



## Wentworth Chambers turn 50

By Kylie Day

Some fifty years ago now, Wentworth Chambers was born. The building was officially opened on 20 August 1957, by the Hon JJ Cahill, then premier of New South Wales. The construction of Wentworth Chambers was an undertaking of great resourcefulness and courage, which is largely attributed to the energy and vision of Sir Garfield Barwick QC and Kenneth Manning QC.

On 21 August 2007, Counsel's Chambers Limited hosted a cocktail reception to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of Wentworth Chambers. As the Hon Trevor Morling QC has observed:

There must be very few barristers now in practice who have any knowledge of the huge debt the Bar owes to the original chairman of directors [of Counsel's Chambers Limited], Garfield Barwick QC. A reading of the minutes of board meetings between the date of the first meeting on 17 April 1953 and the opening of Wentworth Chambers four years later reveals the prodigious effort he put into turning his vision for the building into a reality. It was he (assisted principally by Kenneth Manning QC) who explored the possibility of obtaining finance to erect Wentworth Chambers and who negotiated the original building contract.

And it was he who, with a few other silks, personally underwrote the issue of shares to make up for the initial deficiency in applications for shares. He remained chairman of the board whilst he was attorney-general of the Commonwealth and until his appointment as chief justice of Australia.

In his speech at the ceremony to mark the opening of Wentworth Chambers, on 20 August 1957, Sir Garfield Barwick QC said:

This is indeed a proud and memorable day for the Bar of New South Wales, and they are pleased that many have come to rejoice with us ...

By their enterprise and co-operation, a large number of its members have brought this fine building into being, and have thereby given themselves security, convenience and comfort in the practice of their profession.

Accommodation had become impossible in this street, for so long the milieu of the advocate – although we have not overcome the problem completely, we have reduced it.

Satisfying and important as it is to have so much of the Bar housed so close together and as close to the courts, Mr Premier, it is but a part of the result. For in this building the Bar has made a distinct advance in its



corporate life – taken a great step forward towards having an adequate home for itself.

We have not been so fortunate as our English counterparts. We did not inherit the magnificent facilities of the Inns of Court, mellowed by time with a patina of tradition. Such amenities we must contrive for ourselves – must inaugurate and build up our own customs and particular traditions.

Here, in and by this building, we have made a beginning. We hope that succeeding generations of the Bar will enjoy much grander and more adequate appointments, which will have grown out of and because of this day's effort.

As Sir Garfield Barwick QC seems to have intimated, and Trevor Morling QC recently observed:

Fifty years is a long time in the corporate life of any company, especially a company whose sole purpose is to provide chambers for a large group of fiercely independent barristers.

The benefits to the Bar and the wider community as a result of the establishment of Wentworth Chambers (and shortly thereafter, Selborne Chambers) must have been immense, if mostly intangible. Wentworth and Selborne Chambers have been the hub of the Bar, since they were established, and have fostered an autochthonous collegiate professional community. That was part of the initial plan. As Sir Garfield Barwick QC said in his speech at the ceremony to mark the opening:

... in addition to 189 rooms for chambers and accommodation for clerks and secretaries, this building, in the lower ground floor, contains a large area to be devoted exclusively to the communal activities of the Bar. Here a library will be housed, meetings and social gatherings may be held and a restaurant will serve meals both at mid-day and, on special occasions, at evening.

Here, too, we hope to see Her Majesty's judges lunching and dining with us – thus maintaining and furthering the friendly relations of Bench and Bar so indispensable to the smooth administration of justice.

And as the then chief justice, Sir Kenneth Street, wrote in the visitors' book on the occasion of the opening ceremony:

The value of this building will not be limited to the material fabric. I feel that it will promote and develop that corporate professional spirit with which the Bar should be imbued. The intangible, in the end, will be of greater lasting value than the mere bricks and mortar.

However, the success of the project for the construction of the new barristers' chambers had been far from assured. Earlier, when insufficient applications for shares had been received, Sir Garfield

Barwick QC had written a circular to all members of the Bar, saying:

The erection of this building affords the major hope of preventing the dispersal and disintegration of the Bar. If the Bar has no enthusiasm for it it is no purpose or function of ours to press it on an apathetic group. We have done no more than offer our good offices to promote and foster the scheme.

