



American and Australian soldiers in the reading room of the Ballarat Mechanics Institute, 1942.  
A short history of the Ballarat MI starts on page 10.

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### A note from the Editor: Heather Arnold

Welcome to my second *Useful Knowledge*. Thank you for your nice comments about the previous edition.

Please send me contributions—tell us how your community uses their MI; have you received any grants? Undertaken renovations? Written a history? Formed a partnership with other organizations? Had any great events? Send me a story or some photographs.

Remember, as I said in the last edition, my main focus in life is local history, so if I don't receive anything, then I will fill this newsletter with stories on the history of Mechanics' Institutes!

Contact me on [mivnewslettereditor@gmail.com](mailto:mivnewslettereditor@gmail.com)

Cover: American and Australian soldiers in the reading room of the Ballarat Mechanics' Institute, 1942.  
 Museums Victoria image <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/773639>



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The MIV would like to acknowledge the support of our 'home' the Prahran Mechanics' Institute.

### A note from the President: David Berry

Dear Members,

Welcome to the first edition of *Useful Knowledge* for 2023 – we hope you find the content both interesting and informative.

Recently, I was looking at an outline of the commencement of the Mechanics' Institutes (and related appellations) movement worldwide. The first incarnations were generated in Scotland and England some two hundred years ago to fulfil an important need existing at that time. It is important that such a milestone and the contributions the institutes have made to both individuals and communities in a number of countries is acknowledged. It is intended that such an acknowledgment and implicit celebration be held at some stage this year.

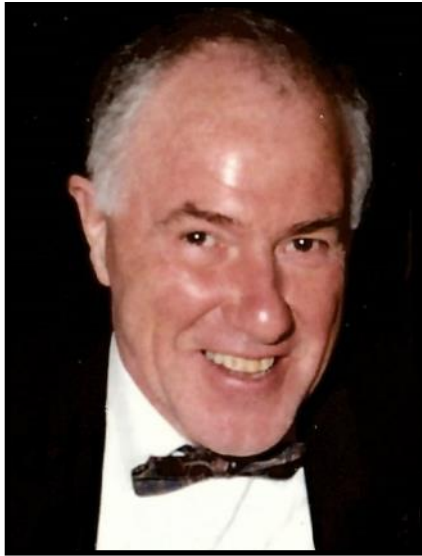
Now that COVID restrictions have largely dissipated, we hope that our active member institutes will be able to resume their full activities and grow even further. To this end, the MIV will assist where it can provide useful and efficacious support.

All the best for the coming year to both our valued individual members and member institutes.

David Berry, President.

## Vale: Associate Professor Alexander Tyrrell

A tribute by Jim Lowden



We note the passing of Associate Professor Alexander 'Alex' Tyrrell at his Rosanna residence on 7 January 2023 at aged 86. Alex was a former Committee Member and longtime Member of MIV and an ardent researcher of the Mechanics' Institute Movement.

Alex Tyrrell was born at Leith, Scotland in 1937, the eldest son of Thomas 'Tommy' and Catherine 'Cathy'. As a youth he was involved with football, the Scouts and was an altar boy in the local Catholic Church. He was educated at the Leith Academy and the University of Edinburgh, where he took his Bachelor of Arts in History. He then moved to McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, where he took his Master of Arts with a thesis titled 'Samuel Smiles: Editor of the Leeds Times'.

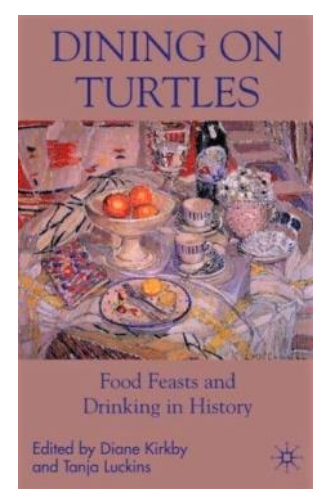
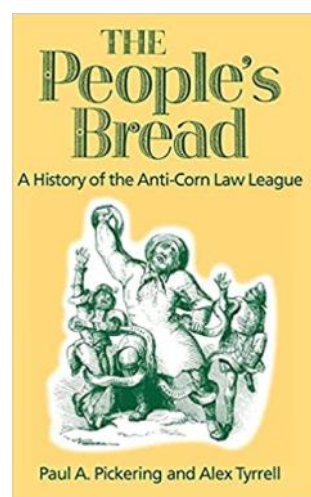
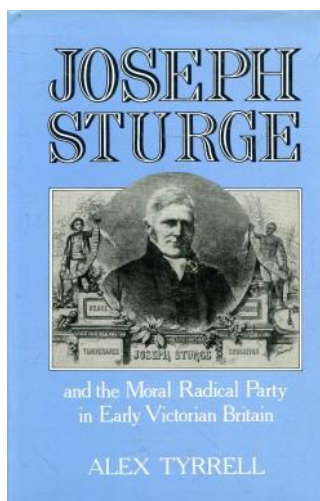
His academic postings included: McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada 1963-65; University of New England, Armidale (NSW), 1965-70; and LaTrobe University, History Department from 1970-2010, first as Senior Lecturer, then as Associate Professor. There he was noted for his engaging

lecture style, based on rigorous research, enthusing generations of future historians.

Alex authored two books: *Joseph Sturge and the Moral Radical Party in Early Victorian Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); and *The Sphere of Benevolence: The Life of Joseph Orton, Wesleyan Missionary* (Melbourne: State Library of Victoria, 1993); and collaborated with Paul Pickering, on *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (Loughborough: University of Leicester Press, 2000); and *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2017); and jointly edited, *Work and Society: The Impact of Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions on Britain* (Bundoora: LaTrobe University, 1981). He also wrote the chapter, *Feasting on National Identity: Whisky, Haggis and the Celebration of Scottishness in the Nineteenth Century* in *Dining on Turtles: Food Feast and Drinking in History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and contributed many articles to academic journals.

In addition to the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria, his memberships included the Robert Burns Society; and University of the Third Age, at which he also lectured. Alex travelled widely, and visited Avignon, France regularly and was fluent in French. He was keen cyclist and bushwalker and visitors to his home would often hear the music of Vivaldi playing.

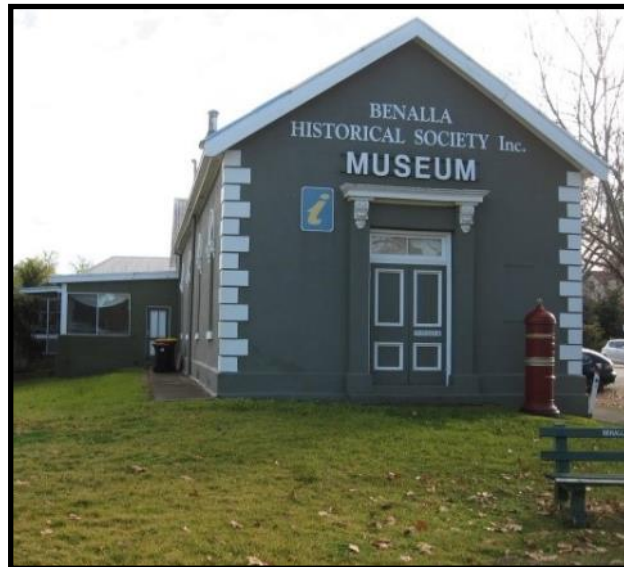
The funeral service was appropriately conducted at LaTrobe University, where he had worked to establish the History Department so solidly. His first wife, Margot, predeceased him, and he is survived by his second wife Ria, and his two children Alasdair and Catriona, to which our deepest sympathy is extended.



## Benalla Historical Society: Benalla Costume and Kelly Museum

Story and images by Alan Monger, Secretary of the Benalla Historical Society Inc.

The Costume and Kelly Museum is a well-known and well-regarded regional museum situated on the banks of the Broken River in Benalla. The museum occupies the old (1870) Mechanics Institute building together with substantial extensions that have been added over the last 34 years or so. The entire site is owned by the Benalla Rural City Council and the central part of the building is occupied by the Benalla Visitor Information Centre.



Benalla Historical Society Museum in the 1870 Mechanics' Institute

The museum, which has twice been awarded "Museum of the Year", has a renowned costume collection, an area devoted to relics related to Ned Kelly, a War Services Room, notably with items related to "Weary" Dunlop and Captain Hector Waller, and many and varied items illustrating the history of Benalla and district. There is also a research room containing a large collection of local newspapers and many other books and documents. The museum, which is run entirely by volunteers, is fully accredited under the Museums Accreditation Program (MAP) and is a Place of Deposit (POD) under the auspices of the Public Records Office of Victoria.

