The stars were twinkling the night the Governor attended the ball. And the man in the moon was winking. Kandos Community Centre, outfitted in its best regalia, knew it was the star of the evening. Glamorous guests mingled on the Town Square sipping champagne, choosing canapés, watching the vice-regal party arrive, and admiring the Lantern Parade as it wended around the perimeter of the Town Square.

Inside the hall even the chairs wore long frocks and bow ties. Tulle, fairy lights and balloons decorated the walls; and old images recalled one hundred years of history worth celebrating. Polished cutlery and commemorative glassware sparkled against a backdrop of black tablecloths. Two hundred and sixteen guests enjoyed music, song and dance; ceremony and speeches; fine food and wine; memories, friendship and camaraderie.

The heartbeat of the town centre was strong. Its presence imposing. It was once again the centrepiece of the town.

It is worthwhile reflecting on this beautiful building – a hall built by visionaries to suit a town built by visionaries. A building that has shaped our community, provided a focal point and improved our quality of life.

Even before World War II had ended members of Kandos Progress Association were considering the possibility of a Community Centre for the town. It was a modern concept: a building with a multi-faceted purpose and up-to-the-minute design features. The inaugural meeting to consider the project, on 21 March 1946, was “the largest and most representative” for many years. Officers were elected, a constitution advanced and the site agreed on, with council to consider the resumption of land.

From 1946 to 1956, a zealous group of townspeople progressed Kandos Community Centre. They contracted Sydney architect Reginald John Magoffin (Diploma in Architecture, Sydney Technical College, 1932) widely recognised for his civic buildings, to draw up plans for a Community Centre. For a time they considered the purchase, removal and rebuilding of the Glen Davis Hostel, which Magoffin had designed, but that idea obviously lost favour.

Councillor Newman successfully secured a £3000 grant from the Joint Coal Board, a body set up to protect the state’s coal resources and workers. It had annual funds of £150,000 to distribute to coal mining towns to help them build amenities. The grant was crucial in defraying the costs of the Kandos Community Centre but could only make up around half of the total.

The Kandos Community Association living up to its name, sought funds from the community. It organised fund-raising events such as balls, street stalls, tournaments, concerts and carnivals. Employees were urged to have one shilling a week taken out of their pay while others were prompted to contribute £2/12/- annually or to make a larger donation.

Though I have not uncovered firm final figures for the cost of the building, media reports suggest that the total was around £14,000, with little or no debt to pay; the Coal Board contributed a total of £5037 of which £500 was for the purchase of a piano; the Association raised more than £6000;
the cement companies paid subsidies of one shilling (Kandos) and sixpence (Charbon) in the pound for money raised by the Association; and the State Government made a grant of £750.

The Saturday of the October long weekend in 1954 saw the project officially launched with the unveiling of a foundation plaque by Minister Leo Nott, MLA for Mudgee, on the site of the centre. Dozens of names associated with the centre appear in news reports but two people were honoured for their contribution: George Hawkins, Manager of the Bank of NSW and John Bennett Simpkins, local businessman and ex-councillor. Their names appear on the plaque. The following day Memorial obelisks, which are still a feature at the entrance to the site, were “dedicated to those who had laid down their lives for their country”.

On the advice of the architect to save money, each stage of the project was separately tendered and Mr Ennis, Shire Engineer, volunteered to oversee the building. Tenders were accepted for Jackson’s Concrete Products for the laying of the foundations and erection of the walls to ceiling height, Gordon Fuller for doors and windows and Trussed Steel Limited for the steel and roofing trusses. Terracotta tiles were to be used for the roof. Unfortunately at some stage corrugated asbestos cement roofing replaced the tiles and only recently it had to be replaced at considerable cost.

In the final years of the project there were at least three difficult and on-going issues faced by the committee. They were about control, interference and disparagement; matters that continue to dampen civic projects today.

The Community Centre Association had hoped to control the project in its entirety but they discovered that under the Local Government Act it was compulsory for Council to have control of expenditure. From June 1954 six councillors and six members of the association formed a 530A committee, the Kandos Community Centre Committee. There was equal representation of both bodies but it was an unwieldy and sometimes fiery assembly, occasionally at cross-purposes with the Association.

A Mudgee Guardian article on 24 March 1955 revealed the architect’s concerns that changes had been made to his specifications and plans, presumably on the advice of the Shire Engineer who no doubt sought to save money. Magoffin expressed fear that departures “might affect the structural stability of the building”, gave a series of directions to fix the problems and advised that it was “imperative to appoint a supervisor experienced in matters of the building trade”. In the final year of the project the architect was asked to eliminate a detailed list of fixtures and fittings to reduce costs including a paved area and fountain, plastering of internal walls, omission of some ceilings and some items in the kitchen and lavatory.

Like any civic project, especially one in such a prominent position, it attracted the nay-sayers. Early on Mr Hawkins made a public appeal to those who were contributing to the funding of the community centre and who were dissatisfied with the efforts of the association, to “contact him personally before going around the town saying that the hall will never be built and other statements detrimental to our efforts.”

Set high above the main street, this strong, dramatic, restrained and classical building, the Kandos Community Centre, is a symbolic reminder of what can be achieved in a small community, even with the challenges confronting it along the way. It also contains sixty years of Kandos history. It has welcomed Governors, turned refugees and migrants into Australian
citizens, hosted flower shows and speech nights, held displays, performances and boxing tournaments.

With beautiful features that include a large auditorium, gallery and stage, cloakrooms, dressing rooms and storerooms, terraces and multiple entries, it has hosted many balls including an opening ball on 16 November 1956.

Four hundred and fifty lovers of the “terpsichorean art”, having paid seventeen shillings and sixpence for a ticket, were welcomed into the hall by the Kandos Town Band playing for half an hour on the terrace. Then those dancers swayed to the rhythm of Barry Conron’s orchestra until 3am; with extras played by Bill Taylor, Lee Wildes and Jim Ellis and a few vocal interludes. The Kandos Women’s Hospital Auxiliary catered for the guests in five sittings in the supper room below the hall (now the library).

In recent years Mid-Western Regional Council has made generous improvements to the Kandos Community Centre and the grounds in which it stands. All that is needed is refurbishment of a kitchen which has been invaded by white ants and of a toilet block which is partly de-commissioned. Perhaps then community energy and enthusiasm will flourish again to ensure this valuable building has a central role in the life of our town.

It was fitting that on the October long weekend of 2014 (just 60 years after the foundation plaque had been unveiled), the newly inaugurated Governor and his wife joined with the community to celebrate the Centenary of Kandos.