By 1 April 1954, Barwick stated that, unless the response from the Bar improved by the end of the following week, the project would have to cease. Applications had then only been received for 135 shares. The project could not proceed without another 15 shares being taken. At that point, Barwick invited six senior members of the Bar to his chambers to talk about an 'important matter'. They left after agreeing to underwrite a further 16 shares in the project (Barwick and Manning headed the list of underwriters, agreeing to take three further shares each). By May 1954, 17 additional members of the Bar had applied for 15 shares and, shortly thereafter, the generous underwriters were all released from their obligations.

And so it came to pass that, on 20 August 1957, Wentworth Chambers was officially opened by the Hon JJ Cahill, premier of New South Wales. A ceremonial gold key was presented to Counsel's Chambers Limited by the building company, with which to officially open the building. The Honourable Societies of the Inner Temple, the Middle Temple, Gray's Inn and Lincoln's Inn presented to the New South Wales Bar Association replicas of their arms, which were placed in the southern wall at the entrance to Wentworth Chambers (where they remain today). The Right Hon the Lord Morton of Henryton attended specially for the occasion, and formally handed over these carved replicas. Beside the replicas, was a tablet which read as follows (and remains today):

These stones bearing the Arms of the Honourable Societies of Lincolns Inn, the Inner Temple, the Middle Temple, and of Grays Inn are the gift of the four Inns of Court. They are here displayed to mark the continuity in this land of the common law of England and of the traditions of the Bar, its independence and its sense of duty to serve the citizens and to assist in the maintenance of the rule of law.

The then chief justice, Sir Kenneth Street, said of this reference to the 'common law' that:

The 'common law' we there mention is not merely for us a set of particular rules or principles to be found in the decisions of past judges – great and important as the common law is in that sense. For us the common law rather represents an attitude of mind; an insistence on the dignity and worth of the individual; a passion for freedom; and for equal obedience to the law by high and by low, by governments and by citizens alike – a creed ill-suited to totalitarian government.

The wording of the tablet is at once a boast of our worthiness to carry this torch, and a reminder to ourselves of our humble duty to the citizens, to the courts, and to our profession.

A replica of the New South Wales Bar Association's arms, carved in timber, was given by the architects, and was similarly displayed. Benchers of the English Inns of Court also presented several historic stone relics, with which members of the Bar will be familiar from

*On 11 September 1957, the Australian Women's Weekly featured an article on the opening of Wentworth Chambers, reporting that there were 'more flowered bonnets than you would see on an off-day at Randwick races'*

various spots around the building. These fragments were from the detritus of the bombing of London in 1940.

On 11 September 1957, the Australian Women's Weekly featured an article on the opening of Wentworth Chambers, reporting that there were 'more flowered bonnets than you would see on an off-day at Randwick races', and that the Police Band played fragments of Sympathy and Trial by Jury. Someone had a sense of humour. The Weekly included, and commented on, photographs of sets of individual barristers' chambers in all their sartorial splendour, reporting that:

Many barristers have painted and decorated their new chambers so attractively that it is hard to imagine discussing the law of torts or assault and battery with a queen's counsel in chambers with wall-to-wall carpet and a décor of black orchid.

Well, quite. Although what may have been beyond the imagination of the Weekly's writer, would be nothing short of a taste for understatement, by the lights of one or two future members of the Bar.

The Weekly also quoted the following remarks of the then chief justice, Sir Kenneth Street, at the opening ceremony, on the increasing elegance of barristers' chambers:

I started on the third floor of the old Wentworth Court across the road. We had only bare boards, and very unclean boards at that. One young man was said to be getting above his station when he put down coir matting.

In this building the carpeting is feet thick, there are Regency stripes, and even beautiful typists. I hope it won't come to be known as the Lotus Eaters' Grotto.

It hasn't, so far as I'm aware.

Counsel's Chambers Limited has published a Commemorative Book to mark the 50th anniversary of Wentworth Chambers, although demand for the publication has outstripped the initial print run. Very fortunately, however, the content of the booklet will shortly be available on the website of Counsel's Chambers Limited.

And so to Wentworth Chambers on its first 50 years – many happy returns!