In December 2019, the council announced to the Society that it had been decided to extend the building to include an expanded Visitor Information Centre, a boutique cinema and a cafeteria. The proposed plans for this extension indicated that the Ned Kelly room and part of the research area would be lost, but a small office would become part of the museum, thus ensuring that the overall area occupied by the museum would remain substantially the same as at present. However, because of the urgent need to extend the storage space for the museum collection, it became necessary to substantially reduce the gallery area.

The council indicated that the construction of the extensions would begin in October 2021, and in anticipation of this, the museum was closed and the entire collection was packed up and stored.

The Council proposal over-rode the Society's plans for its own building extension, and so it was decided that a completely new project for the museum was necessary in order to extend the storage area and re-design the display areas, work room and the research room to fit into the existing building layout. At the same time it was considered an ideal opportunity to completely renovate and modernise the museum displays, to re-examine and re-assess the collection and to bring cataloguing and storage up to date. With a budget of more than \$400,000 the Society was delighted to receive a flying start with a Regional Access Collections Program (RCAP) grant of \$201,000.

## Benalla Historical Society: Benalla Costume and Kelly Museum



The construction of the extension has provided some interesting problems to be solved, notably the need to move the old Greta gaol from the centre of the building to a different room at the north end. The gaol, said to have housed Ned Kelly at one time, had been literally built in to the building during the first of the extensions in 1988. Weighing in at three tons, the three metre cubed gaol was lifted over the roof and back through the roof and all the supporting trusses to its final resting place.

Immediately after this the adjacent Broken River produced one of its occasional floods, inundating all the sub-walls and foundations for the building extension, but fortunately not threatening the main body of the museum.

Left: Dropping the old Greta gaol through the museum roof.

One consequence of the forced reduction of the gallery space is that the Society can no longer house the well-known “Stell Miniature House” which has been on display for twenty years. The miniature house, which purports to depict a 1950s “middle class” house and contains exquisite furniture, all to scale, has always been extremely popular with visitors. Despite this, the house (which has dimensions of approximately 3m x 2m x 2m height and requires some space all around for viewing) would occupy too much space – to the detriment of other items more relevant to Benalla. If any reader considers that this item could be housed in another suitable building, the Benalla Historical Society would be very happy to pass it on to new custodians.



The Stell Miniature House.

We look forward to completion of the council’s extension in early to mid- 2023 so that the newly refurbished and up-dated museum can once again be opened to the public.

## News from the Stanley Athenaeum

By Chris Dormer

### Vale Helen McIntyre

Helen McIntyre was a foundation member of the Friends of the Athenaeum when she bravely put her name on a list of interested community members on 2004, she then joined the Stanley Hall and Athenaeum Committee about 2012, and has been an active, enthusiastic and dedicated member of both these groups since that time.

Helen was prepared to try everything on offer as a member of the Friends cataloguing, exhibition development, research and even bookbinding. She was a passion supporter of the Mechanic Institutes of Victoria and AMaGA Murray Network and attended meetings, conferences and co-presented with Chris Dormer at the Mechanics' Institute Conference in Ballarat in 2018.

Her enduring legacy will be the groundbreaking book 'Hearts of Gold Minds of Mettle' a 6 year project involving far reaching research and writing uncovering the often 'invisible' lives of over one hundred nineteenth century women of Stanley. The book published in 2021 has been well received and reviewed and continues to sell well following its successful launch with Helen Haynes MLA for Indi and organised by Helen and the Friends in 2021.



Hearts of Gold Launch, March 2021

L-R Chris Dormer Jenny O'Connor (Mayor Indigo Shire Council), Valerie Privett, Helen Haines (MLA Indi), Robyn Harcourt, Helen McIntyre.

### Stanley Pubs, Ales and Tales

*Stanley Pubs, Ales and Tales* exhibition tells the stories of the first 150 years of hotels in the Stanley area. Informative illustrated story panels and locally found objects convey the community importance and essential role of hotels during the gold rush era. The story of hotels cover the history of Stanley and the vital role played by hotels in providing food and drinks as well as accommodation and entertainment. The exhibition highlights the significant contribution of women as publicans and the diversity of the community on the goldfields.

Venue: Post & Community Hub, Main Street, Stanley. Open to June 2023. Opening hours—contact: 0458 606 922 or 03 5728 6702.

### Research Enquiries

The Athenaeum gets many requests for research from both individuals and community groups, the research fee of \$30 per hour for the first hour and \$20 per hour thereafter.

Stanley Athenaeum and Public Room, 2 Mount Stanley Road, Stanley. Open every Friday & 4th Saturday each month from 10am to 12.30 pm or by appointment, Enquiries: Chris 0458 606 922 or email [stanleyathenaeum@gmail.com](mailto:stanleyathenaeum@gmail.com).

Website: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~mivic/stanley.html> Also on Facebook and Victorian Collections.

The Athenaeum also has a number of publications for sale—check out the full list in the last *Useful Knowledge*.

## The MIV Scanning Project: Lakes Entrance Mechanics' Institute

Judith Dwyer reports on some of the recently scanned records

The digitized records are added to the Archival Records of the Mechanics Institutes Resource Centre (MIRC) database. Lakes Entrance Mechanics' Institute have had their first Minutes from 1907 digitized.

The following history note was included with the records—

*1907 Trustees. By the 1<sup>st</sup> of November the Trustees were meeting and making final arrangements for the fitting out of the new public facility designed by Architect, Mr French. There were now five men of the district making up the Committee. President E.J. Wyld; Secretary Jas. J. Poynter; members – J. Coate, W.S. Barke, P. Harbeck.*

*Their first recorded meeting reads interestingly in today's light –*

*"That three dozen chairs be ordered, write to Tye & Co for price list. To J. Stone for price list for forms. Richmond Furnishing company for price list of chairs with wooden bottoms for a public hall. J. Moore & Sons for book of designs for forms. Lighting was by Gloria lighting. Secretary to see Mr Turns re price for tank for Generator with connections. Tap to come through the wall into reading room and also the sink. Write to Mr Newbury, Geelong West, re price for 16-gallon boiler with revolving stand and spare grates. Eight 7-foot forms were eventually purchased for 3/6 per foot and eight at 2/9 pence per foot.*



Other Lakes Entrance records chronicle the progress and improvement of the facilities provided by the Mechanics' Institute to the community.

In 1961 there was a major reconstruction of the original hall. In 1998 that hall was demolished to be replaced by a new Community Complex.

The Minutes from 1998-1999 record the extensive discussions and negotiations with council over the new multi-purpose facility.



Have the records of your Mechanics' Institute been digitized? Do you know where they are located? If you would like further information contact Judith Dwyer, the project co-ordinator, on [mirc@mivc.org.au](mailto:mirc@mivc.org.au)

## The Iona Mechanics' Institute

Written by Heather Arnold

The original of this article, with footnotes, can be read here

<https://kooweerupswamphistory.blogspot.com/2022/01/mechanics-institute-pioneers-hall-at.html>

The Mechanics' Institute, later called the Pioneers' Hall, at Iona was opened on April 26, 1895 by the Minister of Mines, Mr Foster, who was also in charge of the Village Settlements. He was accompanied by Mr Hancock, M.L.A., Mr Prendergast, M.L. A., Mr Crook, M.L.C., William Davidson, Inspector-General of Public Works and James Thomas, Chief Steward of Village Settlements. Iona (originally called Bunyip South) is a small town in West Gippsland and was one of the original Village Settlements on the newly drained Koo Wee Rup Swamp.

The community had been agitating for a Hall for a while and it was reported that it was at a meeting with Public Works Department Engineer, Carlo Catani, in June 1894 that *a motion was passed at the meeting that it was desirable to establish a Mechanics' Institute and Free Library on the settlement, the cost not to exceed £75, to be raised by monthly voluntary subscriptions. Mr Catani promised to recommend that the Government should supply the timber for the purpose, the cost of same to be refunded by monthly deductions from the wages of the men who are willing to support the project. Mr Catani also promised to give £1 1s., towards the funds, a statement which was received with cheers.*

The building was located on the north side of the Main Drain, just east of St Joseph's Catholic Church and Presbytery, which was on the corner of Fourteen Mile Road, on land owned by David Fitzpatrick. The Iona Mechanics' Institute is not listed in *These Walls Speak Volumes: a history of Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria* by Pam Baragwanath and Ken James. This is perhaps not surprising as it had the name change to Pioneers' Hall and even the local history book on the area does not refer to its origin as a Mechanics' Institute.

