TOWN HALL
Perth
BARN BIDI WALKING TRAIL

CITY OF PERTH
City of Light

1 HOURS

Koorari, where the foundation stone for the Perth Town Hall was laid in 1867, is Whadjuk Nyoongar country. It was an important meeting place for the Whadjuk Nyoongar people, at the high point between the Derbal Yerrigan (Swan River) flats and Yandilup (the wetlands), where the Perth Railway Station and the Perth Cultural Centre now stand. This high point was where Governor James Stirling felled a tree to symbolise the founding of the Swan River Colony and the displacement of Whadjuk Nyoongar people.

Built between 1867 and 1870, the Perth Town Hall is a landmark and an important and unique building in Perth's history. It is the only major Australian town hall designed in a Medieval style. It is also the only Australian town hall built by convicts, providing evidence of their workmanship and technical skills which, during this time, were superior to those of free citizens. From the beginning, it was conceived not as Council offices but as a venue for civic events, private and community gatherings and celebrations. Major works completed in 2005 restored the Town Hall to its place as a popular Perth venue for the new century.

Start at the intersection of Hay & Barrack Streets on the north west corner.

1 GIFT TO A NEW CITY
PERTH TOWN HALL

Byerbrup is the name of the ridge of high ground between Matta Gerrup (the shallow river crossing of Heirisson Island) and Kata Moor (Kings Park). Today, Hay Street follows this important Whadjuk Nyoongar pathway and the Town Hall is at a place on this ridge called Koorari. It was a good place to camp, close to the food sources of the nearby river and wetlands and provided a view over the surrounding country.

On 12 August 1829, Governor James Stirling founded the Swan River Colony. He landed at a spot on the river near what is now Barrack Street and his party climbed to this high ground and symbolically felled a nearby tree.
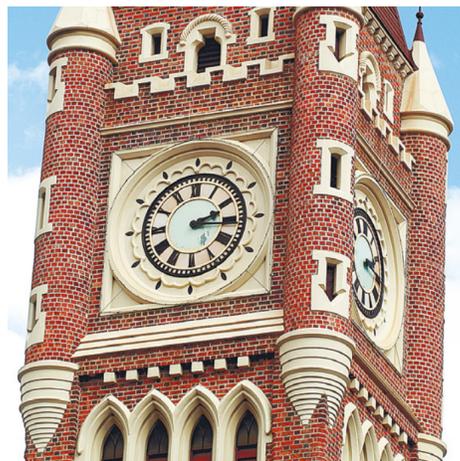
The city block bounded by Hay (previously Howick), Pier and Barrack Streets and St Georges Terrace was designated by the first Surveyor General J.S. Roe specifically for the use of church and state held within it. It had barracks, officers' quarters, a gaol and the first St George's Church.

The Swan River Mechanics' Institute opened in 1851 on the north east corner of this block, and on 10 December 1858 the Perth City Council met for the first time in its rooms on the corner of Pier and Howick St.

In December 1866, Governor John Hampton announced a public works program using the convict population, including a government house, pensioner barracks and town hall. He wrote to the Perth City Council, informing them of his plan to build a town hall and to hand it and the land over to the Council free of charge when completed. The same month, the Council replied to "accept his proposal of building a market house and town hall for the city with thanks to his Excellency for his kind liberality." The Council did not have access to convict labour, but the colony did. This is how Perth came to have the only capital city town hall built by convicts.

Two architects are credited with the design of the Perth Town Hall: Richard Roach Jewell, who was the State Architect, and James Manning, Clerk of Works at Fremantle Prison. The plaque bearing their names and referring to the foundation stone is, curiously, located more than halfway up the west face of the clock tower.

