

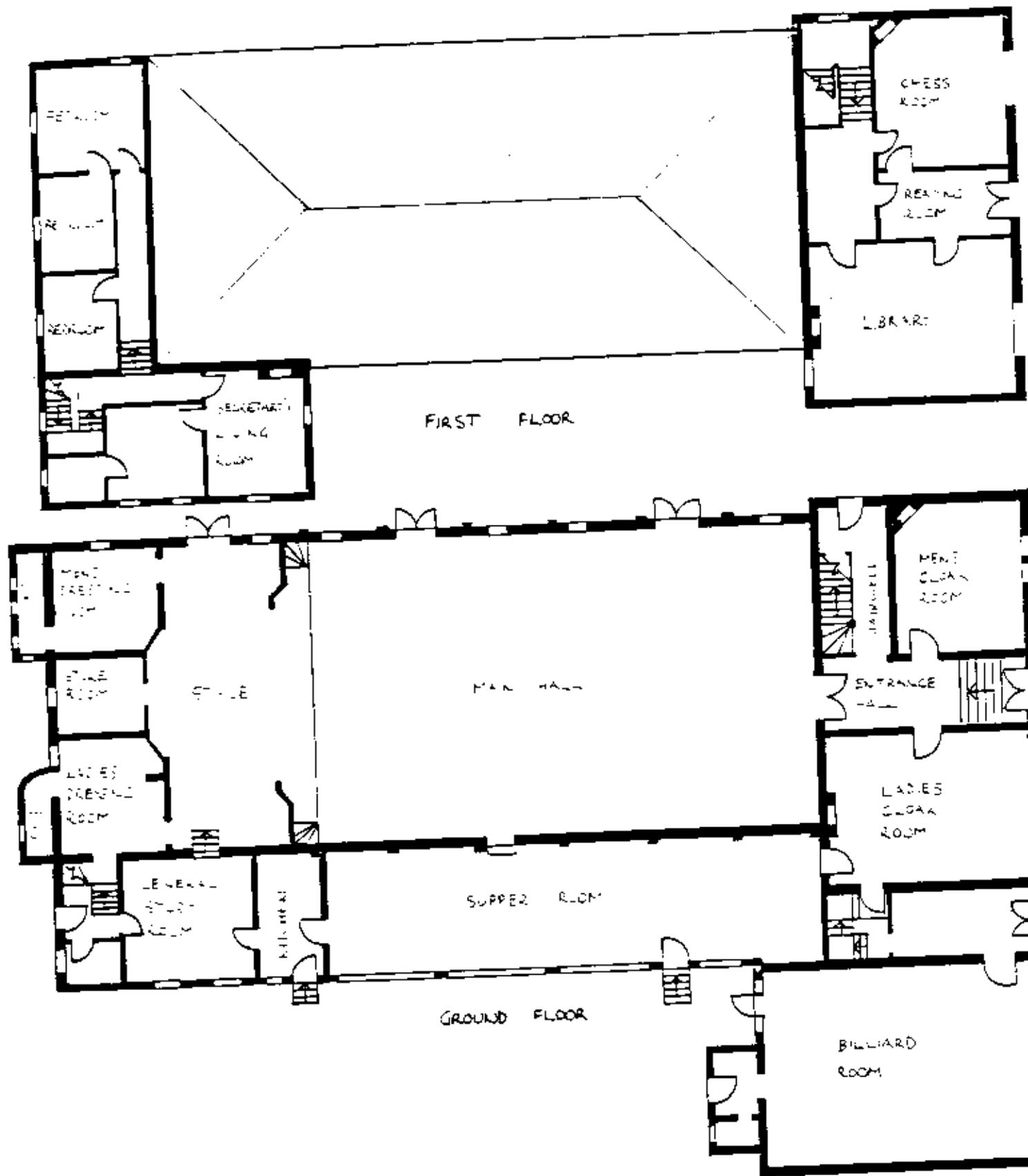
club.²³ The increasing importance of the social activities during the period was reflected in the construction of a wing along Mount Street in 1903 for a Billiards Room. The institution initially formed a Billiards Club but by 1914 had been disbanded and the room was leased out to commercial operators.²⁴

