of Wonthaggi, and after doing so, he took the chair. - C. Landon



First Borough Council: Mr Wishart is in the middle of the front row sitting on a pillow with a stuffed koala between his legs