



Walls that Talk

Stories of the Flood

In February 1955, Maitland became internationally recognised as the face of tragedy and destruction. The 1955 flood devastated communities along the Hunter River but hit Maitland the hardest, with fourteen lives lost and several homes swept away. While the stories of the flood are heartbreaking, they are also a testament to the resilience and community spirit of those who chose to stay, rebuild and continue to call Maitland home. Today, the people of Maitland cherish their city, carrying with them the memories and the knowledge that while the great river holds its challenges, it also shapes the proud community they love.



Maitland Sky

Maitland is no stranger to long dry spells followed by powerful storms – evoking the vivid imagery from the poem *My Country* by Dorothea Mackellar – 'I love a sunburnt country, A land of sweeping plains, Of ragged mountain ranges, Of droughts and flooding rains.' These words, written by a homesick McKellar reflecting on the landscape of nearby Chichester, are echoed in our own landscape.

Maitland locals understand what the sight of looming grey clouds might mean – maybe a brief, violent storm, or the start of a difficult flood. In this painting, *Maitland Sky* by Euan Macleod, the artist not only captures the appearance, but the emotional weight of an approaching storm. Underneath the clouds, Macleod has included the top of the Maitland Post Office clock tower, seen peeking above the rooftops of the city centre. The Maitland Post Office was built in 1881, located on High Street in Maitland and is an iconic landmark on our skyline.

Euan Macleod (New Zealander, b.1956) is an award-winning artist who has lived and worked in Sydney since 1981. Macleod is renowned for his expressive figurative and landscape paintings, which explore themes of identity, memory and the relationship between nature and humanity.

Artwork Credit: Euan Macleod, *Maitland Sky*, 2006. Oil on canvas. Maitland Regional Art Gallery Collection. Purchased 2012. © the artist.



Devonshire Street, 1864

The tragedy of 1955 echoed around the world, but tis etched in the collective memory of Maitland, passed down through stories and personal experiences. This illustration, first published in the *Illustrated Sydney News* on 16 July 1864, captures an image that has been repeated throughout Maitland's history: a city street with the tarmac replaced by floodwaters, with boats replacing traditional modes of transport. The image titled 'Floods – Devonshire Street, Maitland-removing families from their flooded houses' depicts a flood boat navigating Devonshire Street, with buildings in the background possibly depicting the Council Chambers, once located at the corner of Devonshire and Hight Street.

The accompanying news article to this image reads:

'The tendency of the Hunter River to overflow its banks has always been a source of anxiety to the residents in its vicinity. Three times during the current year have they suffered from those visitation, the most disastrous being that of the 14th, 15th, and 16th of June...The Long Bridge was covered; the waters spread over the Horseshoe Bend; and in the lower part of the town almost every house was partially filled,- nearly three hundred tenements were rendered untenable, and the inhabitants compelled to seek safety on higher ground.'

Today, Devonshire Street is again a quiet residential road, lined with 19th century homes and gentle grass edges, capped on one end by the High Street and on the other by the railway line.



Photograph of a flooded street in Maitland

The post war period in Maitland was marked by two great floods; one in 1949 followed six years later by the 1955 flood.

This photograph shows a house surrounded by floodwaters, during either the 1949 or 1955 Maitland flood. It illustrates a scene all too familiar to those who have experienced a flood – a building isolated by water where gardens, streets and paths once were. Suddenly, the place we call home, and once familiar routes turn impassable and dangerous.

This photograph is from the O'Brien Family Collection, part of the Maitland City Library Collection. The O'Brien family was well known in Maitland, with their Irish born ancestors settling in the area in the late 19th century. In 1898, they opened a grocery store on High Street, later expanding to another location on the corner of St. Andrew's Street, now the Riverwalk Arcade. Despite the challenges of repeated floods, the family chose to remain in Maitland, their settled home. The photographic collection includes two additional flood photographs, including one of the flooded Maitland Station, along with several images of the original O'Brien stores.



An Ode to the Flood Boat

From the earliest days of human occupation to the present day, Maitland's floodwaters have been navigated with the use of small watercraft designed to be lightweight, fast, strong and nimble in turbulent waters. The early colony in Maitland responded to this need by building the flood boat.

Flood boats were constructed in the mid-19th century in locations such as Morpeth, Hexham and Newcastle to prepare for flooding events. During these times, community volunteer boat brigades would take to the water armed with important local knowledge of submerged fences, gates and other hidden hazards. The boats were often purpose built open skiffs, usually clinker-built and modelled on butcher boats. From illustrations, we know these boats were used in early floods to rescue people, and as seen in this photograph, they were also vital for delivering supplies to those trapped on upper floors or high ground until the waters receded.