There were references in the newspapers to the building as a Mechanics' Institute until at least November 1917 and then for a few years it was called the Iona Hall. I believe the name Pioneers' Hall is associated with the Iona Pioneers Association which was formed at a meeting held October 11, 1919. The Association was for those who had worked on the drains and were there at the first land ballot. They were a group with a good sense of their place in history, as they had a group photo (below) taken outside the *old Hall, Iona*, at their first meeting.

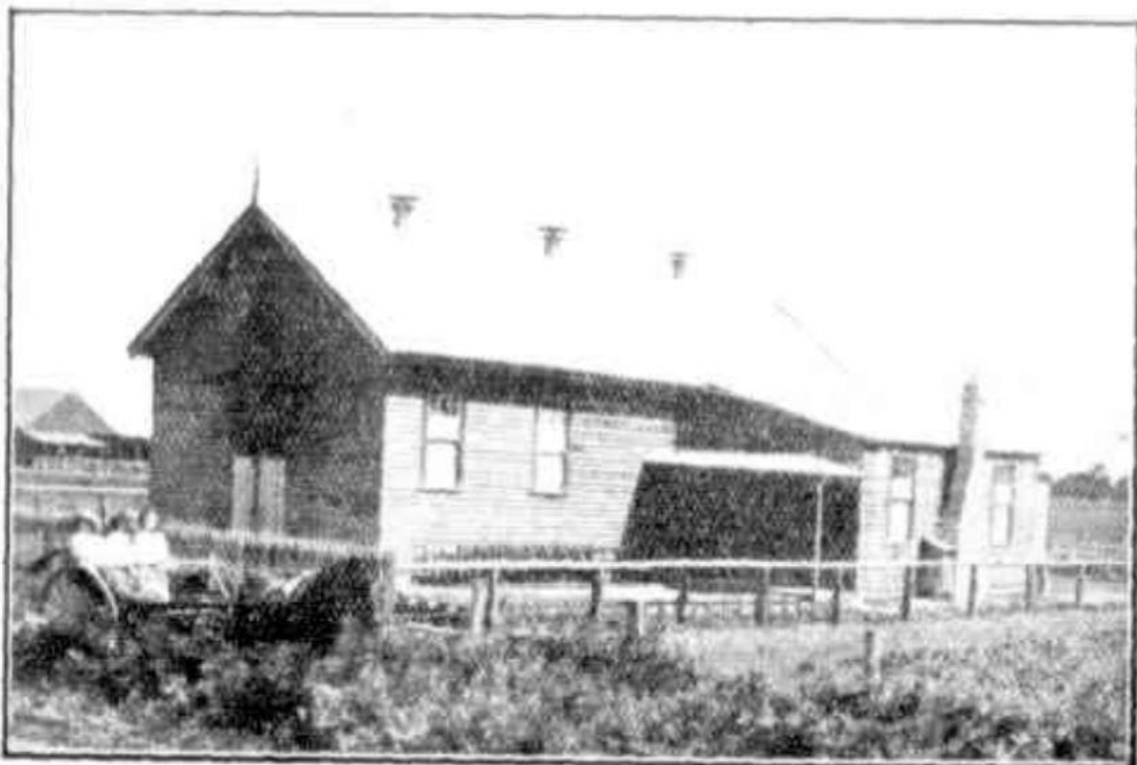


## The Iona Mechanics' Institute

The building was still called the Iona Hall as late as December 1921 and the first reference I can find of the use of the name Pioneers' Hall is in February 1922 when it was reported that a contract had been let to Mr J. Grummich for additions to the Pioneers' Hall - the amount of the tender was £410. *The Advocate* newspaper reported on the Hall on May 4, 1922 and talks about the role of the Iona Pioneer's Association in the refurbishment and extension of the Hall, and thus it would seem the Hall was renamed (either formally or informally) in honor of the work of the Association and the pioneers of the area.

This is *The Advocate's* report - *The Pioneers' Hall, which has been completely neglected for years past, has undergone a complete transformation and it is somewhat difficult now to identify the old building with the present imposing edifice. In the early days of the swamp the Government provided a very small piece of land for recreation purposes, and miserly assisted the pioneers in erecting some sort of a building for the purpose of holding meetings. The building until recently in evidence in one of the richest places in Victoria has sustained the storms for almost 30 years, and whilst other halls were erected in the adjacent townships, substantially assisted by Iona, their own hall was neglected. Some six months ago Mr. Peter Grummich, secretary of the Pioneers, convened a public meeting, at which five new trustees were appointed who also are guarantors. They succeeded in obtaining £500 from the London Bank, Garfield, and immediately prepared plans, etc., for additions and renovations. Mr. J Grummich was the successful tenderer, and the committee are highly gratified at the splendid work performed by the contractor. A new light will be installed during the week, and the hall will be opened about 11th inst. All the money has been spent, apart from work computed at £100 done by the local residents.*

What happened to the Hall? I did ask my Dad about the hall a few years ago. Dad, Frank Rouse, was born at Cora Lynn in 1933 and lived all his life there - Cora Lynn is three miles from Iona - and not only did he not remember it, in spite of the fact that his memory was very good at the time I asked, but he said words to the effect - why would I know anything about Iona! The last reference I can find to the Hall was in November 1935, so we know it was there then. It was possibly demolished in the 1940s, but that is only a guess.



The only photograph I can find of the Iona Hall was published in *The Advocate*, November 16, 1922.

## Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute: a short history

Source: <https://ballaratmi.org.au/about-us/>

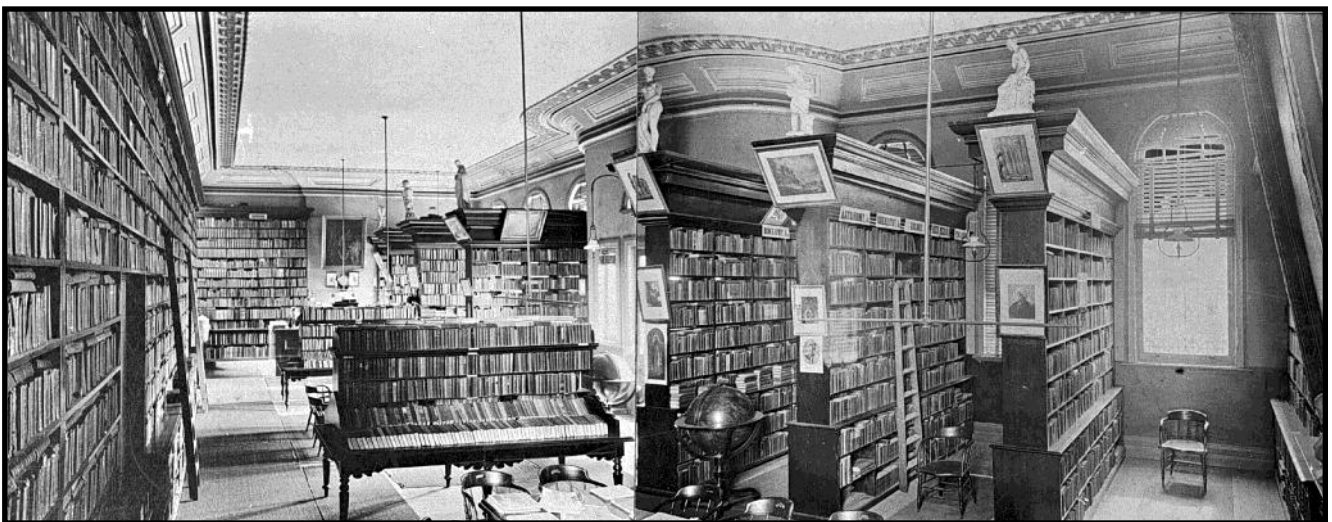
In 1856 an unsuccessful attempt was made to form an Industrial Institute in Ballarat.

By early 1859, following a public meeting, the Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute was established. Committee meetings and lectures were held in a little cottage in Main Road and thanks to the generosity of the Fire Brigade, a Reading Room was established on the first floor of the Ballarat East Fire Station in Barkly Street. According to Nathan Spielvogel, the reading room contained three tables, 18 chairs, a number of newspapers and 72 books on the shelves.