Image Credit: City of Perth, 2012

2 KEEPING TIME
PERTH TOWN HALL CLOCKTOWER

In the 19th century, not all families could afford a timepiece, so all Australian capital city town halls have a clock. The clock tower was typically placed in the north-west corner of the building. This, together with a four-faced alignment with the directions of the compass, helped travellers to orient themselves. The Perth Town Hall's clock follows this custom.
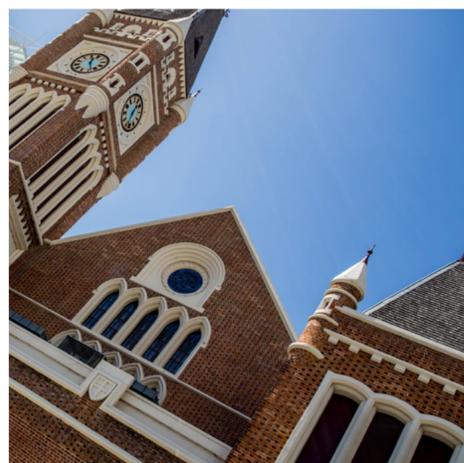
The Perth Town Hall clock was built by Thwaites & Reid of Clerkenwell, London in 1868. It has three bells weighing between 205kg and 305kg, and is powered by a falling 200kg pendulum weight. When the hall first opened, the hall caretaker was paid £16 per year to regularly climb 38m via the tower's 67 spiral steps and wind the clock. Since 1956, the weights have been automatically wound by an electric motor with three gearboxes.

The clock-tower had other practical uses too. Coloured flags signalled the arrival of the mail ship in Albany, and then in Perth, and the bells were the City's first fire alarm.

The electric winding system was designed and installed by Ennis Jewellers in 1956. The Ennis family has cared for the Perth Town Hall clock since 1942, first by the late Norman Ennis (1902-1999), and then by his sons Norman Jnr and Ron. Grandson Paul Ennis, the current keeper of the Perth Town Hall clock, has been climbing the tower since childhood and remembers clearly the many days that he helped his grandfather and father with their labour of love in looking after the clock. Apart from major maintenance, modifications and repair, the family have attended to the clock's regular care and adjustment as a labour of love and a community service, without charge.

Cross Barrack Street but remain on the north side of Hay Street, to view the Hall's north façade.
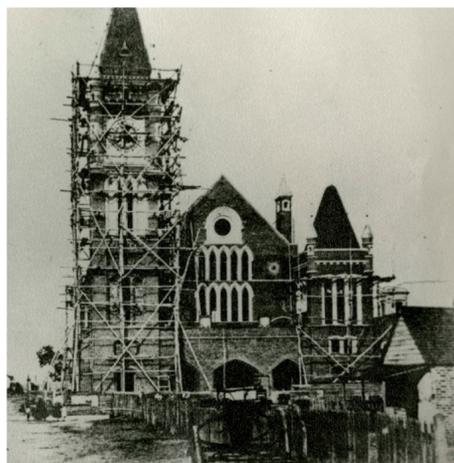
Image Credit: City of Perth

George PITT MORISON,
Image Credit: The Foundation of Perth, 1929, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 137.8 cm. State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia. Gift of George Pitt Morison, 1929. © Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1960.

3 BUILDING BROAD ARROWS
TOWN HALL UNDER CONSTRUCTION, 1869

Although it was built by convicts, the Town Hall's foundation stone was laid by free men, who held the opening ceremony between downpours on 24 May 1867. Originally scheduled for 12 months, the building project took three years to complete. The Inquirer recorded that about 35 men worked on the site per day and the building had been built using: 73,000 feet of jarrah timber, 136,497 jarrah shingles, 1000 cubic yards of masonry, 1,626 superficial feet of cut stone and about 1.25 million bricks. The bricks were fired from clay quarried just 2km to the east on Hay Street; the pits later transformed into an ornamental lake at Queens Gardens. The bricks were laid in a Flemish double bond pattern.

The architectural style is described as Victorian Free Gothic. Gothic buildings feature large indoor spaces with high or vaulted roofs and pointed arches. This style developed and reached its height of popularity in the Middle Ages, but new Gothic style buildings continue to be built up to the present day. Typical Gothic features include the three watch towers, tourelles (miniature conical turrets) and crenellations (square indentations around parapets, often associated with castles). Its generous, almost whimsical ornamentation has made the Town Hall perennially popular.

The Town Hall's opening ceremony on 1 June 1870, was followed by a luncheon. The clock was illuminated for the first time that night, and the hall was opened for public inspection for the next three days. The luncheon had evidently been a select affair, but almost 900 people (of an estimated 5,000 in the colony) attended a 'Monster Public Tea Party' a few days later.

There is a popular tale that the broad arrows and rope or 'hangman's noose' designs on the towers were added by the Hall's convict builders as a way of leaving their mark. In fact, the broad arrow has marked Crown property since the time of Henry VIII, and the rope design was a popular decorative motif.

Cross Hay Street and enter the Town Hall's open-air Undercroft.

