

**BETTER HERITAGE INFORMATION
SUMMARY OF STATE HERITAGE PLACE
Bonney Theatre Complex**



Bonney Theatre Complex SHP 13766, 24 August 2018.

Source: DEW Files

ENTRY IN THE REGISTER

Description or notes with respect to a place entered in the South Australian Heritage Register in accordance with either the *South Australian Heritage Act 1978* or the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

The South Australian Heritage Council may correct errors or inaccuracies in the Entry in the Register in accordance with s21 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

NAME: Bonney Theatre Complex

PLACE NO.: 13766

ADDRESS: First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee Country

2-4 Barwell Avenue, Barmera

CT 5660/200 T741601 A60; CT 5660/226 T741601 A61 Cobdogla
Irrigation Area (Out of Hundreds)

CONFIRMED IN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE REGISTER:

21 October 1993

COMMENTARY ON THE LISTING

Additional information provided as a part of the content of the South Australian Heritage Register in accordance with s14(6) of the *Heritage Places Act 1993* 'hold information in association with the Register'.

KNOWN Bonney Theatre [Barwell Avenue Road Reserve cantilevered awning
AS: attached to Bonney Theatre]

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

Designed by South Australian architect William Lucas and completed in 1938, the Bonney Theatre Complex demonstrates the evolution of motion pictures as a new form of mass entertainment in the twentieth century, and in particular, the role of cinema-going and its contribution to community building in regional South Australia during the interwar period. The Bonney Theatre Complex is also an outstanding example of interwar streamlined architecture articulating many of the key attributes of the style such as clean, parallel lines, roofs concealed by parapets, and horizontal emphasis with vertical relief.

INDICATIVE CRITERIA (under section 16 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*)

(a) *it demonstrates important aspects of the evolution or pattern of the State's history*

In South Australia, cinema emerged as a dominant form of mass entertainment from around 1907. Cinema-going boomed during the 1920s, and by the end of the decade, most communities in South Australia possessed a venue for screening motion pictures, ranging from large, purpose-built picture theatres or town halls in urbanised centres to small rural halls retrofitted with projection facilities. As well as providing a popular leisure activity, 'Going to the pictures' was a regular social occasion and played an important role in community building, especially in regional areas. During the interwar period, partnerships between local government and private enterprise leveraged revenue from cinemagoing to deliver impressive civic amenities that would not otherwise have been affordable. Incorporating an existing, renovated memorial hall and featuring a new purpose-built picture theatre town hall next door, the Bonney Theatre Complex was completed in 1938. It demonstrates the popularity and social importance of rural cinemagoing during the interwar period.

(e) it demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment or is an outstanding representative of particular construction techniques or design characteristics

Designed by South Australian architect William Lucas and completed in 1938, the Bonney Theatre Complex is an excellent example of interwar streamlined architecture, demonstrating a high degree of aesthetic accomplishment. The Bonney Theatre Complex finely articulates many of the key attributes of the style, namely,

- bold massing of simple geometric shapes,
- clean lines, rounded corners and minimal decoration,
- plain surfaces in light-toned cement (now painted) and fibrous plaster,
- horizontal emphasis, achieved through features such as horizontal friezes and/or banding with integrated window openings,
- contrasting vertical relief, expressed through façade fenestration, massing, and flagpole features,
- parallel line motif, notably in banded friezes, window grilles, proscenium decoration, auditorium ceiling spine feature, and foyer cornices,
- long cantilevered awning element (without clutter of supporting brackets or stanchions) and cantilevered auditorium gallery wings,
- metal window frames,
- roofs concealed by parapets,
- architecturally integrated lighting, including illuminated structures on auditorium walls, and indirect lighting troughs in auditorium ceiling.

SITE PLAN

Bonney Theatre Complex
2-4 Barwell Avenue, Barmera

PLACE NO.: 13766



Bonney Theatre Complex, 2-4 Barwell Avenue, Barmera (CT 5660/200 T741601 A60; CT 5660/226 T741601 A61 Cobdogla Irrigation Area Barwell Avenue Road Reserve cantilevered awning attached to Bonney Theatre, Out of Hundreds)

Elements of heritage significance include:

- Bonney Theatre, Barmera Memorial Hall and Hawdon Chambers,
- Original exterior and interior materials and material finishes including fibrous plaster, terrazzo, timber, and chrome,
- Original fittings, including metal window frames, steel shutters, light fittings, joinery, doors and door fittings, stair rails, gallery seating, gallery heater unit, and roof ventilators.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include:

- Access ramp on Barwell Avenue.