Through the efforts of Peter Lalor (then an MP ) a piece of land in Sturt Street was set aside as the site for the future Mechanics' Institute. Much argument ensued between the East and West Councils over the future location of a permanent Mechanics' Institute in Ballarat.

Finally on Friday, September 28, 1860 the foundation stone of the back section of the Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute was laid with full Masonic honours in front of a crowd, estimated by the *Ballarat Star*, as numbering 10,000.

This first part of the building consisted of a reading room, library, lecture room and two classrooms on the ground floor and a large hall on the first floor, capable of seating 1200 people. Charles Boykett was the architect. The cost of the building was reported to be around £3400 and the Committee of the day took some time to pay off the debt.



The Library at the Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute in 1909

Image: Museums Victoria <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/773641>

The lecture hall on the first floor was not finally completed until 1864. By 1868 the Institute was running out of space, so the Committee boldly decided to erect the existing, grand three-storey frontage to Sturt Street. The design of architect J.H. Jones, of Ballarat, was chosen in mid 1868 and the front section was completed in July 1869 at an approximate cost of £6000. Difficulties with the foundations, the architect and the contractors caused a substantial overrun in cost.

The Committee again went into debt to finance this construction with members taking out "a joint and several" to guarantee repayment of the debt.

The front section of the building comprised extensive basements, shops on the ground floor and a museum on the top floor. Unfortunately, a collapse in mining stocks in the early 1870s reduced the Institute's rental income from its new shops and offices, from around £1400 per year to a little over £200 per year. Through a series of economy measures, arts exhibitions, a grand art union and promenade concerts, the Committee finally managed to retire its debt in 1874.

In 1878, the Museum on the top floor was closed and its exhibits, which included Professor Abel's mineral collection, were handed over to the School of Mines. The top floor was then converted to a billiard room that opened on February 8, 1879. The room eventually housed four full-sized billiard tables.

## Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute: a short history

In 1935 the requirement for more library space and easier access to the library, saw the Institute purchase an old 1865 Mining Exchange located behind the Bones building on the west side of the Institute.

The old mining exchange was connected to the main building and the library re-opened in March 1936. The former library area on the second floor was leased for business purposes.

The billiard room closed in 1937 through lack of patronage. Three of the tables were sold and the fourth was "loaned" to the Air Force Camp in 1941, as a patriotic gesture. The top floor was later leased for business purposes.

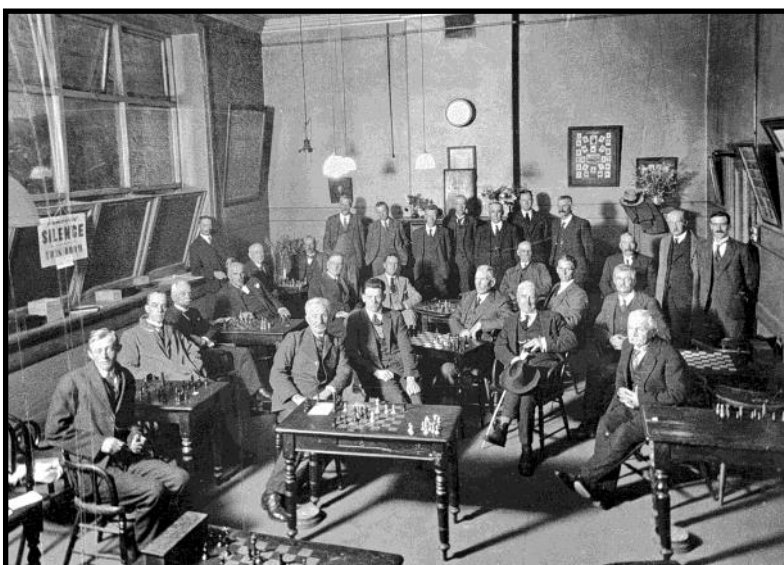
In 1909, the first bioscope pictures were shown in the main hall. Later, in 1917, the hall was leased to the Austral Photoplay Co. for showing silent pictures.

In 1919, a syndicate, including Messrs J. Clemens, C. Gemmola and F.S. Jelbart, opened the Britannia Picture Theatre. The Britannia was later followed by the Odeon and the Vegas 70 theatres.



The Library at the Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute in 1936  
Image: Museums Victoria <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/772547>

Originally there were over a 1000 Institutes in the State. Today, in Victoria there are fewer than ten Mechanics' Institutes still providing library and other services to their communities. The Ballaarat Institute is one of a select few that can claim to have continuously provided library services since its inception.



The Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute offers a full range of talks, seminars and tours of their historic building. All the details are on their website <https://ballaratmi.org.au/>

Left: A chess match between Ballarat and Geelong Chess Clubs at the Ballaarat Mechanics' Institute, April 23, 1925.

Image: Museums Victoria  
<https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/773640>

## Bullumwaal Mechanics Hall Stage Curtain

Written by Nadine Fleischer

<https://www.deeca.vic.gov.au/boards-and-governance/committees-of-management/bullumwaal-mechanics-hall-stage-curtain>

During the past fifteen years or more, the Bullumwaal Mechanics Hall committee has been applying for grants to conserve the stage curtain located in the hall since 1897, without success. The stage curtain had been slowly deteriorating but in the last twenty years or so fading had significantly increased, and signs of wear and tear had become more obvious, threatening the integrity of this unique stage curtain. The stage curtain is still in its original place setting and is one of the only examples left in Victoria and was created during Bullumwaal's hey-day in the 1890s.

Following the discovery of gold in the creeks and rivers in the area during the 1850s, the Boggy Creek was extensively prospected and alluvial mining stripped any easily sought-after gold. By the late 1880s and into the 1890s the community was flourishing, with the establishment of substantial quartz mines and several quartz processing batteries operating in and near the township.

With the increased population, social activities were an important part of the community and included cricket and football clubs, sports and picnic days, as well as music and drama clubs. Social dances and fundraising were popular activities, and it is believed that the curtain was created to support just such an event. The curtain was created in 1897, the same year that the township changed its name from Boggy Creek to Bullumwaal, and may well have been linked to this event, as a "Monster Bizarre" and the fund-raising event was documented in the local papers of the time.



Local businesses from Bairnsdale and Bullumwaal appear on the stage curtain and include:

Anderson & Pritchard Butchers  
L. Emery, Drapery

F. Raymond, Bootmaker

J. R. Bishop, Baker

H. Payne of the Main Hotel  
Bairnsdale

Clements Bros, General  
Storekeepers

W. Minter, Blacksmith.

The artist's signature on the curtain is F. Winters. These names were revealed during the conservation.

Image: Tracey West

The Hall Committee 2013, commissioned a significance assessment with the assistance of Sabine Cotte, Paintings conservator, which comprehensively documented the condition and outlined a proposal to conserve the curtain. This significance assessment was used to support the many grant applications submitted.

Then in 2020, the Hall committee joined forces with the East Gippsland Historical Society (EGHS), continuing to apply for grants but still without success. Members of the Historical Society were able to connect with Heritage Victoria – Bushfire Recovery when they spoke at an event hosted by Heritage Network East Gippsland in early 2021, and an invitation was extended to Heritage Victoria to come and view the curtain and seek advice on how the Hall Committee and EGHS could move forward on seeking a grant to conserve the curtain.

## Bullumwaal Mechanics Hall Stage Curtain

### Conservation begins

On 29 April 2021, a visit was arranged to the Bullumwaal Mechanics Hall. Helen Kiddell, Senior Heritage Officer (Bushfire Recovery), Jenny Dickens, Heritage Officer (Materials Conservation) and Jo Lyngcoln, Manager Bushfire Recovery (Heritage) from Heritage Victoria attended, as well as DELWP representative Tracey West. Bullumwaal Hall Committee members, Helen Martin, a local historian and former Heritage Victoria member, as well as representatives of EGHS, provided historical information and a tour of the local area.

The visit was well received and generated many conversations, the result being that in August 2021 the Hall Committee received a grant of \$20,000 from DELWP, under the Bushfire recovery program. The Hall Committee was able to engage Paintings Conservator Sabine Cotte and her assistant, Sherryn Vardy, PMAICCM Conservator, Gippsland Heritage Conservation, and arrangements were made to undertake the curtain conservation in March 2022.