Image Credit: City of Perth

4 UNDER THE ARCHES
TOWN HALL BARRACK STREET SHOPS, 1948

One of the Perth Town Hall's distinguishing features is the placement of the Main Hall on the first floor. This plan is similar to that of several European town halls built between 1200 and 1600. The ground-level Undercroft was intended as an open-air market square, surrounded by arches. The City's early markets here did not flourish, and ceased by 1877.

However, the space has seen several colourful uses. In 1875, the southeast corner was enclosed to house the city's fire engine. The Town Hall clock's bells would signal the fire, while the fire engine was hitched to the nearest horse from the nearby Hay Street cab rank. In the same year, the renowned explorer Ernest Giles used the area to house his group and their camels during their stay in Perth following his epic overland journey from South Australia. In 1910, after a year-long campaign, Perth's first public women's toilets were installed in the Undercroft allowing women to participate more easily in city life.

Even before the building was properly finished in 1871, the Council began to enclose the Undercroft to provide its own offices and rental property. Additions and alterations continued through the 1880s, progressively enclosing the Undercroft.

In 1924, Council resolved to construct shops here, to be rented out for income. They enclosed the space entirely and added cantilevered awnings, causing The West Australian to lament that Council had "transformed what was a thing of beauty... into an architectural monstrosity."

Look for several interpretive plaques in the Undercroft and around the exterior for more of the Town Hall's story. Toward the southeast corner, some unusual reverse arch foundations are visible. A brass plaque near the west door bears the City's motto, Floreat, meaning "Flourish".

Enter the Lower Foyer, go up the stairs or lift, and stand in the Upper Foyer at the doorway of the Main Hall.

Image Credit: City of Perth

5 JEWEL OF THE CITY
BARRACK STREET, 1921

The total cost of the original building is recorded as £4,567, excluding the cost of convict labour. The new venue was welcomed and used as a civic and social centre for a wide variety of activities such as public meetings, lectures, dances, balls, stage shows, bazaars, charitable activities, exhibitions and community concerts. In 1878 Henry Charles Prinsep even documented a 'costume skating soirée', showing the Hall had been popular for roller skating!

A month after the opening party, the Council bought at least six chandeliers, plus additional side lighting for the Hall. The chandeliers were lit by candles, but the clock was lit by kerosene and colzas oil (a vegetable oil). Two fireplaces were located along the south wall of the Main Hall.

However, the building had no toilets and no Council meeting chamber. The one public staircase, located where the lift is now, caused immediate concern about fire safety. Within 15 years, the Council concluded that the Town Hall building did not meet its needs and was a financial burden. They first offered to sell it back to the Government in 1896, with plans to construct a new one. Similar offers and counter-offers between the Council and the Colonial and State Government continued for the next 25 years.

One such offer was actually accepted in 1906: The Council was to exchange the Town Hall site and buildings for £22,000 plus the block of land on the corner of Hay and Irwin Streets and St. Georges Terrace, and the City would erect a new Town Hall. However, Council rescinded its plans after an overwhelming majority of citizens at a public meeting held at the Town Hall called for the Bill to be withdrawn. Perth people had spoken—they loved their handsome Gothic meeting place.

Over the years a number of other significant alterations were made to the Town Hall. In 1870, a platform stage was constructed with leftover building materials. In 1884, gas lighting was installed, including a centre 'starlight' with 90 jets and pillar gaslights for the stage.

By 1885, the south parapet was enclosed to create a Council Chamber. Later, the ceiling was raised, blocking the lowest windows on the south side. This room is now called the Supper Room. In 1892, electric lighting was installed.

In 1937, leadlight windows complete with the civic crest and ventilation grilles were installed and the stage took its current form. In 1949, the Main Hall's original floorboards were replaced with narrower jarrah boards. The wider original boards can still be seen in the Upper Foyer and Supper Room.

One of the Town Hall's most dramatic features is its Jarrah 'hammer-beam' roof—a design also found in London's Middle Temple. James Manning's handsome piece of engineering took advantage of the materials available to him, notably large jarrah trees felled at nearby Mount Eliza (Kings Park). Along with door and window joinery, the hall ceiling was constructed at the Fremantle Prison and taken on site for installation. Aged jarrah is naturally dark. The convicts installed a trussed roof, 15 metres high across a 14-metre span—a great technical accomplishment achieved with not much more mechanical assistance than block and tackle and winches. When the Hall is darkened, uplighting highlights the roof's functional elegance.

Look around the Upper Foyer.