N ↑

LEGEND

- Parcel boundaries
- Outline of Elements of Significance for State Heritage Place

*Red outline is indicative of elements of significance, noting imperfect alignment of aerial imagery with parcel cadastre. The awning suspended from the northeastern elevation overhangs the airspace of Barwell Avenue.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Bonney Theatre Complex is a stone, brick and reinforced concrete interwar civic complex built in two key stages. It comprises the following elements:

- Barmera Memorial Hall (single-storey stone, brick and reinforced concrete hall with two-storey street frontage, built as Barmera District Soldier's Memorial Hall, 1929),
- Bonney Theatre (two-storey brick and reinforced concrete picture theatre with mezzanine gallery in auditorium, 1938),
- Hawdon Chambers (two-storey brick and reinforced concrete office block, 1938).

The Memorial Hall and Hawdon Chambers are integrated behind one symmetrical façade, while the Bonney Theatre is expressed as a separate, neighbouring building with its own symmetrical façade. It is nevertheless connected to and integrated with the hall and office block as a single State Heritage Place. Both feature gable roofs and a symmetrical street elevations in Portland cement render (painted).

External features of the hall and office block include:

- parapet concealing roof with receding step motif,
- two monumental entrances with receding step motif above, and receding step motif to reveals,
- rectangular window openings with steel frames,
- upstairs fenestration unified by recessed band,
- podium featuring parallel line motif,
- recessed, relief lettering 'Barmera Memorial Hall' to parapet,
- relief lettering 'Hawdon Chambers' above northern entry,
- marble foundation stone and bronze plaque,
- access ramp to southern entrance (ramp not significant fabric).

External features of the Bonney Theatre include:

- central pylon feature with rounded corners,
- balconies flanking central pylon with masonry balustrades,
- parapet concealing roof with receding step motif,
- deeply recessed fenestration to central pylon, with individual window openings separated by vertical masonry fins and decorative spandrels,
- metal window frames to pylon window openings,
- recessed, relief lettering 'Bonney Theatre' to parapet,
- flagpole mounted centrally on parapet,
- recessed horizontal bands to ground floor of street elevation,
- main entrance comprising three double-entry doors, separated by rounded masonry fins,
- terrazzo steps to main entrance,

- rectangular windows to auditorium covered by pivoting steel shutters,
- cantilevered awning,
- marble foundation stone,
- steel exit stairs to southern side,
- 'Syphonator'-type roof-mounted ventilators.

Internal features of the Bonney Theatre include:

- two-storey foyer,
- bifurcated jarrah staircase (now carpeted),
- ticket box and servery counter to foyer,
- chromium-plated grille and glazing with sandblasted details to ticket box,
- original light fittings to foyer ceiling,
- fibrous plaster ceiling and cornice to foyer,
- welded-steel handrail to upstairs foyer balcony,
- booth seating to upstairs balcony,
- tiered gallery and side wings to auditorium,
- jarrah auditorium floor,
- fibrous plaster ceiling and proscenium,
- central decorative ceiling spine incorporating ventilation openings and fibrous plaster lighting trough,
- reinforced concrete projection box, with glazed projection ports through to auditorium,
- upholstered gallery seating with cast-iron frames,
- integrated indirect lighting battens flanking proscenium,
- fibrous plaster grilles over auditorium windows,
- frosted scone light fittings to auditorium walls,
- heating unit to southern auditorium gallery wing.

Elements of Significance:

Elements of heritage significance include:

- Bonney Theatre, Barmera Memorial Hall and Hawdon Chambers,
- Original exterior and interior materials and material finishes including fibrous plaster, terrazzo, timber, and chrome,
- Original fittings, including metal window frames, steel shutters, light fittings, joinery, doors and door fittings, stair rails, gallery seating, gallery heater unit, and roof ventilators.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include:

- Access ramp on Barwell Avenue.

HISTORY OF THE PLACE

Interwar picture theatres¹

Motion pictures were first screened in South Australia from 1897 but cinema did not emerge as a dominant form of mass entertainment until after 1907. Cinema-going boomed during the 1920s and by the end of the decade, most communities in South Australia possessed a venue for screening motion pictures, ranging from large, purpose-built picture theatres in urbanised centres to small rural halls retrofitted with projection facilities.²

'Going to the pictures' was a weekly outing for many families during the interwar period. During 1938, South Australians collectively accrued 9 million picture theatre attendances from a population of 598,000, the equivalent of 'every man, woman and child' attending the pictures fifteen times per year.³

As a regular social occasion, the subject of films shown was often 'immaterial' and many families had permanent bookings in preferred seats.⁴ The manager of the theatre typically greeted patrons, in some cases disappearing upstairs at show time to start the projectors rolling. A typical theatre programme included: 'God Save the King', a newsreel, a serial or cartoon, and a feature. Intermission offered an opportunity to socialise in a foyer or lounge. In country centres, 'going to the pictures' had particular social value

...for children who might otherwise be isolated, for families coming to town together off properties, for couples who were courting and for the broader community where [people] could mix democratically.⁵

Many suburban theatres were built near public transport routes.⁶ The distribution of film prints throughout rural parts of the state also relied on the railway network⁷ in the absence of sealed roads.