The stage curtain conservation has been very successful, bringing to light some hidden treasures, including the revealing of the date the curtain was created - 1897. Members of the Bullumwaal community, Hall committee and EGHS assisted with volunteer labour and equipment to help achieve the project, which was completed in two weeks.

The Bullumwaal Hall Committee would like to extend thanks to DELWP Bushfire Recovery for the grant, Heritage Victoria, and East Gippsland Historical Society for their support. Special thanks to Nadine, Kevin and Di Fleischer, Phil Large, Peter Van Diesen and Jacque Hocking for their time and efforts.

You are invited to see the newly restored Stage Curtain at the Bullumwaal Hall on Saturday March 4, 2023 from 10.00 am., with the Conservators presentation at 11.00 am.



**Bullumwaal Hall Open Day**  
**Saturday 04 March 2023**  
**10.00am to 2.00pm**

Come and see the recently conserved  
**Bullumwaal Hall Stage Curtain**

- Conservators presentation 11.00am
- Local History and mining displays
- Tea, coffee and light refreshments available

**Sausage Sizzle**

## A survey of Public Libraries in Victorian Country towns in 1944

In 1944 Melbourne University Press published a book by Alan J. & Jean J. McIntyre *Country Towns of Victoria: a Social Survey*. The authors undertook a survey of the amenities in towns with a population of between 250 and 10,000 people. The number of towns surveyed was 180. The amenities included water supply, industry, railways, Schools, Churches, Health and Libraries.

What follows is the section on Public Libraries from the book. Most of the Libraries surveyed were those in Mechanics' Institutes.

Public Libraries. One hundred and fourteen towns have a public library, that is, a library not run for private profit. These, whatever their name – 'Free Library,' 'Mechanics', 'Athenaeum', 'Public Library' – are run by a publicly appointed committee or trust. They are financed by shire and government grants and by the subscriptions of members, for although they may be called 'free' or 'public' this means nothing more than that they have a free newspaper reading room. The grants are usually very small, ranging (combined) from £6 to £30 per annum. About three or four libraries are also endowed. Subscriptions range from 10s. to 25s. per annum; in a few towns the subscription rates are lower for country members, who are unable to use the library as frequently as town members. Some libraries have also started the 3d. a book system, as well as having subscribers, in an effort to compete with the private libraries.

Most of the public libraries were started early in the life of the town, and many are still housed in their original building. They have, too, legacies of books from that time which are similar enough throughout most libraries to allow a general description. The basis of these usually consists of one or more dictionaries and an encyclopaedia, and in most libraries nothing newer of this sort has been added; next are books, other than novels, thought at that time to be important, and many of which still are – Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*; Darwin, *The Origin of the Species*; Froude, *History of England*; Buckle, *History of Civilisation*, once even Karl Marx's *Capital*; again, not many libraries have added to this section, partly because the publication of books has increased so enormously and they have no-one qualified to decide what is worth buying, partly because 'no-one reads that sort of stuff anyway.'

The founders of these libraries then added what is often labelled 'Standard Literature' – the works of Shakespeare, the works of Tennyson, Carlyle's *Critical Essays*, all Dickens, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Pride and Prejudice*; next to these stand 'Works from other Countries', by Balzac, Goethe, Rousseau, Tolstoy. And after that they happily let themselves go with Marie Corelli, Hall Caine, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, sometimes Edgar Allan Poe.

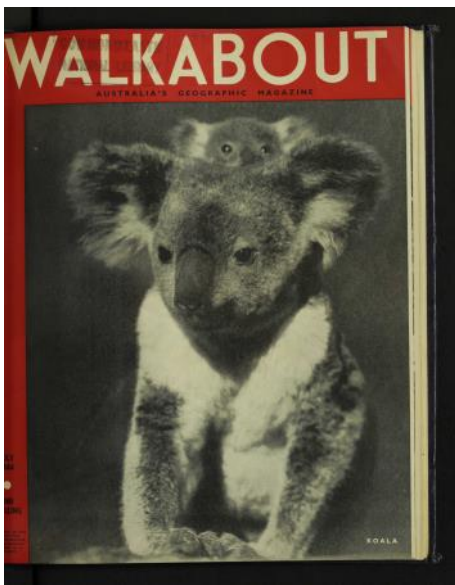
Libraries have dealt variously with their legacies. Some have them properly classified, labelled and looked after; some have simply bundled 'those old books' away in the gloomiest corner, and the dust has not been removed from them for years.

The books that have been added, say, since 1918, vary greatly from one library to another, though they are alike in that they are mainly novels. In the declining libraries (which are usually, though not always, in the small declining towns), there are perhaps the first works of H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, and the *Forsyte Saga* but these are swamped by the detective, the wild west, and the 'light love' stories, which 'you can be sure that people like'; these are often bought secondhand, for new books are too expensive. In the better libraries also there is usually a large percentage of 'detective, wild west and light love', but in addition a fair number which could not be so classed, by writers such as Charles Morgan, Eric Linklater, Willa Cather, Stella Benson, Ernest Hemingway, G.K. Chesterton, and so on.

In a great many there are almost no books by Australian writers; in others we are told that 'Australian writers are very popular,' and Ion Idriess was often mentioned as the type of Australian writer. In these better libraries (which comprised about one-third of the total) there are usually a number of travel books, biographies, collections of letters, and journalist-political books e.g., Stefan Zweig's *Marie Antionette*, Gunther's *Inside Europe*, and books by Quentin Reynolds. In some libraries these are all put together on a special shelf, and labelled 'Heavy.' Some of these libraries also get parcels of books monthly or quarterly from the Melbourne Public Library. These are usually historical, economical and political. Many also, like most of the private libraries, have a monthly exchange system with a large Melbourne private library. The total number of books ranges from two to twenty thousand, the average being about eight to ten thousand.

## A survey of Public Libraries in Victorian Country towns in 1944

The declining libraries get only one or two magazines, e.g., *Pix*, *Walkabout*, the *Bulletin*, and in their free reading rooms they put out only the Melbourne and local daily papers, and perhaps such inappropriate publications as the *Financial Gazette* and the *Recha-bite*. Some of the free reading rooms of the more prosperous libraries are also very meagrely supplied with reading matter, and are sometimes very uncomfortable, with no seating accommodation, but others are more comfortable and much more generously supplied, with all the larger country town newspapers, and a fair range of periodicals. Some libraries, e.g., that at Kyneton, put out all periodicals which are one issue old.



These better libraries get a large number of periodicals, including many from overseas; they include several of the popular information type, e.g., the *National Geographic*; political papers from overseas are usually all of the one type, i.e., conservative. Parliamentary debates, C.S.I.R. journals, and similar official and technical papers are sent to many libraries; in the declining and neglected ones they are simply stacked away in corners, unread; in the better ones, though still largely unread, they are kept in an orderly fashion.

Seventeen libraries have less than twenty-five subscribers, and some of these have as few as eight or ten; the most flourishing ones have four or five hundred. The numbers of subscribers, and the vitality of the library, depends to a certain extent on the size of the town, but to a much greater extent on the community's attitude towards the library. This is mainly expressed in the choice of a librarian, and the decision as to what hours the library shall be open.

Some libraries which are open only a few hours a week have not so much a librarian as a caretaker, possibly an old-age pensioner who is paid very little. The excuse often made for this is that the library has so few subscribers that it does not warrant greater expenditure, but when we asked further questions we often found that the institution of a caretaker rather than a librarian had been the beginning of its decline; in one town, when the library had ceased to exist altogether as a public affair, an interested and energetic person took it over as a private concern, and it is now flourishing.

The effect which a librarian can have on the fortunes of a library is exemplified at Kyneton, where the membership was nearly doubled within the few months of the appointment of a keen and energetic librarian. Special measures, such as the circularising of all newcomers to the town, were taken in that case; but usually the efficacy of a librarian consists in a certain knowledge of the books, a certain aptitude in picking out what different people like, and so saving them the trouble, and also in the capacity to make the library comfortable and attractive-looking. Many of those with interested, full-time librarians were club-like in atmosphere, with a good fire in the winter, flowers on the librarian's desk, books all spick and span, and comfortable chairs, e.g. Kyneton, Castlemaine, Beaufort. We often found these libraries good places to catch those whom we wished to interview, and on market days they were usually crowded, not only with people coming in to get books and going again, but with those who had come in to 'wait for Mrs. Smith,' to 'have a bit of a rest,' to 'have a chat and get warm.'



