Bathurst Courthouse is situated in Russell Street opposite Kings Parade. From the Visitor Information Centre travel west on the highway to William Street. Turn left and travel 2 blocks to the Russell Street traffic lights. Turn right and park - take note of parking restrictions in force in this area.

Welcome to your historic tour of Bathurst Courthouse, one of the finest examples of colonial architecture outside Sydney. This magnificent building listed by the National Trust was built in 1880 and is a source of pride to the Bathurst community due to its elegant structure, design and colourful history.

Before you begin your walk through the courthouse reflect for a moment on the splendour of such a building located in a town, which at the time of construction had a population of only 4,000 people. During its establishment it was rumoured that there was a mix up between plans intended for the Bathurst building and those intended for a more substantial courthouse in colonial India. As a result it was said that Bathurst received the plans for India's magnificent Court of Appeals; the mistake being rectified in India but overlooked in Australia. This myth is re-enforced by the fact that the Supreme Court of India in New Delhi today is a replica of the Bathurst Courthouse.

A further local myth on how the courthouse came to be revolves around the story that Britain mixed up the plans for the courthouse in Bathurst, Africa and Bathurst, Australia. The wrought iron railings enclosing the courthouse were reputed to be able to stop a herd of stampeding elephants!

These rumours may be refuted however by the fact that plans for a courthouse to be built in Bathurst were drawn up by the colonial architect James Barnet, who had a powerful influence on the character and design of public buildings in New South Wales including the establishment of 130 courthouses. Bathurst Courthouse is considered to be his finest works.

As you walk along the path leading to the courthouse steps stop for a moment and reflect on the fact that you are actually standing on the site of a previous courthouse. The present building is actually the fourth since the foundation of the settlement in 1815.

As a result of the discovery of gold and the establishment of transportation links Bathurst and the surrounding district grew rapidly and the facilities of the third courthouse proved to be inadequate so plans for a fourth building were drawn up. At one stage both buildings occupied the same site with the old courthouse continuing to function while the new one was being built. The old one was eventually torn down in 1880 to make way for the planting of the forecourt.

The east wing on your left housed Bathurst’s Post Office until 1976 and is now home to Bathurst District Historical Society and its Museum. On the right the west wing was formerly the Telegraph Office but is now occupied by Mitchell Conservatorium Inc. These wings were constructed by Joseph Mills earlier than the main courthouse block (c1877) due to a vital need for them in the township.

The point at which you are now standing is an excellent position to view the architecture of the building. The courthouse is neo-classical in style and features Greek revival and Renaissance elements. It was constructed of locally made bricks, predominantly dark red with sand coloured pilasters. The sandstone facings were brought from Pyrmont. It is reported that nine hundred tonnes were used and that the carriage of the stone alone cost half the price of the stone itself. The courthouse was built by David Jones at the cost of £38,000 pounds.

The total length of the building from end to end is 81 metres and is 45 metres wide. As a whole the structure forms a striking quadrangle. Notice the splendid colonnade, or covered passage linking the main building and the wings. Take a walk along these colonnades and examine the solid structure and architectural features of the courthouse.
If you look up you will see the magnificent turret clock that was added in 1883. The clock is a mass of cogs and wheels driven by steel wire cables which coil around drums to provide the power needed to make the clock 'tick'. Continue along the path and up the stone steps of the building leading into the two storey doric columned portico with classical pediment that forms the grand entrance. Notice how the stonework over the door is beautifully and delicately carved with leaves. Also of note is the plaque which was unveiled in 1982 by the Attorney-General Mr Frank Walker commemorating the 150th anniversary of the establishment of Courts of Petty Sessions in New South Wales. Bathurst had one of the first of these courts. Mr Walker described the Courthouse as "one of the really outstanding citadels of the law in this country".

The courthouse itself is essentially rectangular in plan and originally housed 21 offices located around the two courtrooms, some with private enclosed courtyards and accommodation for the court keeper. As you enter the building pay attention to the piece of original fresco edging on the wall that was preserved during refurbishing. To your right is the office of the Clerk of Petty Sessions that handles the complicated mass of paper work involved in the judicial system. To your left is the Sheriff's Office. The sheriff has the task of executing summons and controlling the overall running of the court.

Now take a few steps further and enter the most magnificent room in the complex, the vestibule or public hall. Before you do anything look up at the splendidly structured and coloured Renaissance dome built both square and octagonal and lit by eight windows. An important feature of the dome is the handsome lantern placed at a height of around one hundred feet from the floor.

To your right is the Court of Petty Sessions or Local Court. This is a handsome chamber with polished cedar fittings. The magistrate's bench with intricate carvings on the panels is most elaborate. To your left is the District Court. This chamber is exactly the same dimensions as the Court of Petty Sessions and is fitted in a similar fashion.

The courthouse has provided Bathurst with a colourful account of the more unseemly aspects of history. The law and lawlessness have been prominent features in Bathurst's history. Within the stately walls of the courthouse bushrangers, murderers and petty criminals have stood waiting for sentence. The nineteenth century justice system was often erratic with verdicts sometimes being dealt with an uneven hand. Once a villain was gaol for six months for murder while a farmer was gaol for two years for shooting a neighbour's bull which had been knocking down his fences! Some interesting trials have occurred here such as the 1904 Piper murder trial, in which an eighty year old man was accused of killing his wife of over fifty years in cold blood.

The courthouse is open from 9.30 am to 1.00 pm & 2.00 pm to 4.00 pm Monday to Friday. It still functions essentially in its original capacity and is the venue for regular sittings of the Court of Petty Sessions, District and Supreme Courts. If you visit the courthouse on a day when court is in session you can sit in on the proceedings and observe the workings of the judicial system except when it is a closed court. They can often be very interesting and if you listen hard enough, who knows, you may even be able to hear the ghostly pleas of our colonial outlaws whose notorious behaviour helped build the character of Bathurst's finest landmark.

This information was originally researched by Penny Snoxell, a student of Applied History, at Charles Sturt University - Mitchell. Publication of the information was funded by a joint grant from the Bathurst and District Tourist Committee and Department of Planning under the 1992 Heritage Assistance Grant Program.