Prior to the 1950s motion picture films, printed on a cellulose nitrate base, were highly flammable. Overseas, film fires leading to audience panic, stampede and mass death encouraged Australian state governments to introduce legislation governing the exhibition of motion pictures. In South Australia cinematograph entertainment was addressed in the *Places of Public Entertainment Act 1913*, through a series of regulations⁸ that shaped the plan, form and features of interwar picture theatre buildings. The Act initially applied only to Adelaide and its suburbs but was gradually extended by proclamation to rural towns into the mid-1930s.⁹

By 1930 two local family-owned companies had grown to dominate South Australian film exhibition in the suburbs, namely Ozone Theatres Limited and D. Clifford Theatres Limited (see below), the latter operating theatres under the Star banner. Community-

owned picture shows and independent exhibitors predominated in rural areas, where audiences were smaller.

Prior to 1929 motion pictures screened in South Australia did not typically have a synchronised soundtrack, but were almost always accompanied by live music. Motion pictures with a synchronised soundtrack, known as 'talkies,' arrived in early 1929. Initial scepticism was replaced by acceptance as talkies rapidly displaced silent cinema. The expense of wiring for sound, combined with the economic shock of the Depression¹⁰ meant that no new, purpose-built theatres for screening talkies were built in South Australia prior to economic recovery in the mid-1930s.

Technology associated with the talkies matured during the early 1930s. When the construction of purpose-built picture theatres resumed from 1934, the resulting buildings were quite different from theatres of the 1920s. An architectural style known as streamlining, especially as applied to picture theatres, became 'highly emblematic of bright, comfortable modernity and progress'¹¹ around the world and was pervasive in South Australian commercial architecture by the late 1930s, expressing a sense of optimism for the future as the state emerged from economic depression.¹² Streamlining could be less expensive than traditional architectural styles, with less reliance on applied ornamentation, and was particularly suited to picture theatre auditoriums, where smooth, protuberance-free surfaces were preferred on acoustic¹³ and hygiene grounds.

The appearance of drive-in theatres in South Australia from 1954 eroded attendance at traditional picture theatres¹⁴ while the introduction of television in South Australia in September 1959 further reduced attendance. Many suburban and country picture theatres had closed by the early 1960s.

First Peoples and European Settlement in the Barmera area

Barmera is located on the southern shore of Lake Bonney, on First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee Country.¹⁵ Prior to European colonisation, the region supported a large Aboriginal population,¹⁶ typically living in extended family groups.

In 1838, Joseph Hawdon and Charles Bonney led the first cattle overland into South Australia, following the course of the Murray River from Howlong, NSW and Aboriginal trails. On 12 March 1838, Hawdon was the first European to sight Lake Bonney and while he was aware the local Aboriginal name for the lake was Nookamka, he instead chose to call it Lake Bonney after his companion Charles Bonney.¹⁷

The success of the Hawdon-Bonney expedition, led to the establishment of an overland stock route through the region. Pastoralism had irreversible consequences for Aboriginal People. In particular, sheep polluted the waterways, degraded the landscape and displaced native fauna. While some Aboriginal People found work on the Cobdogla run, established by John Chambers in 1846,¹⁸ frontier violence between Aboriginal People and pastoral interests on the western Central Murray during the

mid-nineteenth century was 'sustained and highly complex,'¹⁹ contributing to a 'staggering' depopulation of Aboriginal People from the region by the end of the nineteenth century.²⁰

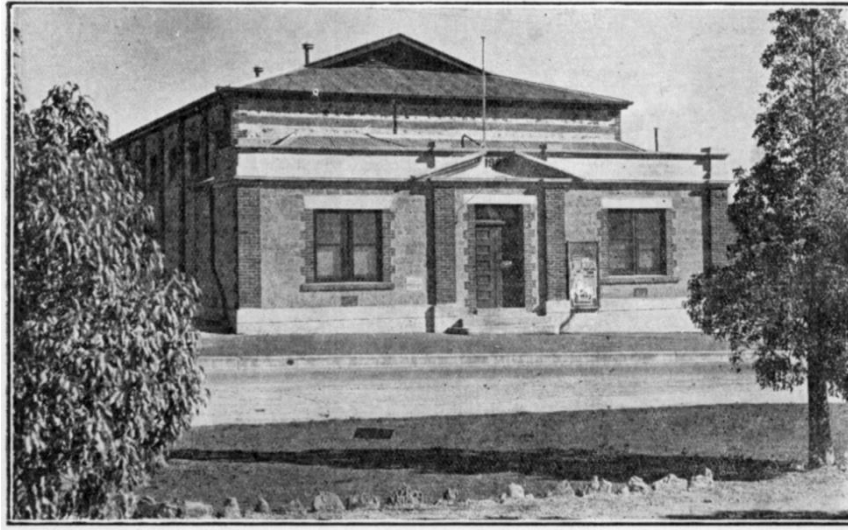
Until the 1880s the River Murray was primarily viewed as a means of transport to neighbouring colonies.²¹ Large-scale irrigation of horticultural crops in the Riverland only began in 1887, with the establishment of Renmark by the Canadian brothers George and William Benjamin Chaffey. From 1894, colonial government legislation facilitated the establishment of co-operative 'Village Settlements' along the Murray at places such as Murtho, Lyrup, Pyap, Moorook and Ramco.²² After 1909, the South Australian Government developed irrigation districts and installed pumps and water distribution systems at Waikerie (1909), Berri (1910), Moorook (1911), Cobdogla (1912), Kingston (1913), Myponga (1913), Cadell (1919) and Chaffey (1922).