Kyneton Mechanics' Institute, September 1965  
 Photographer: John T. Collins.  
 State Library of Victoria Image

### A survey of Public Libraries in Victorian Country towns in 1944

Two towns have a Children's Library attached to the adult public library. They are Kyneton and Mildura. That at Kyneton was started and built up by the initiative of the librarian, and now has 180 members; it also lends out parcels of books to the district schools. The Mildura Children's Library is older and has 800 members. Both are free. A few other libraries have Children's Sections, but on the whole there is a great dearth of good and easily available children's and adolescents' books in country towns. Many school teachers complained of this, for even when the schools have libraries these are usually quite inadequate.

Many of the librarians have the responsibility of buying the new books, though in some towns their lists are checked by the committee. Most of them, however, have had no training (they are poorly paid, and are usually local middle-aged women with an interest in books, and some other income) and rely for their choice in the reviews in newspapers and popular magazines, on their knowledge of what subscribers like, and on their own likes and dislikes. Knowledge of what subscribers like may be thought to be the best guide, but subscribers cannot cultivate a taste for what they do not get, and a hint that some at least would like to try something different was given by the librarian who said: 'It's the High School girls it's hardest to please. They ask for these modern poems and plays and things that no-one else would ever read.'

Table 20 from *Country Towns of Victoria: a Social Survey* by Alan J. & Jean J. McIntyre (MUP, 1944)

NO. OF TOWNS WITH PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND NUMBER OF SUBSCRIBERS				
Number of subscribers	No. of towns with population of			Total
	250-999	1000-2499	2500-10,000	
No library .. . . .	45	15	6	66
No. unknown .. . . .	24	4	2	30
1-50 .. . . .	29	6	1	36
51-100 .. . . .	11	13	3	27
101-200 .. . . .	—	5	11	16
200+ .. . . .	—	—	5	5

#### Cards and Billiards at the Shepparton Mechanics' Institute.

See story next page regarding MI's and billiards and card playing.

*Shepparton Advertiser* July 7, 1941 and February 3, 1943

A heated discussion took place between members regarding the motion passed at the previous meeting concerning the charge of 3d. per head that was being made for the use of the card tables.

#### NOW ELECTIONS ARE OVER

Settle down to Good Reading by  
Joining the

**MECHANICS' INSTITUTE  
LIBRARY**

Subscription 7/6.  
Billiard Room Sub., 2/6 year

## A survey of Mechanics' Institutes in Victorian Country towns in 1944

As well as surveying Public Libraries Alan J. & Jean J. McIntyre in their book *Country Towns of Victoria: a Social Survey*, also looked at Organisations in the towns such as Social Clubs, the Victorian Railways Institute and the Victorian Housewives' Association. Also included in this chapter was Mechanics' Institutes. This is their report.

Mechanics' Institutes are open to both sexes but we have not considered them here unless, in addition to library, hall and meeting room, they have facilities for cards or billiards; these facilities are, as far as we know, only used by men. As we pointed out above, members of the R.S.S. and A.I.L.A. branch are honorary members of the Mechanics' Institutes in many towns, or the Institute shares facilities with the branch.

The vitality of Mechanics' Institutes varies from town to town. In some towns only a few of the older men meet weekly or bi-weekly for a game of whist or crib in the card room; in others the card and billiard rooms are a nightly gathering place, at which most of the men of the town (except those of the lowest income group, and even those in the smaller towns) drop in once or twice a week; the billiard table draws the young men, and, especially in towns where there is no other billiard table, this makes it a real mixing place of ages and income groups. However, the number of Mechanics' Institutes which act as clubs of this sort is comparatively small.

In a few towns, though, the Mechanics' Institute as such has ceased to exist, its card rooms are used by a Men's Club, a small number of men who meet two or three times a week for a game; four of these clubs in one district have united into an Association, and visit each other fortnightly through the winter, running a competition among themselves. 'It's nice to see a few different faces, especially in the winter.' the secretary of one of these said to us. Though these clubs are in small townships, no farmers belong to them.

**Table 24 from *Country Towns of Victoria: a Social Survey* by Alan J. & Jean J. McIntyre (MUP, 1944)**

MEN'S ORGANISATIONS IN THE 180 TOWNS		
Type of Men's Organisation	Number of towns with population of	
	250-999	1000-10,000
Number of Friendly Societies:		
None . . . . .	20	—
1 . . . . .	46	—
2 . . . . .	25	4
3 . . . . .	17	14
4 . . . . .	1	21
5 . . . . .	—	16
6 . . . . .	—	5
7 . . . . .	—	3
8 . . . . .	—	6
9 . . . . .	—	1
10 . . . . .	—	1
Masons . . . . .	70	58
Returned Soldiers' Ass. Branch (R.S.S.A.I.L.A.) . . . . .	79	70
Victorian Railways Institute . . . . .	1	14
Fire Brigade—Bush . . . . .	56	15
Country . . . . .	61	71
Mechanics' Institute Clubs . . . . .	11	23
Service Clubs (one or more) . . . . .	3	18
Pastoral and Agricultural Society . . . . .	39	44
Men's Church (one or more) . . . . .	14	33

## St Peters Institute 1893 – 1982: South Australia

Written by and images supplied by Joelle Hancock

St Peters is an inner eastern suburb of Adelaide that was first settled in 1838, just two years after the proclamation of South Australia. The township was treated as a town separate from Adelaide when allotments were sold to investors in the South Australian Company, the commercial company that settled SA under conditions enacted by the British Government.

Four institutes were formed in the inner eastern area within three years of the 1856 Act of Parliament that established the South Australian Institute whose task it was to foster and support institutes around the state. Those four inner-east institutes opened in Glen Osmond, in 1854, Norwood and Stepney in 1855, East Torrens in 1856, and Magill in 1857. (But not one in St Peters!) These suburbs had many of Adelaide's early cultural and political leaders and their institutes soon provided libraries, reading-rooms, lectures, entertainment and classes.

Perhaps because of those other institutes and St Peters' proximity to the SA Institute in the city, the St Peters Institute was founded much later – in 1893. By that year the St Peters Council was well established and was one of the few local councils that was able to give its new institute support in its palatial Town Hall on Payneham Road – that had a hall, council chambers and ten offices.

The Institute was declared open in June of 1893 by the Minister of Education. The Council provided a room upstairs in its Town Hall for its library. Three years later the library was moved downstairs to a larger room, when the Institute had 76 subscribers. Between 40 and 200 people attended lectures at the Institute before 1900 on topics such as Pompei and Rome, Effective voting, Federation, American humor, Australian poets, and Habits.



St Peters Town Hall, 1887. This was the original location of the Institute.

State Library of South Australia Image B 16567/30

The St Peters Institute had 150 members and over 2,000 books by July 1900 when up to 30 people were visiting the library on Saturdays between 7 and 10pm – the only time it was open. That year the Institute established a Literary Society and also a Model Parliament, and in 1903 a chess club was formed.

The number of subscribers, of books and the times of opening kept increasing. The reading-room was open four evenings a week by 1906, when the number of subscribers had increased to 210. More space was needed for the library and the reading-room.



In 1916 with financial support from the Council and also the State Government, the Institute moved into St Peters' former Post Office, next to the Town Hall. The building and its renovations cost over £1,300.

