

Drill Halls

"The aim of drill is develop, in the individual soldier, a sense of instinctive obedience which will assist them, at all times, to know and carry out their orders. Drill of the highest precision is an exercise in self-discipline, alertness and obedience" (Army Recruit Training Centre)

Drill is an inimical part of military behaviour for it is the organisation discipline and professional standards that separate a military force from a bunch of gangsters. The drill hall provided a large enclosed rectangular space for the soldiers to undertake their training. The area had sufficient space to allow a large body of troops to parade and then for subgroups to separate and undertake particular training. Being out of the weather it allowed training to occur at all times and away from the public gaze.

The first drill halls in Australia were community halls hired by the militia units that developed from the 1850s. As the militia movement developed in the various Australian states purpose built drill halls were constructed which incorporated offices for the permanent instructors hired by the State Governments. These halls were taken over by the Commonwealth at Federation and were added to by halls constructed as part of the compulsory military training from 1909 to 1929.

From the 1930s onwards the halls were maintained and used by regular and citizen units but were generally allowed to run down and suffered from lack of maintenance.



Plan of the Geelong Drill Hall

In recent years changes in Defence policy has seen changes in Drill Hall use and many have been sold by Defence and put to new uses in the community. Most halls have an interesting history both while they were used by Defence and subsequently. Quite a few have been moved from their original locations.

JCIS Consultants has recently completed a brief contextual history of Drill halls in Australia. Some historians have seen the Drill halls as a machine for the transformation of undisciplined civilians into disciplined soldiers. Others have focused on the role of the Drill Hall as part of a community's involvement in a war. Often militia units were based at Drill Halls and sent from the Drill Halls off to war. So the Drill Hall is remembered as the place where a community farewelled its young men going off to fight the Nations enemies. Ex-servicemen remember the camaraderie of military service as well as sometime uninspiring instruction in the Drill Halls.

We noted in our study that the basic design of the halls, a long rectangular space under the main roof with offices and service rooms in an attached pavilion or an extension under a skillion roof, was modified during use with more offices taking up the central space and a greater provision of amenities for troops. We think this reflected a change in the nature of drill and in the nature of the military generally over time. An infantry unit for example would have had machine guns, mortars, radios and such all requiring more technical training and support. All military units would have had vehicles.

The challenge for heritage is to find an on-going use for these significant items.