The largest such district in South Australia, the Cobdogla Irrigation Area covered 126,000 acres, including Lake Bonney, and was planned with a township on the southern shore of the lake, which was gazetted on 1 September 1921. The district was settled extensively by returned servicemen and their families under the Soldier Settlement Scheme.²³

The township was designed by town planner Charles Reade on garden suburb principles, however, the plan was modified upon implementation.²⁴ The name Barmera itself is reportedly derived from a First Peoples' name, Barneedjie.²⁵

The Bonney Theatre Complex

In 1921, committees in Barmera and Adelaide commenced fundraising towards construction of a public recreation hall in Barmera, to serve soldiers settlers living in harsh and rudimentary conditions in the district. The Barmera District Soldiers' Memorial Hall was designed by South Australian architect Henry Ernest Fuller,²⁶ built by Murray Bridge-based builder C. H. Brereton at a cost of £2,395,²⁷ and officially opened on 9 November 1929 by the Minister of Irrigation, Hon. John Cowan.²⁸ The building consisted of a hall and stage, an entry vestibule facing Barwell Avenue and two offices flanking the vestibule. At the time of the hall's completion, it was considered to be the largest stone building in the Barmera district.²⁹



The Barmera District Soldiers' Memorial Hall around the time of its completion.

Source: Malcolm Gray, 'Pictorial Souvenir of the Barmera and Lake Bonney District' (c.1930) Adelaide SA: Malcolm Grey (pamphlet), State Library of Victoria Collection

By the mid-1930s, the hall, already known informally as the Bonney Theatre, was considered to be too small to meet the community's needs and acoustically unsuitable for screening talking pictures.³⁰ During 1937, the Barmera Memorial Hall Committee learned that film exhibitor Leston (Les) Robert Appleton planned to rebuild the existing Barmera picture theatre. Following negotiations, Appleton agreed that if the district Council acquired the Soldiers' Memorial Hall and built a new general-purpose hall capable of screening talking pictures, he would abandon his plans to rebuild the Barmera Picture Theatre.³¹ In this way, the town would gain a large fit-for-purpose civic complex, effectively paid for by income from cinema attendance.

On 12 February 1938, a poll of ratepayers gave the District Council power to raise £10,000 towards acquiring the Barmera District Soldiers' Memorial Hall and building a new modern hall adjoining. This new hall would seat 900, with an associated supper room and a clubroom for the Returned Servicemen's Association located in the existing hall.³²

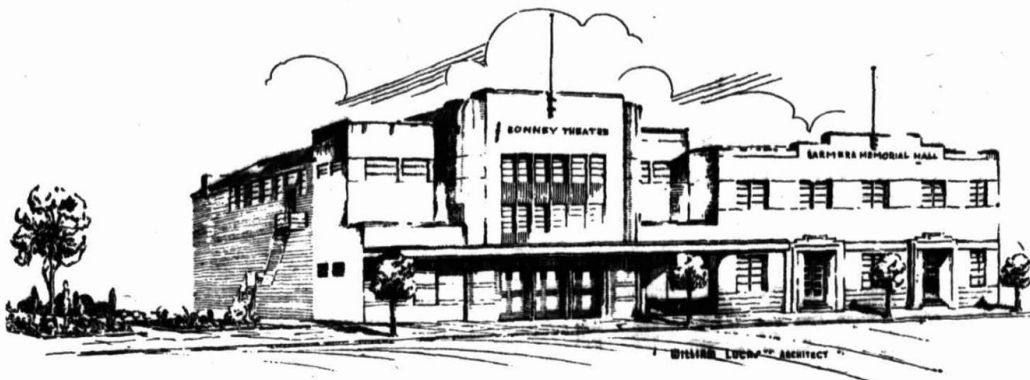
The District Council commissioned South Australian architect William Lucas, ARIBA, ASAIA to design the new memorial hall complex.³³ Lucas' scheme featured a new, purpose-built town hall picture theatre adjoining the existing Soldiers' Memorial Hall on the southern side, a second storey added to the front of the existing hall, and a contiguous new structure housing offices added on the northern side.

The District Council of Barmera called tenders for building the Bonney Theatre Complex on 5 May 1938 and the successful tenderer, Ronald Lindsay Gambling, commenced work on site in June of that year.³⁴

Construction was funded by a loan from the Savings Bank of South Australia, with annual repayments of £830 over 20 years. The District Council hoped to make a 'substantial' income from leasing the picture theatre and office space.³⁵ On 21 June 1938, the District Council accepted Les Appleton's tender for film exhibition rights and leasehold of a retail tenancy in the Bonney Theatre foyer, both over a 15-year period, with an option to review the rental after 10 years.