Left: St Peters Post Office, c. 1900.  
State Library of South Australia  
Image B 22767

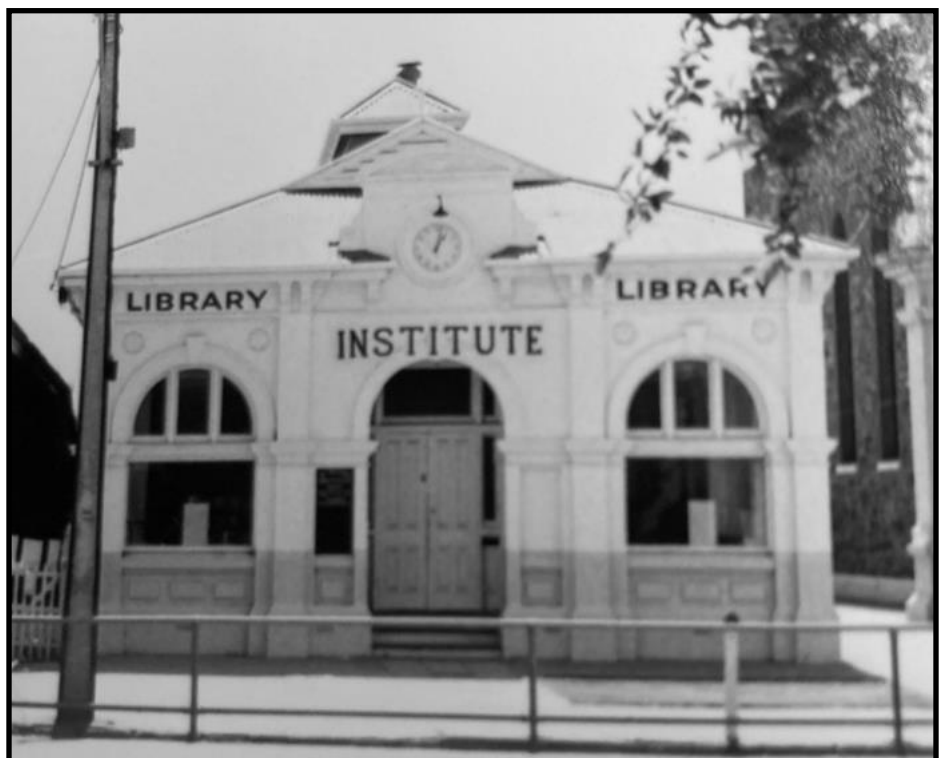
By 1927 the Institute had 451 subscribers, about 11,000 books and a liberal supply of popular magazines. The Council's annual grants were £50, while the Institute gave free subscriptions each year to eight students from the district.

Despite regular Council support through the 1950s and '60s, the library and reading-room struggled to compete with other sources of books and entertainment in the community. To keep it functioning, the Council contributed \$1,000 to the Institute in 1981.

When the State Government was supporting local councils in providing their communities with free libraries in the 1970s and 1980s, the St Peters Council stepped in. The library moved back into the Town Hall complex (where it is today) and the Institute was dissolved.

As well as the St Peters Library, the St Peters Town Hall building now houses a Heritage Centre that provides access to community, family and council archives. It also has an exhibition gallery.

Right: St Peters Institute Library in 1975.  
State Records of S.A Image.



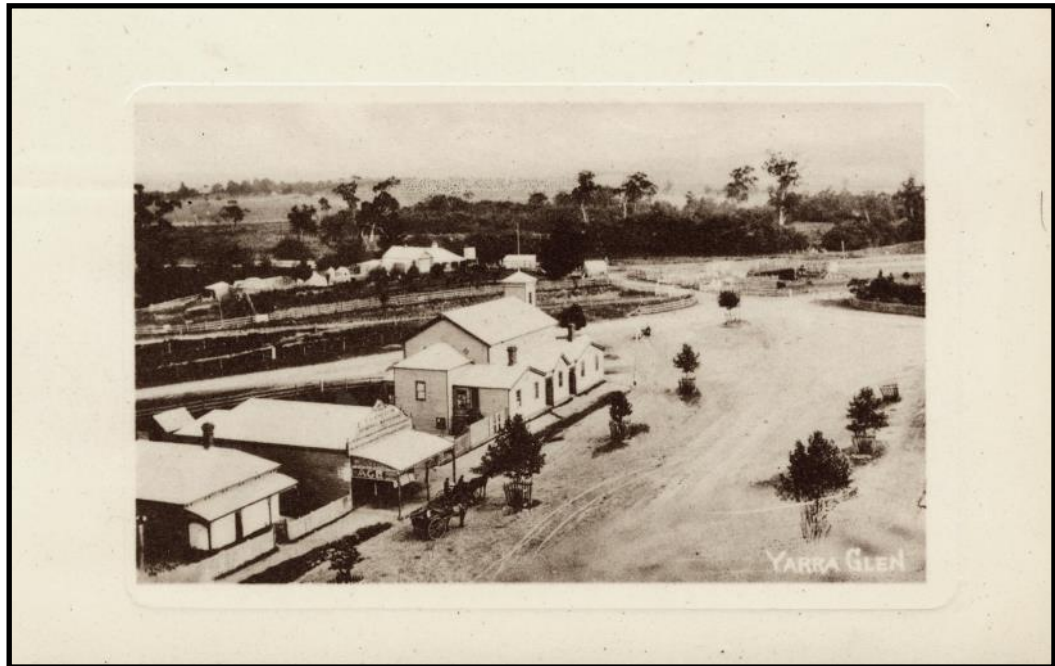
For more about the St Peters Institute and the other 351 institutes in SA, visit <https://institutessa.com/>

## Victoria Hall, Yarra Glen

By Heather Arnold

Read the original of this article, with footnotes, here <https://victoriaspast.blogspot.com/2023/02/victoria-hall-yarra-glen.html>

I came across this photograph, below, of Yarra Glen and wondered what the building on the right was and discovered that it was the Victoria Hall. This article looks at the history of the Victoria Hall (later referred to as the Mechanics' Hall) and the two other Yarra Glen Halls - the Recreation Hall and the Memorial Hall.



Yarra Glen, c. 1911, showing Victoria Hall  
State Library of Victoria Image H96.200/740

The Hall has an interesting history as related by the journalist, The Vagabond. John Stanley James (1843-1896) arrived in Melbourne in 1876 after a mixed career in England and America and he started writing for *The Argus*, under the name of The Vagabond. He visited Lilydale and Yarra Glen towards the end of 1893 and his observations were published in *The Leader* in December 1893 and January 1894. This is what The Vagabond wrote about Victoria Hall -

*Opposite the railway station is the most prominent public building in Yarra Glen. The Victoria Hall is architecturally a feature of the place. Built on a point of land at a junction of four roads, it could not be on a better site. It is as good a building of its kind as there is outside of Melbourne, containing stage, scenery and sitting accommodation for 400 persons. Balls and "socials" at the Victoria Hall are always crowded..... This Victoria Hall, it may be mentioned, has a history. Ten years ago a cheese factory was erected near the banks of the river, and an American manager was imported to make cheese and dividends for the shareholders. He failed to do the latter. The benefits to be derived from creameries were not understood by farmers in those days. In these times a butter and cheese factory at Yarra Glen would perhaps pay. This American was one of the most obnoxious Yankees I ever met. Outside dairy management he was very ignorant. To this day they tell with glee of his nailing wire netting on all the windows of the two-story factory to keep out the snakes which he believed crawled up the sides of houses. This would do good, however, in keeping out the flies. Like all ignorant Americans, this Yankee was perpetually blowing about the country of his birth. Once only did he say a good word for Australia. A snow storm came down from the hills on to Yarra Glen. The Yank took off his hat and stood in the centre of the road. "Great Scott!" he shouted, "this is the only thing I've met in this all-fired desolate land which reminds me of God's own country, America!" He was not regretted when he left the district. The factory stood empty for years, till someone persuaded Mr. Robert Kilpatrick to buy it and remove it to a central site for a public hall. It cost him an additional £500 to build the Victoria Hall as it is, and there is no chance for years of obtaining a return for the outlay. But Mr. Robert Kilpatrick is a local patriot. "If it doesn't benefit me it will benefit the district," says he. The chairman of the New Mariner can afford this.*

Robert Kilpatrick (1839-1903), of Lilydale, was involved with both the New Mariner Gold Mining Company Steiglitz, which was registered in February 1891; and the New Mariner No. 1 Quartz Mining Company, which was registered in July 1893.

The Vagabond's report of January 1894 is the first reference I can find to it being called the Victoria Hall. When it was opened on June 30, 1893 it was referred to as the New Hall. The *Evelyn Observer*, of July 7, had this report of the opening -

*The new hall built by Dr. Wm. Kilpatrick at Yarra Glen was opened last Friday evening, when the Yarra Glen Amateur Dramatic Club staged the play, "Our Days" and the comedietta "Hook and Eye." There was a large audience present, and the amateur theatricals acquitted themselves creditably and were warmly applauded.*

It is interesting that they credit Dr William Kilpatrick with the building of the hall. The Vagabond had referred to the musical skills and dedication of Doctor Kilpatrick in his report -

*Yarra Glen rivals Lilydale [sic] in musical and histrionic talent. The "leading lady" of the district is Miss Murphy, who is the school mistress at Dixon's Creek. I have been often fairly startled at Miss Murphy's powers. As an amateur she is in the front rank, and delights the audiences to whom she plays throughout the year on behalf of local charities. In comedy and tableaux Dr. Kilpatrick is Miss Murphy's great support. It is nothing for the doctor to spend a day in the saddle around the district, play at Yarra Glen for some "benefit," visit a few more patients, and then drive back to Lilydale, arriving there in the middle of the night, to be up fresh as paint in the morning.*

Doctor Kilpatrick was the only child of Robert Kilpatrick, so whether it was Robert or William who donated the Hall to the community, they were the same family.