In the 1955 flood, boats and their crews were called up from many places, from as far afield as Stockton and Swansea. This flood also saw innovative transport methods like DUKWs (amphibian vehicles from the US) and Australian Navy helicopters. There were even two boats fitted with outboard motors, however struggled with debris and would break down. The true heroes were the smaller boats, operated by volunteers and locals, who battled the rough tides to save hundreds of lives.

'All through the afternoon and night, the surfboat crews – and many other people in all kinds of boats, patrolled the treacherous waters rescuing the stranded. Three boat crews alone rescued more than 300 people from rooftops, awnings and floating debris. It has been estimated that surfboats from 15 clubs rescued 1800 people and ferried 600 to safety during the course of the flood across the Lower Hunter.' - Greg Ray

Image credit: Jim Lucey collection, digitised by David Sciffer, held by the University of Newcastle Library's Special Collections



The Waters Recede – Photograph from the Jim Lucey Collection

An article published in the Daily News Perth on 26 February 1955 reads: 'Last night, from the window of a flood bound building, I saw a city writhing in the agony of its worst flood ever... I have seen unprecedented scenes of desolation and horror, which have filled me with misery and pity, and left me with a feeling of helplessness.'

On the same page however, a scene emerges of high spirits and resilience:

'By lantern light at 3am today flood victims danced in knee deep water at a party in the bar at the Grand Central Hotel, Maitland...Guests included 42 year old postal clerk Eric Crane, who has lost everything in the floods except a pair of trousers. The barmaid was Mrs. Daphne Hughes, whose home was swept away yesterday. Swirling through knee deep water, Mrs. Crane and Mrs. Hughes began a dance with an old time waltz. A woman's clothes dummy floated into the bar and a PMG technician took it in his arms and joined in the dance. All needy flood victims who walked into the hotel yesterday found that Mrs. O'Hara quietly slipped a few 1 pound notes across the bar to them.'

This scene of waltzing by lamplight in floodwaters tells a story of a despair mingled with hope. How else could someone find the strength to keep dancing when everything they knew had washed away?

Perhaps it's this same spirit that helped these two figures smile on a street that had only recently become accessible by foot. Their expressions give no indication of the horror and fear they may have endured. Behind them is the immediately recognisable 5 Victoria Street, home to the Maitland Lodge of Unity Masonic Hall and Lodge, designed by J.W. Pender and completed in 1887. To the left of this building is a terraced house with a balcony looking over the street. This is photographer Jim Lucey's house, from which he took photos of rescues. Once the waters receded, Jim would then leave his home and take what would become iconic photographs of the flood and the recovery efforts of the Maitland community.

Image credit: Jim Lucey collection, digitised by David Sciffer, held by the University of Newcastle Library's Special Collections

Clean up gang set out from Roe Street - Photograph

This is a photograph that instantly conveys both the human drama and community spirit that often emerge in the aftermath of a major disaster. But the longer you look, the more stories it begins to tell through the details.

A diverse group of individuals sits on or walks near a floating raft, with three in the group working to push and steer the contraption. What appears to be a floating wheelbarrow has been adapted into an emergency raft with the wheel submerged underwater while an additional wooden barrel supports the human cargo above water level. It looks like a quick, improvised solution created quickly to meet a pressing need.

The individuals vary in ages and while they are mostly male, one lady sits at the centre of the photograph, holding what must be someone's keepsake soft toy puppy. Most have rolled up their shorts and pants to avoid the water. The boy in the foreground carries papers covered in muddy fingerprints. A large bale of textile sits in the place of honour in the front seat. In the background, houses sit untenanted with water at their gates and a bicycle sits abandoned against a fence.

While we may never know the full stories of these people, we can only imagine how they all came to be together, the meaning behind the objects they hold and how they survived the flood.





Lionsville

The 1955 flood in Maitland was catastrophic. At its peak, the floodwater covered an area the size of England and Wales combined, claiming 14 human lives and reaching a record height of 12.1 metres. The devastation was so severe that there were proposals to relocate the entire town of Maitland to higher ground at a cost of £15,000,000 over a period of five years. The proposal was put forward to the federal government to fund this bold project.

'It appears that we must either move the city or the river to save the domestic and business life of the city' (Maitland Mercury 8 March 1955).

Clearly this assistance was not approved, and a second Maitland was not born north of the river. Instead, the Lions Club of Maitland initiated a bold plan to relocate flood affected residents. Land was purchased in Telarah and whole houses were moved there by the Robert M. Fraser House Haulage service.