The new Bonney Theatre was designed by Lucas in a streamlined style and possessed features typical of interwar town hall picture theatres, including a foyer and an upstairs lounge, cloakrooms and a ticket box; a large, flat multi-purpose main auditorium floor at ground floor level; a tiered gallery in the main auditorium with fixed seating and side wings; a large stage, with a multi-purpose room beneath; and a reinforced concrete biograph (projection) box at the back of the gallery. It was expected that the new hall would be used to host social and civic events, besides regularly screening motion pictures.

Measuring 60 by 58 feet and presenting a floorspace of 3,500 square feet, the main auditorium seated 570 at ground level and 330 in the gallery,³⁶ for a total capacity of 900. By providing a jarrah auditorium floor, the District Council hoped to provide the residents of Barmera with a 'first class' dancing surface.³⁷ Meanwhile, the old hall was divided into two main sections, comprising a supper room at the front and a Returned Servicemen's Association club room at the rear. The old hall was also provided with a 'spacious' kitchen.³⁸



Perspective drawing of Lucas' final scheme for the Bonney Theatre Complex.

Source: *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp.24-25

On 28 July 1938, the Minister of Irrigation, Hon. Tom Playford, laid the hall's foundation stone.³⁹ The complex was opened by the Attorney-General of South Australia, Shirley William Jeffries, on Tuesday 20 December 1938.⁴⁰ The *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* newspaper described the new Bonney Theatre Complex as 'a palatial structure'⁴¹ and reported on its 'dignified modern lines.'⁴² The Complex was built at a total cost of approximately £10,300, including extras, architect's fees and furniture.

In 1979, the Bonney Theatre Complex benefited from a state government grant intended to help improve country halls used for performing arts.⁴³ In May 1984, the District Council of Barmera prepared an interim report on proposed upgrading of the Bonney Theatre Complex.⁴⁴ In 2009, Berri Barmera Council commissioned a masterplan report from Habitable Places Architects to guide future conservation and development. A fire safety upgrade in line with the masterplan was undertaken in 2009. Subsequent works have included lighting upgrades, roof-mounted photovoltaic installation, renovation of the Memorial Hall and external repainting.

Aboriginal Cultural Considerations

The *Heritage Places Act 1993* makes provision for the identification, recording and conservation of places and objects of non-Aboriginal heritage significance. The protection and preservation of Aboriginal heritage is provided for under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988*. Contact the Aboriginal Heritage Unit for listings.

CHRONOLOGY

Year	Event
1830	Charles Sturt visits the Barmera area on his journey down the Murray.
1838	12 March: Lake Bonney is named by Joseph Hawdon for his friend Charles Bonney, during the first cattle overlanding trip from New South Wales into South Australia. An overland stock route is established following the course of the River Murray and Aboriginal trails, passing close by Lake Bonney.
1846	John Chambers leases the Cobdogla-Lake Bonney area from the crown for pastoral occupation and establishes a head station at Cobdogla.
1887	Large-scale irrigation of horticultural crops in the Riverland begins with the establishment of Renmark by the Canadian Chaffey Brothers.
1894	Colonial government legislation facilitates the establishment of co-operative 'Village Settlements' along the River Murray.
1897	The first motion pictures are screened in South Australia.
1907	Cinema emerges as a dominant form of entertainment in South Australia.
1909	The South Australian Government begins developing irrigation districts along the River Murray.
1913	The Government of South Australia passes the <i>Places of Public Entertainment Act 1913</i> .
1920	Barmera town survey commences. Lady Grace Emily Blundell Maple Weigall and Alexandrine Seager catalyse fundraising activities towards a public hall at Barmera. Two committees are established, one in Adelaide and one at Barmera.
1921	1 September: the township of Barmera is gazetted. November: soldier settler and carpenter Francis Patrick Kilgariff opens Barmera's first picture theatre.
1925	Adelaide architect Henry Ernest Fuller completes working drawings for a hall at Barmera.
c.1926	The Barmera Picture Theatre is leased by Leston (Les) Robert Appleton.
1928	21 June: the Barmera community votes to proceed with construction of a hall.
1929	2 March: motion pictures with a synchronised soundtrack, known as 'talkies,' are screened for the first time in South Australia. 6 July: the foundation stone of the Barmera District Soldiers' Memorial Hall is laid by local member F. McMillan.

