The Gospel Union Hall
141-145 Commonwealth Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010

Michael Bogle

The Gospel Union Hall, organised and built by the Sydney Rescue Work Society 1915-1916, survives inside a complex of buildings known as 141-145 Commonwealth Street (currently the Oasis Backpackers) at the intersection of Reservoir Street, Surry Hills.[1]

Figure 1. Aerial View, Gospel Union Hall gable roof structure (circled) and the Oasis Backpackers, 141-145 Commonwealth Street, corner of Reservoir Street, Surry Hills. Google Maps, 2014.

In 1888, Commonwealth Street was recorded as Macquarie Street and Reservoir Street was known as Gipps Street.[2] The multi-storey Cave of Dunmore Hotel (later 141 Macquarie Street) occupied the northwest corner of this intersection, now the Oasis Backpackers. The appropriately named Robert Reckless was the

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[1] http://www.oasisbackpacker.com/
[2] Smith Street later became Commonwealth Street; see Sheet 22, City of Sydney, *Sydney and Suburban Plan Publishing Co.*

proprietor.[3] This hotel was a centre for political action in East Sydney with numerous political addresses and meetings taking place at this address.[4]

In 1915, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the Sydney Rescue Work Society had begun to construct a "suitable hall" at 145 Reservoir Street "capable of seating about 400 persons, also a basement for free teas".[5] Services were described as being held in the "Gospel Union Hall" by July 1915 and overseen by the evangelist and social benefactor George Edward Ardill.[6]

Figure 2. Beauchamp Lane view, rear, Gospel Union Hall and arched windows details. Oasis Backpackers, 141-145 Commonwealth Street, Surry Hills. March 2014.

By 1916, the hall construction was described as complete and an "Open Air Night Refuge" was also identified at the site with an entrance from Beauchamp Lane.[7]

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[3] *Sands Directory*, 1888, 141 Macquarie Street, Surry Hills.

[4] "Mr Reid […] spoke to a large audience from the balcony of the Cave of Dunmore Hotel at the corner of Macquarie and Reservoir Streets." *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 September 1903, p.4.

[5] "Waifs and Strays." *Sydney Morning Herald.* 30 January 1915, p.8.

[6] "Question Night re Second Coming of Christ." *Sydney Morning Herald,* 7 July 1915, p.16.

[7] "The Churches." *Sydney Morning Herald,* 5 August 1916, p.7. For a report on the Beauchamp Lane Open Air Night Refuge. "Destitute Women and Children."

By 1918, the Cave of Dunmore Hotel was no longer listed in the *Sands Directory*. the location is identified in 1918 as the home of a number of social agencies including the Sydney Rescue Work Society; Open All Night Refugee, the Jubilee Home, Society for Providing Homes for Neglected Children, the Home of Hope for Friendless and Fallen Women and the NSW Open Air Gospel Mission.[8]

Figure 3. Gospel Union Hall and gable detail. Commonwealth Street view, Oasis Backpackers, 141-145 Commonwealth Street, Surry Hills. March 2014.

City of Sydney *Assessment Books* illustrate that 143/145 Commonwealth Street had been in the possession of the Trustees of the Sydney Rescue Work Society as early as 1911 (described as a factory and house) but the Gospel Union Hall is not listed in the Assessment Books until 1918 when it is described as under the

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Sydney Morning Herald, 27 September 1915, p.10. A sister organization, the City Night Refuge and Soup Kitchen was also active in the city in 1887
[8] *Sands Directory,* 1918, listing for 143-145 Commonwealth Street. The Christian Workers Depot was sited at 149 Commonwealth Street.

control of the Sydney Rescue Work Society and described as a "church, hall and offices built in brick".[9]

In 1931, all of the addresses (and terraces) from 141 to 155 Commonwealth Street are recorded in the City of Sydney *Assessment Books* as under the ownership of the Sydney Rescue Work Society. In 1938, the Gospel Union Hall is active at 145 Commonwealth Street and featured an "all night refuge for women and children".[10]

Figure 4. "The Rescue." Masthead of the Sydney Rescue Work Society's magazine. 25 September 1896. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Q205/PA1.

The Sydney Rescue Work Society was founded by the noted evangelist George Edward Ardill (1857-1945) in 1890 and offered a wide range of charitable social services based at the Gospel Union Hall, 145 Commonwealth Street and the adjacent Christian Workers Depot at 149 Commonwealth Street and other locations. Ardill was very active in aid societies (at one stage, 12 organisations), that his biographer states that "his work was becoming less directed to rescuing

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[9] In the Rate Book hand-written listing, church is crossed out, leaving "hall and offices". CSA027479_024. Belmore Ward.

[10] "Sydney Rescue Work Society." *Sydney Morning Herald,* 14 November 1938, p.13.

the fallen than to providing for the needy".[11] He also acted as a publisher through his quarterly magazine, *Rescue.*

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[11] Heather Radi, 'Ardill, George Edward (1857–1945)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ardill-george-edward-5048/text8413, accessed 22 April 2014.