

KANDOS ORIGINS: BOOM OR BUST?

Everyone has an opinion about a new business venture. It has the magnetism of a traffic accident. People hover at the edges, speculate on its origin, wonder about the outcome and almost certainly express an opinion.

Was Kandos a going concern? The Mudgee Guardian raised it with its readers. The Railway Commissioners considered it in the boardroom. It was bandied around the bar of the Globe Hotel Rylstone. But for the directors of the NSW Cement Lime and Coal Company Limited, who floated their company on May 22 1913, there was only one answer. Boom! They had already secured mining leases in the area, and had started to plan a town to service their industry. It would be their own private village, named by using the first letter of each of their names.

War broke out only days after they had ordered their cement-producing plant from Germany, and it was interned till the end of the war. But the directors saw opportunity, not disaster. The value of German cement exports to Australia prior to war was £250,000 (pounds). Why shouldn't Kandos cripple the Kaiser?

Get over to England and America and order a new plant! In the meantime we'll mine coal! Start building the lime kiln! Construct an aerial ropeway! Extend the rail line!

Finally, after contracting James Dawson to survey their new town, they yankee-grubbed the streets and advertised land sales.

Now contact the editor of the Mudgee Guardian and get us some good press!

But what about the hoverers at the edge? Were they convinced this was a good enterprise on a crisp sunny morning in August 1915, when they caught the train to Kandos for the land auction? As they stepped onto the platform from Sydney, Lithgow, Portland, Mudgee, Lue and Rylstone, did they have a bill of exchange in their pockets to purchase land, or were they there to gloat at the fools who would invest in a bubble?

These auction-hungry men carried themselves with an air of assurance and expectation, as they milled around the information booth and examined lithographs, plans and photographs. It was like a businessmen's convention, although there were a few women scattered about. Every potential business in a new town was represented in that crowd of six to seven hundred: certainly a cordial manufacturer, a billiard room proprietor, a picture show man, a Methodist minister and a boarding house keeper; as well as solicitors, storekeepers, publicans, builders, blacksmiths, bakers, butchers and of course journalists. Pamphlets in hand they started a tour of inspection.

It is always difficult to imagine what a place was like before it was a town. Think then how difficult it must have been to imagine what a town would look like on almost virgin land. When they stood on the hill above Buchanan Street which separated the industry on one side, and the scrubby uncleared land with a few rough streets on the other side; when they looked up at the Coomber Mellon Range looming above them and then towards the flat lands and mountain range on the northern horizon; were they inspired or intimidated?

Whatever comments they made to the man beside them, as they gazed or strolled or ate lunch, I have no doubt they kept their plans to themselves.

By 1.30pm they had gathered down near White Crescent for the auction. Picture a platform made of boxes. Picture two rickety posts with a diagram of the town strung between. Picture Mr Gorman (of Messrs Hardie and Gorman Ltd Sydney), a tall rather portly gentleman, being partly lifted and partly shoved onto the platform, amidst encouraging cheers and comments. Mr Gorman is not perturbed. He is used to pulling a crowd into the palm of his hand. ...*£150,000 has been outlaid already in the Kandos cement industry...Portland, hardly in existence a few years ago, now has a thriving Commonwealth Portland Cement Company and a population of 4000...the Kandos area has huge quantities of high quality limestone, shale and coal ... your chance to secure a block of land in a town expected to have one of the largest and most flourishing industries in the Commonwealth...an industry which will help to bring the Kaiser to his knees...* All agreed it was a rattling good speech. And so the auction began and progressed till nearly sundown.

Two allotments on either side of Angus Ave and directly opposite the railway station were the first ones offered for sale. They had been selected as the location for a hotel, the successful bidder able to choose which site. There was to be only one hotel in Kandos because every other block of land sold by the company had a caveat on the title forbidding its use as a hotel. A cunning move by the directors. By selling a monopoly, they created a bidding war. That first site raised £2700 at a time when the average worker earned about two pounds a week. And that first sale drove the bidding. No allotment sold for less than £30. Allotments in the main street went for about £120. Altogether Mr Gorman sold £16,000 worth of land.

It was a quieter atmosphere as the visitors caught their trains that evening, back to Sydney, Lithgow, Portland, Mudgee, Lue and Rylstone. Some were still hovering at the edge, wondering if they had missed the opportunity of a lifetime. Those who had taken the gamble and parted with ten per cent deposit had a contract in their pocket to purchase their allotment in 60 monthly payments at five per cent interest. They murmured with subdued animation, committed now to the new enterprise. Bust? Not likely. Boom!