- 7 October, builder C. H. Brereton completes masonry work on the Barmera District Soldiers' Memorial Hall.**
- 9 November: the Barmera District Soldiers' Memorial Hall is officially opened by the Minister of Irrigation, Hon. John Cowan.**
- 1937 Les Appleton plans to rebuild the Barmera Picture Theatre.
- 1938 12 February: a poll of ratepayers gives the Barmera District Council power to acquire the Barmera District Soldiers' Memorial Hall and build a new modern hall adjoining.**
- 5 May: the District Council of Barmera calls tenders for building the Bonney Theatre Complex, due 24 May.**
- June: successful tenderer Robert Lindsay Gambling commences work on site.**
- 21 June: Barmera District Council accepts Les Appleton's tender for film exhibition rights and leasehold of a retail tenancy associated with the Bonney Theatre Complex.**
- 28 July: the Minister of Irrigation, Hon. Tom Playford, lays the foundation stone of the new Bonney Theatre Complex.**
- 20 December: the Bonney Theatre Complex is officially opened by the Attorney-General of South Australia, Shirley William Jeffries.**
- 1954 South Australia's first drive-in theatre opens.
- 1979 The Bonney Theatre Complex benefits from a state government grant intended to help improve country halls used for performing arts.
- 1984 May: the District Council of Barmera prepares an interim report on proposed upgrading of the Bonney Theatre Complex.
- 1993 21 October: the Bonney Theatre Complex is entered in the Register of State Heritage Items under the *South Australian Heritage Act 1978* as Bonney Theatre, 24A Barwell Ave, Barmera 5345 CL 688/78 CL 768/31 Lots 60 & 61 Hundred of Cobdogla.**
- 2009 DA 752/175/09 Fire Safety Upgrade.
- 2011 DA 752/45/11 Internal and external alterations Stages 2-5 only.
- 2016 DA 752/33/16 Canopy repair.
- 2017 DA 752/41/17 Exterior repainting.
- 2019 DA 752/121/19 Roof mounted solar photovoltaic panels and associated infrastructure.

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- Alison Painter, 'Entertainment: the changing scene' in Bernard O'Neil, Judith Raftery and Kerrie Round (eds), *Playford's South Australia: Essays on the history of South Australia, 1933-1968* (1996) Adelaide SA: Association of Professional Historians Inc.
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Journals

- Heather Burke, Amy Roberts, Mick Morrison, Vanessa Sullivan and the River Murray and Mallee Aboriginal Corporation (RMMAC), 'The space of conflict: Aboriginal/European interactions and frontier violence on the western Central Murray, South Australia, 1830-41' in *Aboriginal History* vol. 40 (2016)
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Reports and Theses

- District Council of Barmera, 'Proposed Upgrading, Bonney Theatre, Barmera. Interim Report' (May 1984)
- Dylan Walker, *Almost an Institution: Sustaining Rural Exhibition in South Australia (1897-1935)* (August 2017)
- Heritage Matters Pty Ltd, 'Jaffas Down the Aisles: A Survey of Cinemas in Country Victoria' (June 2008)

Pamphlets

- Chris Burns, *Art Deco in South Australian Architecture* (2018) Adelaide SA: Art Deco and Modernism Society of Australia Inc. Adelaide Chapter
- Malcolm Gray, 'Pictorial Souvenir of the Barmera and Lake Bonney District' (c.1930) Adelaide SA: Malcolm Grey, State Library of Victoria Collection

Newspapers and Periodicals

Advertiser

Chronicle

BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 13766

Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 21 October 1993

Draft BHI SSHP for Consultation 6 August 2026 to 6 November 2026

The Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record

News

Port Lincoln Times

Register

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Government of South Australia, Department of Primary Industry and Regions, History of Agriculture in SA, Irrigation development and management in South Australia's Riverland

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Interviews

Pete Crowle Pers. Comm.

SITE DETAILS

Bonney Theatre Complex

PLACE NO.: 13766

2-4 Barwell Avenue, Barmera

FORMER NAME:	Barmera Soldier's Memorial Hall
DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:	Bonney Theatre Complex including former picture theatre, soldiers' memorial hall and council chambers.
HISTORIC THEME/S	5. Developing South Australia's economies 5.11 Developing South Australia's tourism industry 6. Developing Social and Cultural Life 6.5 Participating in sport, leisure and recreation
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:	1929, 1938
REGISTER STATUS:	Nominated 19 March 1986 Provisionally entered 28 May 1993 Confirmed 21 October 1993
CURRENT USE:	Theatre, community hall, shop and offices 1938 – present
PREVIOUS USE(S):	Community hall 1929 – present
ARCHITECT:	H. E. Fuller, 1929 memorial hall William Lucas, 1938 picture theatre and chambers
BUILDER:	C. H. Brereton, 1929 memorial hall R. L. Gambling, 1938 picture theatre and chambers
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:	Berri Barmera Council
LOCATION:	Address: 2-4 Barwell Avenue, Barmera SA 5345
LAND DESCRIPTION:	Title CT 5660/200 T741601 A60; CT Reference: 5660/226 T741601 A61 Hundred: Cobdogla Irrigation Area (Out of Hundreds)

PHOTOS

Bonney Theatre Complex
2-4 Barwell Avenue Barmera

PLACE NO.: 13766



Bonney Theatre Complex, northern side showing escape stairs. Note steel shutters over windows.