The use of the hall was still the central feature of the institution's activities. The hall had remained an important venue for local concerts and ballroom dances. It was also occasionally hired out for bazaars by such institutions as the Mater Hospital. Also the hall was often hired for wedding receptions, especially by the local Chinese and Greeks. For the many theatre productions, there was a well equipped stage with lighting, props and a grand piano. The hall was even hired out for a short period in 1911 for the purpose of screening motion pictures, but after some dispute concerning Sunday screenings, the lease was terminated²⁵

The MinuteBooks first mention the hire of the various rooms in the main building and hall from about 1910 on. Prior to this, the Technical College had been the main tenant of the hall. The other casual tenants were such groups as the Women's League.²⁶ The patriotic sentiments of the institution were demonstrated during the First World War when it provided the free use of the hall or rooms to any group supporting the war effort. In particular, the hall was hired out in late 1918 for a meeting to form the local branch of the R.S.L²⁷ It was also during the war that the hall was hired out by the army as the headquarters of the 18th Infantry Brigade. The army was to continue its occupation of the hall until well after the war. It was then used by a voluntary citizens' artillery unit which stored guns inside the hall.²⁸ This effectively curtailed the hire of the hall for other purposes, but provided the institution with a regular income from the rent.



View of the hall and stage taken in the 1950s shortly before it was rebuilt. (Photo courtesy of Lady Scott)



Ground Plan of the Mount Street School of Arts building, 1903, showing layout of rooms and their functions.



*View of the Mount Street facade of the School of Arts in 1983
(See Roll 1, no. 22)*

Apparently it was during the 1920s that the institution first began to suffer a marked downturn. No longer was it seen as a focal point of community interaction with a membership of just over 200 in 1912.²⁹ Most importantly, the School of Arts now lacked the active support of the local professionals who had stimulated the early activity. Other organisations now offered a similar range of social activities which had been provided by the School of Arts. The library had now become fairly dilapidated and most of the new purchases included the cheap fiction of the day. The library was never very large and those interested in reading supposedly found it very limited as most of the reference books were very outdated.³⁰

It was during this period that the School of Arts began to experience considerable financial difficulties. The institution had remained fairly stable for many years but due to reduced membership and the inherited mortgage, the institution had to seek other sources of revenue. This included petitioning North Sydney Council to exempt the School of Arts from rates, however, this was rejected.³¹ The lack of Council support had been a long-standing dispute as the Council felt no obligation to assist the School of Arts. The Council had also been petitioned regularly to help subsidize the library as there was no municipal library at the time. Alternatively, the Committee

tried unsuccessfully to sell off part of their property. However, they did successfully hire out some of their rooms as day offices.

By 1930, the financial situation of the institution had become desperate, especially after the termination of the Army's long-standing lease.³² They left the hall in a state of disrepair which involved considerable effort by the institution to repair. The committee, with J.M. MacFarlane as President, attempted to promote dancing again, but was largely unsuccessful due to the cost and the generally depressed economic conditions. Also the hall had been superseded by a number of more modern halls in the North Sydney area.

The institution now had further trouble due to the difficulties of collecting overdue rent from various tenants whilst having difficulty paying its own debts such as council rates. The mortgage had been transferred to City Mutual in 1932 who quickly declared the institution's financial situation as hopeless.³³ However, the Committee managed to struggle on for a few more years, often deferring repayments. But eventually the Trustees of the School of Arts were forced to sell the land and buildings in November, 1935. A special meeting was held on the 14th October, 1935 to close the institution and for City Mutual to realize on its assets.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of North Sydney School of Arts, few of its initial aspirations were fully realised. It only ever provided a sporadic educational function from the early 1860s to 1880s as this role was soon superseded by other organisations. The library did serve an important role during the nineteenth century as it was the only public library in North Sydney apart from several private lending libraries.

However, despite such efforts, the real significance of the early School of Arts lay in its social and cultural role. The School of Arts provided a focal point for such activities with its organisation and the provision of the hall for various functions. Its importance can be gauged by the dominance of local professionals in the institution who wished to guide North Sydney's early cultural and social activities.

By the twentieth century, the role of the School of Arts had been definitely resolved in favour of a social function. The library's books were now more recreational than educational and the Debating Society was ineffectual. The Billiards Room added in 1903 epitomises this resolved role. Ironically, the institution by now had lost the active support of the local professions since it was no longer a focus of community life in the now greatly diversified North Sydney. The School of Arts was forced to close in 1935 due to financial difficulties and, although publically regretted, was officially ignored.