

Appendix 4 - CNF Grounds at South Geelong

(a) Comunn na Feinne's Petition for the grounds at South Geelong.

“This Society requires a Grant of Land from the Government within the Town of Geelong of no less than 5 acres in extent to enable it carry out its objects successfully. That Comunn na Feinne has by the permission of the Bench of Magistrates at Geelong for the past two years occupied temporarily a Block of Land at South Geelong, the position of which is shown on the accompanying plan sketch. The expense of enclosing and erecting temporary buildings on the said land every year is one reason for making application to your Honorable Board for a permanent grant.

“Comunn na Feinne ... was instituted in Geelong in December, 1856, it numbered 30 members, and at the first Gathering on 1st January, 1857 ... prizes to the value of £50 were distributed. At the next Gathering on 1st January, 1858, the members enrolled were 145 and prizes to the amount of £100 were distributed to competitors for the Games, and to Scholars at the various schools in Geelong for proficiency in certain branches of Education. The number on the roll at present is 239 – and it is purposed to distribute prizes to the value of £136, on the 1st January next, 1859.

The members of this Society would further submit that in the event of a Grant of Land being set apart by the Government for their use, it is their intention to enclose the land without delay, to plant around the outside boundaries, trees and shrubs for ornament and shelter;- to erect a Grand Stand and Amphitheatre for spectators and to enclose an arena for Athletic Games etc., and as part of the land of about 300 yards in length will be set aside for Archery and Foot Racing, it will be obvious to your Honourable Board that a smaller piece of Land than five acres would not be sufficient for the requirements of the Society.

In conclusion your memorialists would only add that the last annual Gathering was attended by at least 10,000 spectators,* whose comfort and safety greatly depended on the ample accommodation provided by the Society; and as it is probable that the future Gathering may be in excess of that number, the Society has selected Block No 5, South Geelong as the most desirable site, it being perfectly level, and for this reason of comparably small value for other purposes its position renders it valueless for trade.”
(*Geelong Advertiser* 15th October, 1858)

[*This figure would have included those who paid at the gates and those who remained outside the grounds watching from different vantage points. *Bell's Life in Victoria* estimated that there were over 7,000 at the grounds but then, as now, crowd estimation is hardly an exact science! cc]

(b) *Government Gazette* (14th January, 1861) announcement re granting Comunn na Feinne temporary use of the grounds at South Geelong. Lands and Survey Office

Lands Temporarily Reserved from Sale

“The Governor, with the advice of the Executive Council, in exercise of the power in him

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vested in this behalf by the Act 24 Victoria, No 117, has by divers orders made on the 14th day of January, 1861, temporarily reserved from sale, the lands hereinafter described for the several purposes specified in connection with each description.

Such of the said lands are situated in Auriferous localities and are accordingly exempted from mining operations within the meaning of the 4th Clause of the Gold Fields Act 21 Victoria No 32, 11th Day of February, 1861.

Description of the Lands above referred to:-

At Geelong, for the use of the “Comunn na Feinne”, Two acres two roods, being part of Section 5 A town of Geelong: Commencing at the south-west corner of the section, bounded on the west by Bellerine Street, bearing North 11 degrees East five chains; on the north by Balliang Street, bearing South by 79 degrees East five chains; on the East by allotments 5 and 16 said section, bearing South 11 degrees, West five chains; and on the South by Fyans Street, bearing North 79 degrees, west five chains to the point of Commencement, 60, A8826.”

Appendix 4 (b) Purchase of St Andrew’s Church and Land.

At a special meeting called of Comunn na Feinne members, under the chairmanship of its President, Dr John Small, the matter of the sale of St Andrew’s Church and grounds was fully laid before the membership. The secretary read a minute from the directors that the following sub-committee had waited on the St Andrew’s Church managers, who had offered to sell 171 feet of land in Yarra Street, with a depth of 131 feet 6 inches along McKillop Street, with the church buildings and appointments thereon for £1,500.

The chairman said that they were told that at £1,500, they would get a bargain. They might not get a fortune straight away, but it was something worth the money. Both were Scottish bodies, and their interests were mutual. The walls were sound, but new floor and seating might be needed. There was a piece of land on the corner not needed for the hall. They might lease it or dispose of it later on. The question was, what would they get for the old land? William Plain had done yeoman service towards getting a Bill through in a spare moment to enable them to realize on it. Soon he believed it would be an accomplished fact. He had a written offer for the land for £950. They might be forced in the Bill to auction the land, and estimates of the proceeds varied between £1,100 and £1,300, less expenses.