Source: DEW Files 24 August 2018



Bonney Theatre Complex, interior foyer.

Source: DEW Files 24 August 2018

Bonney Theatre Complex
2-4 Barwell Avenue Barmera

PLACE NO.: 13766



Bonney Theatre Complex, interior auditorium showing stage and proscenium and central ceiling ventilation and lighting spine.

Source: DEW Files 22 May 2025



Bonney Theatre Complex, interior auditorium showing gallery seating, balcony and projection box.

Source: DEW Files 22 May 2025

Bonney Theatre

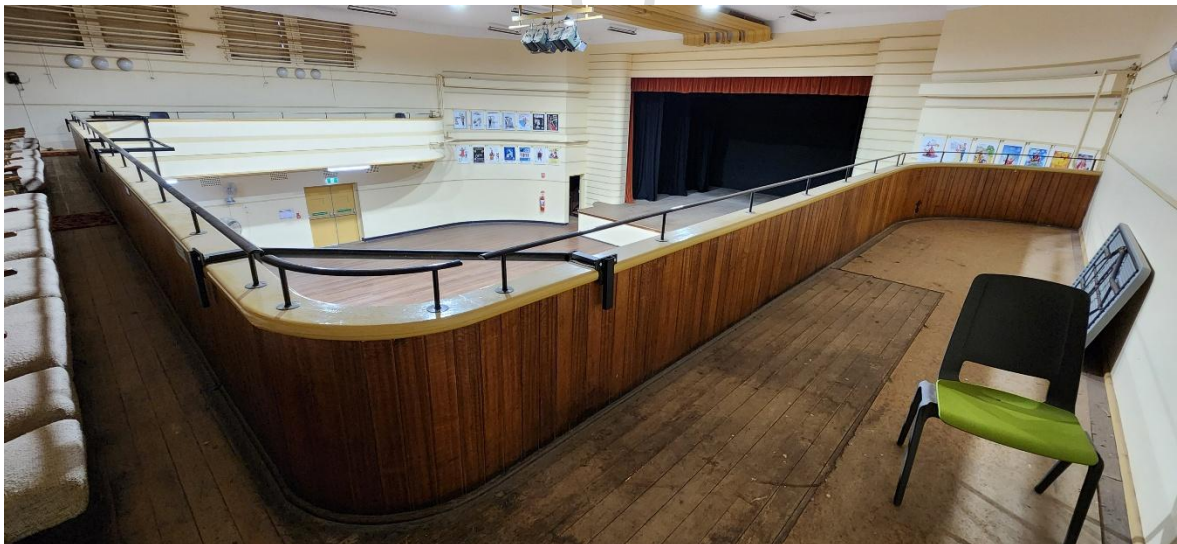
PLACE NO.: 13766

2-4 Barwell Avenue Barmera



Bonney Theatre Complex, interior auditorium showing timber floor, gallery and side wing and central ceiling ventilation and lighting spine.

Source: DEW Files 22 May 2025



Bonney Theatre Complex, interior auditorium showing side wing.

Source: DEW Files 22 May 2025

REVISIONS

Date	Changes

¹ During the interwar period, venues that screened cinema (originally called cinematograph) entertainment were usually described as theatres or picture houses, while the term 'cinema' was not used to describe such venues until the late postwar period. In this history, the terms theatre and picture theatre are used interchangeably as appropriate while traditional theatres (where mentioned) are referred to specifically as stage theatres.

² Dylan Walker, *Almost an Institution: Sustaining Rural Exhibition in South Australia (1897-1935)* (August 2017) pp. 3, 21; Heritage Matters Pty Ltd, 'Jaffas Down the Aisles: A Survey of Cinemas in Country Victoria' (June 2008) p. 9

³ Alison Painter, 'Entertainment: the changing scene' in Bernard O'Neil, Judith Raftery and Kerrie Round (eds), *Playford's South Australia: Essays on the history of South Australia, 1933-1968* (1996) Adelaide SA: Association of Professional Historians Inc. p. 298

⁴ Alison Painter, 'Entertainment' p. 298; In 1930s Renmark, the Crowle family held regular seats in the dress circle of the Arcadia Theatre adjacent to the main stairs; Pete Crowle Pers. Comm. 8 July 2010

⁵ Heritage Matters Pty Ltd, 'Jaffas Down the Aisles' p. 14

⁶ Dylan Walker, *Almost an Institution* p. 64

⁷ Dylan Walker, *Almost an Institution* p. 9

⁸ Dylan Walker, *Almost an Institution* pp. 41-43

⁹ Dylan Walker, *Almost an Institution* p. 41

¹⁰ Dylan Walker, *Almost an Institution* pp. 81-85

¹¹ Bruce Peters, 'The Impact of the Talkies on Scottish Cinema Architecture' in *Visual Culture in Britain* (2019) p. 210

