The prelude to Ben Hall’s raid on Bathurst occurred near the little township of Caloola, south of Bathurst, on or about 1 October 1863. Two young surveyors from Bathurst, Machattie and Byrne, were held up and robbed of their horses. For some unknown reason the mood of the encounter deteriorated and ended with the two young men challenging the gang to a fight; the gang members declined and Machattie and Byrne accused them of cowardice and dared them to come to Bathurst where they could meet them on their own ground. The company, but Ben Hall and his gang than anyone might have expected.

On 3 October 1863, a mild Saturday evening, the bushrangers calmly trotting their horses towards Bathurst would have gone virtually unnoticed - presuming, of course, that their pistols were well concealed! Saturday was market night for Bathurst, a popular social occasion, which drew squatters, stockmen and townsfolk together. As a town of approximately 6,000 residents, Bathurst was large enough and busy enough to allow Hall and his gang to enter in a relatively inconspicuous manner.

The gang approached town from the direction of the Vale Road and entered through the southern suburb known as Milltown. It appears most likely that they first rode along Bant Street which was, in those times, the street that ran into Dunn's Plains Road (now called Vale Road). Milltown was a sparsely settled area and the gang probably meandered through a few vacant blocks and cow paddocks as they made their way towards the southern end of William Street.

Once in William Street, at around 6pm, they quietly proceeded northwards towards the city centre and then reined in their horses outside the shop of Bartholomeo Pedrotto - Gunsmith. The site of this shop has been identified as the present day site of Wishbone Chicken, the building next to the Westpac Bank. Two of the gang Hall and Gilbert entered the shop, leaving O'Malley and Burke to hold the horses while Vane stood guard somewhere near the William Street end of Kings Parade. The gang asked to be shown the latest revolving rifles (Tranters). When informed by Pedrotto that he had none in stock, the bushrangers asked to see his range of Tranter revolvers. Pedrotto likewise claimed that he had none. The group quietly left the shop, mounted up and rode a few doors further northwards to the shop of McMinns, a jeweller. It is likely that McMinns was the first shop on the southern side of the present ANZ bank. At least two of the gang entered McMinns and there followed a confrontation in which a young shop assistant was bailed up. At this moment Mcminn's daughter entered the shop by a side door, sized up the situation immediately and began screaming loudly. The two gang members beat a hasty retreat after warning the shop assistant and Miss Mcminn against following.

Outside, the other three members of the gang were engaged in procuring fruit from a stall which was on the northern side of McMinns and W F Curtis’ shop, which sold fruit and tobacco. The gang swung into their saddles and, still without undue haste, broke into a jog-trot as they made their way down William Street. They had not ridden far before Miss Mcminn ran into the street and sounded the alarm.

At the corner of William and Howick Streets, three of them turned their horses into Howick Street, travelling in a westerly direction, whilst the other two continued north along William Street in the direction of the Police
Barracks (present location of Bathurst Panthers Bowling Club). At this stage, it is alleged that a shot was fired into the air by one of the gang members already in Howick Street, in all likelihood a warning call to the two in William Street. The two riders in William Street wheeled their horses around and followed the other three along Howick Street until they turned left into George Street and pushed their horses into a canter.

Meanwhile the Police had been alerted, but only five constables could be mustered. The Police concluding that Hall and the gang were headed for Carcoar, galloped up George Street towards the Carcoar Road. However, instead of taking the most likely action and leaving Bathurst immediately, the bushrangers had turned into Piper Street and were in the yard at the rear of the Sportsmen’s Arms Hotel, (on the present site of the Metro 5 Cinema Complex) the establishment of Alderman John DeClouet. The gang bailed up a horse trainer and groom in the yard at the rear of the hotel and left them under the guard of Vane, O’Malley and Burke.

Hall and Gilbert entered the hotel, bailed up the occupants and demanded the keys to DeClouet’s stables. Alderman DeClouet was the owner of a valuable racehorse called Pasha and it was the gang’s intention to steal the horse. One version of the story has Alderman DeClouet begging the gang not to steal his favourite racehorse; the other alleges that DeClouet, hearing of the gang’s intended raid, had moved the horse and had it secretly stabled elsewhere in Bathurst. Regardless of what the truth is, it appears that the gang left Bathurst without Pasha, after the owner and patrons of the Sportsmen’s Arms were taken into the backyard of the hotel and warned not to go out into the street.

By then, the police realised that the gang had not taken the Carcoar Road and decided to cut across country and return to Bathurst over what was then known as the Bald Hills (now Mount Panorama racetrack).

The gang leaving town and the police re-entering, sighted one another at the head of the George Street reserve, near the present site of Bathurst Public School. Shots were exchanged, but the gang, all mounted on stolen racehorses, made an easy getaway in the direction of Dunn’s Plains (where Perthville is today).

Understandably, the gang’s raid on Bathurst generated both hysteria and concern. A public meeting was called by Dr Palmer, the Police Magistrate. Police protection was criticised as being inadequate, a number of special constables were sworn in and a reward of £500 was posted by the Government for information leading to the arrest or conviction of the gang.

As a final chivalrous touch, the gang honoured their promise to return the two horses, stolen from Machattie and Byrne, three days before and left a message with the patrons of the Sportsmen’s Arms to this effect. The horses were found the next morning, not far from town, in the paddock the gang had nominated.

This information was researched by B Fitzsimon, a student in Applied History at Charles Sturt University - Mitchell. It was funded by a joint grant from the Bathurst & District Tourisim Committee and Department of Planning under the 1992 Heritage Asistance Grant Program.

Ben Hall was shot dead on 5 May 1865 at Billabong Creek near Forbes.