

The Thargomindah Hospital

*The Hospital has claims upon us all. The goods
Done, the charity dispensed, the suffering
Alleviated in such a place, no tongue
Can tell, nor pen describe.*

John Thomas, "Letter to the Editor",
Thargomindah Herald, December 16th, 1888

One thousand and one hundred kilometers west of Brisbane, nestled within a curve of the Bulloo River under an enormous expanse of blue sky and surrounded by the brilliant orange-red dust of southwest Queensland, is the small, rural community of Thargomindah. Home to some 200 people, Thargomindah is the centre for the Bulloo Shire Council, Queensland's third largest shire covering approximately 73,600 square kilometers. It is a town steeped in historic tradition and best known as the first place in Australia (and third in the world behind London and one day after Paris), to use hydro-electricity. Although Thargomindah's population has fallen in recent years the continued existence of such a remote community is testament to the persistence and resourcefulness of the men and women who tamed some of Australia's harshest areas and began the historic tradition of which Thargomindah and, indeed Australia, is so justifiably proud.

Standing proudly on the outskirts of the town is a large brick building known to the locals as the old Thargomindah Hospital. Built in 1888 out of locally made, unfired mud-bricks the building is a tribute to the tenacity of Thargomindah's pioneers and has always played an important, often sentimental, role in the community.

There have been three distinct phases in the life of this building since 1888. The first stage includes the first 55 years of hospital's history, during which the building provided a vital service to the community for two important reasons. Firstly, because it was a hospital and, as such, it supplied essential medical assistance to Australia's pioneers. Secondly, it gave people in the town the wider Bulloo Shire a sense of security – which is important for a remote community in what can be a harsh and dangerous landscape. The hospital helped to encourage people to move west and live the Australian pioneering dream.

The second stage in the hospital's history began in 1942 when a Flying Doctor base was established in Charleville. This increased the community's sense of security and meant that a resident doctor was no longer a necessity in Thargomindah. During this period there was also a significant change to the

hospital's management when the reins were passed from the Thargomindah District Hospital Committee to the Cunnamulla Hospitals Board in 1946.

The third stage for the building began in 1976, when a new Thargomindah Outpatients Center was opened in Dowling Street. For a time the old brick building was privately owned by the Howard family, who eventually sold it to the local Council who rented it out as residential flats. These flats were not well maintained during this time and it is only thanks to Terry and Vonda Smith, who purchased the building from the Council in October 1995 and began renovations, that the building has survived and remains in such a well-kept condition today. Terry and Vonda not only re-stored the old hospital, they re-established its central position in Thargomindah as an outback icon. In 2006 the building is the Bulloo Shire Tourism Office and is visited daily by tourist from all walks of life – whether they are city-dwellers 'on the wallaby' or visitors from overseas they are all welcomed with a friendly smile, a cup of tea, and a tour through Thargomindah's historic old Hospital.

This booklet will discuss the history of the Hospital by dividing it into three sections that are slightly different from those listed above. Because this is a history told with a large amount of emphases on memory and local historic tradition it seems logical to divide the sections as follows:

1. The Early Years, 1888- 1930;
2. The Hospital in Living Memory, 1930- 1976; and
3. The Old Thargomindah Hospital, 1976- 2006

This building is an essential part of the town's history and its heritage and everyone has a story about it. The old Hospital is a lasting reminder of the medical miracles and unavoidable disasters that Thargomindah has seen as well as the achievements of a united community and the hardships endured in this harsh environment. Ultimately, it is testament to the determination of the Australian pioneers and the people who have dared to call the outback home. It enriches the lives of the locals and tourist with its presence. As Nicola Pitt, author of *Thargomindah: The Town By the Bulloo*, says "The Thargomindah Hospital played an important part in the history of the Bulloo Shire and that of Western Queensland. ... it stands as a monument to the tenacity of the 'people who opened up the west'".