Other agents wanted to get rich quick, and offered sums they could not consider. They had to raise £550 to cover the cost of the hall, and the authorities agreed to let that stand on the honour of the Society for five years at 6 per cent, half-yearly reductions of principal to be accepted if desired. To make the church into a self-supporting speculation would cost a lot of money. He had been giped at for voting to extend the brick area there, but he was not sorry for it; if they got a building in brick they would not have to paint. They paid £50 per year [at present] for the hire of of a hall etc., and that was about the interest they would have to pay on the speculation. They would be able to put by annum per annum to wipe out the whole thing. His own ideal was to raise the money on debentures from the members, and to guarantee them a fair rate of interest. Any surplus could be balloted for. It would sharpen their interest in the Society. They had stagnated for the last two years, and he blamed his own occupation of the chair against his

convictions. [Shouts of “No” from the body of the meeting] To have a home of her own would give new life to Comunn na Feinne. Geelong must grow through its great district and possibilities. He hoped there would be great men, and the preponderance would be Scotsmen. Purchases with the revenue from the old land would be vested in the Crown, and the balance in their own name. Buildings on the ground vested in the Crown would be in the name of C.N.F. Therefore, if the ground were sold they would have to get compensation on the buildings.

Mr Laird said the walls of the building were perfectly sound, and would be 50 years hence. The floor would have to be renewed. He suggested two rooms each 25 feet by 13 feet 3 inches, leaving a 9 foot entrance to the hall. Between the new part and the street, a space of 39ft. would remain. At the sides of the rear he proposed a ladies’ cloak room and a kitchen. The estimated cost of the whole of the works, ventilation, exits, etc., would be £800.

The Chairman proposed that the scheme be carried through.

Mr J.B. Leitch seconded. It was a wonder to him that C.N.F. had existed for 56 years without its own home. This might not be in the centre of the city, but it would soon be the way things were progressing, and if they waited for a block in the city they would wait till doomsday.

Mr Aikman said as the land was under offer it was the wisest thing C.N.F. could do to buy it. He thought the members would finance it.

Mr Sinclair said his experience was that members were not quick to put their hands in their pockets.

The Chairman said it was only on loan and at interest.

Mr Leitch said he was certain that in 10 years all liabilities would be wiped out.

The Chairman, Dr John Small, said it was a great scheme and in future they would look back on the decision with pride.

After a little discussion, the proposal to buy was carried unanimously “with applause.”

The directors were empowered to act for the Society in the purchase.

“It was decided to issue a circular to district and country members appealing for assistance to carry the project through. Sums from £1 to £100 advanced will be allowed the current rate of interest.”* (*Geelong Advertiser* 31st October, 1912, p4)

[*Those giving money under these terms constituted the ‘debenture holders’ much mentioned in the latter stages of the Society’s life.]

Appendix 4 (c) – Sale of CNF Land at South Geelong.

(1) The need for title

William Plain, a Victorian State MLA., and long-time Comunn na Feinne member and office-bearer, had been busy with efforts to ‘oil the wheels’ of the decision-making machinery in parliament. This pertained to the application by the Society for title to the grounds at South Geelong and, also, to have the government purchase back the land. The issue of title was dealt with towards the end of November, 1912.

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The Government Bill, introduced into parliament on 29th November, 1912.

“No. 2387.

An Act to provide for the Sale of certain Lands at Geelong and for other purposes. [11th December, 1912.]”

“The Crown would get a property transferred to it valued at £900 instead of the present land, valued at £700. Mr Richardson said there was no objection.”

“A Bill having been passed for the sale of the old Comunn na Feinne grounds at South Geelong, the Society has practically closed with the proposition for acquiring St Andrew’s old Church as a hall. The committee which has been negotiating, will meet the Church representatives tomorrow night to discuss the transaction. It is probable that the old ground will be sold before anything further is done.”

On Tuesday 3rd December, 1912, a preliminary deposit was paid to the Church’s Trustees with possession of the property almost immediately available. An early start was to be made on the necessary renovations and extensions.

It has already been pointed out that Comunn na Feinne avoided party politics, and denominational religious matters, and practiced a non-discriminatory attitude when it came its membership and to participation in its activities. However, as we have seen in the land issue involving its grounds at South Geelong, it was not averse to using political ‘contacts’ to further its cause. In a report regarding the land bill issue, the Society stated that it had had a letter from Hon. Hugh McKenzie MLA., acknowledging the Society’s gratitude, “for his assistance in pushing the Bill through Parliament for the disposal of Comunn na Feinne land at South Geelong, intimating that he would be pleased to accept the invitation to attend the opening of the new Hall.”

The Government Gazette of 15th February, 1913, gave notice of the intended sale of the Society’s old ground at South Geelong.