Three blocks of streets totalling 55 blocks of land were set aside in Telarah, colloquially known as 'Lionsville' in appreciation of the benefactors that made this possible.

Houses belonging to flood affected residents of Maitland applied to have their houses moved. Families stood on roofs and hung out windows as their houses moved slowly through the streets of Maitland towards the new lots in Telarah. The streets are now named Lions Street, Lismore Street and Taree Street – named in honour of the Lions Clubs that assisted in the purchase of this land on higher ground. The relocated houses still stand today; a testament to the resilience and determination of the people of Maitland, as well as the community's compassion and support in the face of disaster.



Faces of Maitland - Our Happy Home

Today, Maitland shows few markers of the great flood of 1955. Flood level signs were infamously put up around the town then mysteriously removed, with some attributing to collectors or real estate agents. As a result, Maitland is said to be a town that 'turned its back to the river', grappling with its identity as a river city.

Despite this, the town remains deeply connected to its past, with stories of bravery, resilience and community spirit continuing to be shared alongside tales of loss and hardship.

Maitlanders proudly call this place home, and cling both lovingly and stubbornly to their homes near the Hunter River.

In 2011, former Maitland Mercury photographer Stuart Scott embarked on a creative project to meet with and capture the faces and stories of Maitland residents. The photographs from these series show a diversity of faces, locations and ages. Families, pets, farm sheds, hot rod cars, interiors and exteriors of homes all feature. Mostly taken within private residences, there is a strong theme of personal identity and pride of place. The photographs were displayed at Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG under the exhibition titles Faces of Maitland).

One photograph from this series, depicts an unnamed resident standing at her door, surrounded by a lush garden, accompanied by a small terrier like dog. As the title suggests this is her happy home, and it has likely been a safe harbour for and mute witness to many families, stories and events in Maitland.

The Faces of Maitland series was originally displayed at and subsequently acquired by MRAG and is held as part of the city's permanent art collection.

Artwork Credit: Stuart Scott, 'Faces of Maitland- My Happy Home', 2011. Inkjet print. Maitland Regional Art Gallery Collection. Purchased 2011. © the artist.



Cultivation Road, South Maitland

Some choose to move here; some choose to stay here. But how do we adapt to a challenging environment, one that we know at any moment can turn unruly?

The first inhabitants of this area were the Wonnarua people, and the river was called Coquun, meaning 'fresh water'. Before the Europeans called it Wallis Plains, the area around Maitland was called Boun, meaning 'bittern place'. A bittern is a water bird, famous for its secretive nature, perfect camouflaging in grass reeds, and for its bird call which is described as long, mournful and unnerving. The region was once a place of swamps, marshes, eels and reeds. The plains were rich and fertile because of the river sediment deposited over several flood events, and red cedar trees grew healthy and tall along the banks of the river. Oddly enough, this is what first brought the settler Europeans to the area. The land did and continues to sustain life because it is part of a system of marshes and floodplains.

However, building European style homes in this changeable environment proved challenging. Despite the challenges, the people of Maitland persevered, finding ways to adapt and thrive.

In the artwork *Cultivation Road, South Maitland* by Trevor Dickinson, we see one such adaptation. The artwork depicts a home on stilts, a clever adaptation to the area's regular flooding. Cultivation Road runs alongside the Maitland Showground and is surrounded on all sides by flat and fertile farmland. This area regularly floods, and the owners of this home have met the challenges by raising the homes upward on stilts.

This artwork is part of a series by artist Trevor Dickinson, and features in his book *Greetings from Maitland*. In the book, Trevor writes:

'Maitland is a wonderful city to draw. I like the range of subject matter, from the grand to the decaying, and I like the contrast between the urban and rural landscapes....The choice of what to draw was random: I walked and cycled the city until I saw something that I thought was worth recording.'

The book is a visual treasure trove of the city's iconic historic buildings, including the Mansfield Building, the Post Office and the City Library. Alongside these architectural gems, the book captures the quirky charm of everyday life in Maitland, with images of vintage advertisements, machinery and overgrown trees. Together, these images weave a rich tapestry of Maitland's vibrant and diverse character. From grand buildings to the sweeping landscape that surrounds the city, Dickinson's artwork reveals the complex beauty of Maitland. In the distance, the mountains, and flooding plain stretch out, a reminder of the city's enduring connection to the land.

Artwork Credit: Trevor Dickinson, 'Cultivation Road, South Maitland', 2016. Digitally coloured print of pen drawing on paper. Maitland Regional Art Gallery Collection. Purchased 2016. © the artist.