

# Telling a sorry saga of stables



Di Morrissey: Reveals the story behind the demolition.

Di Morrissey, one of Australia's best selling authors, returned to live in the Manning several years ago. She has a passion for history and heritage and was one of the many behind the push to save the Wingham Hotel Stables which were demolished by council order in July. She provided the following article...

SO the Greater Taree City Council Heritage Committee have apologised over the mishandling of the demolition of the Wingham Hotel Stables. Credit must go to Cr Mave Richardson, who chairs the heritage advisory committee, for

sending a letter of apology to former heritage advisor and councillor, Helen Hannah, who took it to the newspaper. It is time that more of the story should be told.

The first I heard about the threat to the stables was in an article which appeared in the Wingham Chronicle, saying the stables and the hotel site were being sold and so the future of the stables was at risk. I rang my friends Robert and Sue Milliken in Sydney whose grandfather, Harry Cross, built the stables, because they are deeply committed to preserving Wingham's heritage. They offered to help in any campaign to save the stables.

When I learnt the future of the stables was to be discussed at a council meeting the following week, I rang Cr Richardson to express my concern, to find it was the first she knew about the issue as well.

Donna Carrier, the head of the Wingham Chamber of Commerce, raised the same article at a chamber meeting and a letter of concern was subsequently sent to the council.

A Save the Stables committee was formed by Wingham resident Nicola Morton and the media were informed. A petition to go to the council asking that the stables be saved was distributed to local businesses. Robert Milliken pointed out that since the stables were heritage listed by the GTCC, certain procedures would have to be observed before their future was decided.

We learned that an engineer's report had been ordered. Eric Richardson, head of the (Manning Valley) Historical Society, told me he had walked around the stables with the senior leader of regulatory services at council, who had advised him that



July 2010: Wingham Hotel, the beloved 'bottom pub', burns to the ground.

the stables were unsafe.

Others recalled, though, that the late John Machin had donated timber from his mill and along with the Rotary club of Wingham, the stable supports had been strengthened about 15 years ago.

I emailed the GTCC heritage officer who also told me that council maintained that the stables were unsafe.

The main worry among concerned citizens was that should the stables be demolished, what building would be erected in its place at this significant entrance to Wingham township. Designs and ideas to incorporate the stables structure into a new building with help of the new owner were suggested. Eric Richardson suggested the stables be moved to the showground and re-erected there. Others considered this a last resort option, but preferred to save the stables on their original site.

When I emailed Cr Richardson to ask what was happening about the future of the stables she said she didn't know, but suggested the man I should speak to on council was Mr Ron Posselt, the executive leader of service delivery.

Robert Milliken and I both rang Mr Posselt. Mr Posselt said there was a potential buyer of the stables site, but he refused to tell us the name of the person as it was a private matter. He said he was in touch with the buyer's representative.

So despite our arguments that the stables was a significant heritage listed building, and therefore the future intentions of the site should be publicly known, Mr Posselt said he would not release any information, except to say the buyer had not yet completed the sale, nor had raised finance for a new building and so was in no hurry to pull the stables down. Mr Posselt again stressed the stables were unsafe and as such were a hindrance to any buyer.

He went on to say the Ryans, whose property had been burnt down after buying the hotel less than a year before, had lost everything and really had to sell the site, and believed that such a sale would be hindered by the presence of the stables.

Since no sale of the stables site had yet taken place we felt we had still time to act. So we requested a copy of the engineer's report on which council was basing its claims that the stables were unsafe and dangerous.

We then applied to the State Heritage Commission to request that a State interim heritage order be placed on the stables, which would give us 12 months' breathing space.

I emailed a letter to local State member of Parliament, Steve Bromhead, asking if he would look into the matter of the stables and am still awaiting his reply.

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# Sorry saga of stables

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Then to our shock, council issued the stables demolition order, based on the engineer's report. Mr Posselt told us the owner now had up to 60 days to comply with the council's orders.

A petition opposing demolition was quickly gathered up and Nicola Morton delivered it to the front desk of the council chambers, in a sealed envelope addressed to the mayor. People wrote to the local papers and the feeling was if the stables could not be retained in situ, then they should be moved to the showground as Eric Richardson had suggested. I assumed the historical society would run this operation.

I wrote a series of questions for council which I addressed to Cr Trent Jennison trying to clarify matters.

Clive Lucas, a highly esteemed heritage architect, wrote to council saying the "great shed" of Wingham was among the most important buildings from the NSW North Coast's pioneering heritage and council's duty was to preserve it.

Meanwhile a thorough reading of the engineer's report to council revealed a different perspective from council's statement of May 16 justifying its demolition on "structural issues."

Nowhere did the report say that the stables were unsafe. There were marks from the hotel fire on one pole and pole 21, on the weather side of the building, needed some strengthening "minor remedial repair works". While inspections "do not display at this point a likelihood of being structurally unsafe", the report concluded that "major works are now required as the stables are not well preserved". This seemed at odds with Mr Posselt's and apparently the council's rationale for the demolition of the heritage stables.

The sale of the site had now gone through and a search revealed it had been purchased by Clackermann Pty Ltd. Then we tried to find out if someone had estimated the cost of moving the stables to the showground. There was no support for this action.

At a meeting in Wingham with Steve Bromhead over council's plans to downgrade the tourism information centre, Donna Carrier asked for his help in saving the stables. He agreed. At the same time, the State Heritage Council contacted GTCC, telling them there was a request for [www.manningrivertimes.com.au](http://www.manningrivertimes.com.au)

an interim heritage order. Two days later, a demolition crew went in and over a weekend the stables were no more.

By Sunday the mighty poles of oregon that had come from North America on a steamship 100 years before, were chopped and sold as firewood.

In subsequent media interviews Mr Posselt said the stables were unsafe. The mayor denied any petition had been personally delivered to him, and no-one at council would admit receiving any letter of concern about the fate of the stables from the Wingham Chamber of Commerce.

However after a following council meeting discussed a letter I had written to the paper detailing delivery of the petition and emails to Donna Carrier acknowledging receipt of the chamber's letter, letters of acknowledgement from council were sent out.


Under Freedom of Information we sought the council's file on the stables. In it are letters and documents which detail that the Ryans, the original owners, along with the new buyer, appear to have come to an agreement over the sale of the property subject to the removal of the stables. In the buyer's solicitor's letter it states: "So there can be no misunderstanding, our client purchased the property on the understanding that there was an order of demolition and, if there is no order of demolition, our client company considers it has suffered substantially in a financial sense."

The letter concludes "Our client needs council to understand in no uncertain terms that if there is any consideration at council level to reverse the demolition order that is in existence, our client will take whatever action is necessary to have the matter decided by a court, as such a reversal would completely frustrate our client's intentions and see considerable financial detriment incurred."

So it seems council was obliged to comply with their original agreement to demolish the stables.

But with the destruction of the stables we were left with the question: Why did council put private development ahead of community concerns? Let us hope that council does not go down this path again and that Wingham's heritage buildings will have real protection.

(Di Morrissey)

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