Image Credit: City of Perth

6 A PLACE FOR HISTORIC EVENTS
RECEPTION FOR THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, 1965

Between 1875 and 1931, Governors of the State of Western Australia were welcomed and presented at the Town Hall. The Town Hall has played its part in wartime too. On 26 April 1916, the City hosted a luncheon for returning ANZAC soldiers. From March 1942 until July 1944 Perth Town Hall was handed over to the Citizen's Reception Council (CRC), a group of 28 women's volunteer organisations, as a recreation centre for members of the armed services. The venue opened every day providing writing facilities and light refreshments, with music and dancing at night.

In addition to the City of Perth's larger civic events, the Hall is used for public meetings, exhibitions, corporate and charitable events, weddings, concerts and shows.

For over 20 years the Town Hall has hosted the Tuesday Morning show, a free weekly program of entertainment and information for seniors. For many years the show was hosted by the late Holly Wood, socialite, entertainer, journalist and restauranteur. His portrait now hangs in the dressing room area.

Return to the Lower Foyer via the lift or the stairs.

Image Credit: City of Perth

Sir Henry William PICKERSGILL and Sir Thomas LAWRENCE,
Image Credit: Portrait of General, Rt Hon. Sir George Murray GC. BPC, Lord Provost of Scotland 1772-1846, Colonial Secretary 1828-30, 1830, oil on canvas, 299 x 208 cm, on loan to City of Perth Australia from Perth Scotland

7 HERITAGE AT WORK
THE TOWN CRIER WELCOMES GUESTS, 2006

In 1958, Perth won its bid to host the 1962 Empire Games. The Council again considered razing the Town Hall, and once again a public outcry saved it from destruction. The issue was finally resolved when the Council built new civic offices—Council House on St Georges Terrace. Opened in 1963, and now heritage listed, it remains the home of most of the City's administrative and civic functions.

In 1978, the Town Hall was placed in the Register of the National Estate, finally assuring its survival for future generations.

However, the building's challenges were not over. It had taken years for the State Government to formally vest the title deed to the City of Perth, but when it finally did, the deed included only the land on which the building physically rests.

In the early 1960's, a new Rural & Industries (R&I) Bank tower was built abutting the Town Hall's east façade. Two tourelles were deliberately sheared off on one side to accommodate the new office tower, and a grey granite veneer was attached to the remaining facades at ground level in an attempt to make the two buildings more compatible. When the R&I Building was removed in 1994-95, damage to the Town Hall was revealed. Some of the brickwork had been softened due to excess water runoff, and the foundations had suffered damage.

However, for the first time in a generation the Town Hall was visible from all sides, as it had been designed. Council took the initiative and under the leadership of Lord Mayor Peter Nattrass, the City made a major investment to restore the Hall as one of Perth's heritage treasures. Much of the $10.6 million cost went into structural reinforcement including earthquake proofing. A new brick run was required to replace bricks that were damaged. Restoration work took nearly as long to complete as the original building.

The most dramatic effect of the restoration was the restoration of the Undercroft, allowing it to be seen as designed 100 years before. A portion of the Undercroft was enclosed in glass, creating the Lower Foyer. The corrugated iron roof was removed, replaced with sheoak shingles, which perform better than the original jarrah.

The best way to conserve a heritage building is to keep it in use, so the Town Hall was fitted with an elevator, air conditioning, and modern but compatible lighting. Not all the older additions and modifications were removed—the stage and the parapet roofs, added early in the Hall's history, were retained. The restoration project won two awards from the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

The Hall's re-opening was celebrated on 12 August 2005 with an art exhibition 'Perspectives in Time', featuring depictions of the Town Hall throughout its first century.

The Lower Foyer is home to the ship's bell of the HMAS Perth, which was sunk off Sunda Straight on the 1 March 1942. There is also a model of that vessel and a bell of its successor the Perth II. The HMAS Perth III is still in active service.

Image Credit: Photo by Neil Wallace

Perspectives in Time exhibition 2005
Image Credit: Photo by Neil Wallace

PERTH TOWN HALL

🚌 BUS	🚆 TRAIN	ℹ INFORMATION	🚻 TOILETS

Valedictory dinner for Town Clerk W.E. Bold, 1944
Image Credit: City of Perth

After restoration, 2005
Image Credit: Photo by Neil Wallace

Perspectives in Time exhibition 2005
Image Credit: Photo by Neil Wallace