¹² Chris Burns, *Art Deco in South Australian Architecture* (2018) Adelaide SA: Art Deco and Modernism Society of Australia Inc. Adelaide Chapter

¹³ Bruce Peters, 'The Impact of the Talkies' pp. 204-207

¹⁴ 'First Drive-In Theatre To Open Tomorrow' in *Advertiser* 27 December 1954 p. 9; Alison Painter, 'Entertainment' p. 299

¹⁵ Norman Tindale indicates the Erawirung group lived in the vicinity of Lake Bonney, with territory encompassing Lake Bonney, the Cobdogla Swamp, south along the river to the vicinity of Loxton and north towards Ral Ral Creek, the present-day location of Renmark; close neighbours the Ngawait group lived to the west; see Heather Burke et al, 'The space of conflict: Aboriginal/European interactions and frontier violence on the western Central Murray, South Australia, 1830-41' in *Aboriginal History* vol. 40 (2016) p. 155; Tindale's group names and boundaries are considered to be indicative, rather than conclusive.

¹⁶ Amy Roberts et al note that First People are frequently 'anonymised' in historical accounts of the Riverland, making it difficult to trace connections between past and present families; 'From loop-holes to labour: Aboriginal connections to Calperum and Chowilla pastoral stations, South Australia' in *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* vol. 145 (2021)

¹⁷ Hawdon counted 163 First People camped at Lake Bonney at this time; George Woolmer, *The Barmera Story* pp. 7-8

¹⁸ George Woolmer, *The Barmera Story* p. 16

¹⁹ Heather Burke, et al 'The space of conflict' p. 149

²⁰ Amy Roberts et al 'From loop-holes to labour'

²¹ Michael Williams, *The Making of the South Australian Landscape: a study in the historical geography of Australia* (1974) London: Academic Press p. 233

²² Michael Williams, *The Making of the South Australian Landscape* p. 237-238

²³ Graham Irwin, *A Brief History of Barmera 1838 – 1996* (1996) Barmera SA: Barmera 75th Anniversary Committee

²⁴ Alan Hutchings, 'Comprehensive Town Planning Comes to South Australia' in Alan Hutchings (ed), *With Conscious Purpose: A History of Town Planning in South Australia* (2nd Ed) (1986/2007) Adelaide SA: Planning Institute of Australia SA Division p. 79

²⁵ Place Names of South Australia, State Library of South Australia

<https://manning.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/>

²⁶ 'Barmera Memorial Hall Fund.' in Register 3 April 1922 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article63579317>

²⁷ 'Barmera Memorial Hall, Foundation Stone Laid by Mr. F. McMillan, M.P.' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 12 July 1929 p. 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109383857>

²⁸ 'Memorial Hall, Opened at Barmera' in *Advertiser* 9 November 1929 p. 17 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article73788318>

²⁹ 'Memorial Hall, Opened at Barmera' in *Advertiser* 9 November 1929 p. 17 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article73788318>

³⁰ 'Barmera's New Memorial Hall and Picture Theatre' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp. 24-25 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109245672>

³¹ 'Barmera's New Memorial Hall and Picture Theatre' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp. 24-25 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109245672>

³² 'Council To Control Barmera Hall' in *Advertiser* 15 February 1938 p. 12 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article30844969>

³³ 'Barmera's New Memorial Hall and Picture Theatre' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp. 24-25 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109245672>

³⁴ 'Tenders, Additions to Barmera Hotel' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 5 May 1938 p. 11 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109241333>; 'Barmera's New Memorial Hall and Picture Theatre' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp. 24-25 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109245672>

³⁵ 'Revenue from Barmera's New Hall' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 9 March 1939 p. 10 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109487311>

³⁶ 'Barmera's New Memorial Hall and Picture Theatre' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp. 24-25 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109245672>

³⁷ 'Barmera District Council, Review Plans for Reconstruction of Hall' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 27 January 1938 p. 1 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109239563>

³⁸ 'Barmera's New Memorial Hall and Picture Theatre' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp. 24-25 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109245672>

³⁹ 'Barmera's New Hall, Foundation Stone Laid' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 28 July 1938 p. 10 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109242990>

⁴⁰ 'Barmera's New Memorial Hall and Picture Theatre' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp. 24-25 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109245672>; 'Barmera's New Bonney Theatre, Now Nearing Completion' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 3 November 1938 p. 1 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109244867>

⁴¹ 'Barmera's New Memorial Hall and Picture Theatre' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 15 December 1938 pp. 24-25 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109245672>

⁴² 'Barmera's New Hall Opened, Fine Structure Earns General Admiration, Attorney-General Performs Ceremony. – Hospital Fete and First Picture Showing' in *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 22 December 1938 p. 9 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article109246036>

BHI Summary of State Heritage Place. 13766

23 of 24

Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 21 October 1993

Draft BHI SSHP for Consultation 6 August 2026 to 6 November 2026

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⁴⁴ District Council of Barmera, 'Proposed Upgrading, Bonney Theatre, Barmera. Interim Report' (May 1984)