Victoria Hall, Yarra Glen.

State Library of Victoria Image from the *Illustrated Australian News* of February 1, 1894

An early function held at this new hall was reported in *Lilydale Express* in September 1893 -

*The debate, "Woman's Position," by Mrs Andrade, in spite of most unfavorable weather, drew a good audience to the new hall, Yarra Glen, on the evening of the 8th September. The bill of fare presented, although it offered nothing new in the way of grievances or remedies was well thought out and delivered. American statistics were brought forward to show the number of positions and the variety of duties fulfilled by women in the United States making them as useful and self-supporting as men. After Mrs Andrade's presentation the debate was taken up by four men - the Reverend Darroch who considered that in women, sense is second to sentiment; Mr Fleming who would give women the vote but did not want to see them in Parliament; Mr Maxwell who thought women should chose her own sphere and not be tied down by any male restriction and the last speaker Dr Kilpatrick who had been at school and college with girls, and found them equal, if not superior, to the male scholars. Why should not all careers be opened to them?*

The Victoria Hall was used for the usual functions in a small town - meetings, performances, balls and fundraisers for community efforts such as repairs to the Anglican Church building. During the First World War the Hall hosted Red Cross meetings, farewells to local soldiers and the 'welcome home' to the returned soldiers.

In September 1898, a Library was opened at the Hall. The *Evelyn Observer* noted -

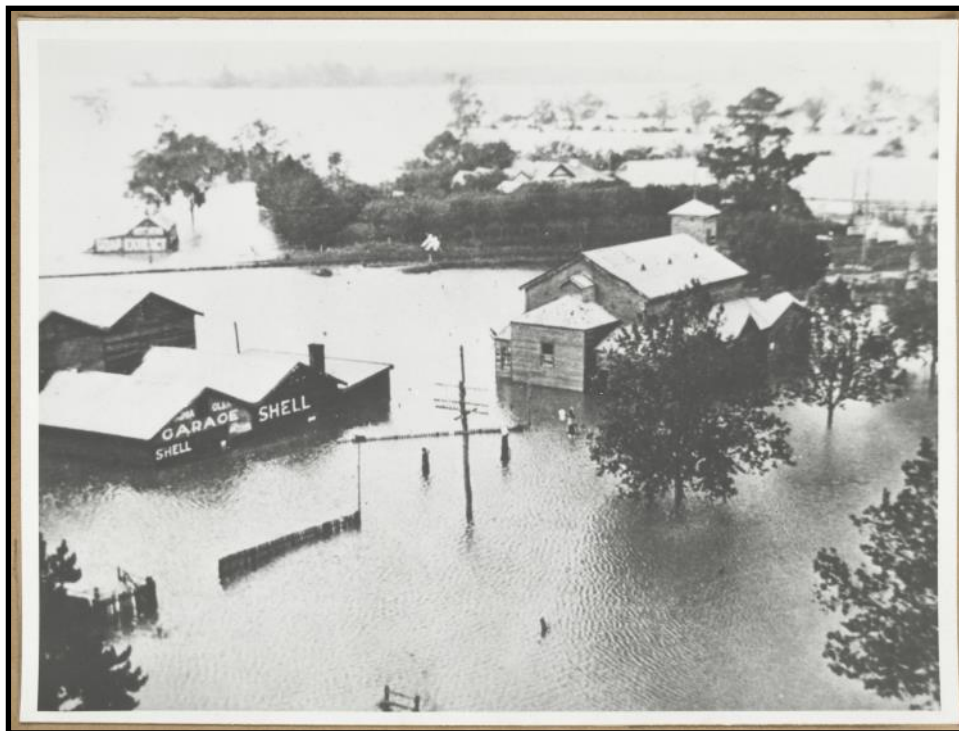
*The Yarra Glen Public Library is now open, and considerable interest is being taken in it. On Friday evening last, in the Victoria Hall, Mr. Paul, barrister, of Melbourne, gave a lecture in aid of the funds. The subject of the address was "Ourselves as others see us." The Library was still in operation in December 1905, but it closed at some unknown time and when, in 1929, there was agitation in the town for a new public library it was reported that there is a Probability of a public library being established in the town. Years ago there was one in existence, but it became a thing of the past.*

### Victoria Hall, Yarra Glen, continued

On October 8, 1921, the Soldiers Memorial was unveiled in front of the Victoria Hall, on the corner formed by the Lilydale Road and the Railway. The *Eltham and Whittlesea Shires Advertiser* reported - *The monument consists of a granite column, with abroad pedestal on a foundation of concrete, the whole surrounded and protected by a chain set in granite posts. On one face of the monument is the inscription: "This monument is erected by the citizens of Yarra Glen and District, under the auspices of the Welcome Home League, to perpetuate the memory of the men who gave their lives in the Great War, 1914-1919." And below on the pedestal, "This Monument was unveiled 8th October, 1921."*

The following names were listed on two sides of the memorial - J. Armstrong, J. Bell, H. Conway, C. Dinsdale, E. Farnsworth, C. Gedye, W. Holding, E. Hubbard, G. Hubbard, A. Hunt, J. Irvine, S. Jell, A. M'Leod, L. M'Leod, H. Marshall, S. Mills, J. Pickering, D. Shillito, S. Smedley, R. Waigh and J. Wilson.

What happened to the Victoria Hall? The last reference in the newspapers which I can find to Victoria Hall is in November 1924. However, from 1919 until 1929 there are references to the Mechanics' Hall at Yarra Glen and I believe they are the same building. This is confirmed by the fact that the building is also listed as a Mechanics' Institute in the comprehensive survey of Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria, *These Walls Speak Volumes* by Pam Baragwanath and Ken James. The building was still there in December 1934, as it is photographed in the flood photograph, below. *These Walls Speak Volumes* notes that *It is thought locally that Victoria Hall was demolished some time before the end of World War Two.*



Yarra Glen, December 1934 flood.  
State Rivers and Water Supply Commission photographer.  
State Library of Victoria Image RWP/32883

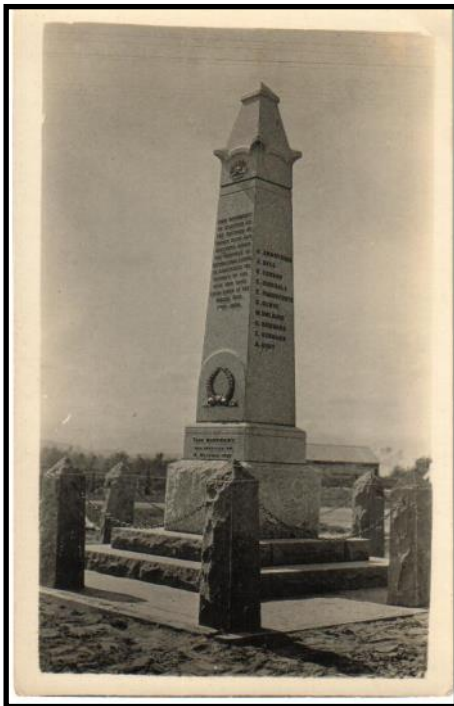
The Victoria Hall was not the first Hall in Yarra Glen; as mentioned previously when it was opened in June 1893, it was referred to as the New Hall. The original Hall was also donated by local business men, as the *Evelyn Observer* notes in the report from July 1886 - *We hear on good authority that Messrs. Munday and Warren, auctioneers, are making arrangements for building a spacious hall on their land at Yarra Flats, to enable the residents of that district to have some commodious building to hold their public meetings, and allow the young to enjoy "the light fantastic"; also, in case of wet weather Messrs M. and W. will use the hall for their land or property sales. We believe a stage is included in the specification, so we may expect to see some "stars" on the boards during the oncoming busy times promised for the Yarra Flats and its neighborhood. We wish them success.*

Tenders for the building were called in the August and the building was opened by December 1886.

I can find references to this Hall, known as the Recreation Hall, until 1911, but I have no information as to its fate. As you can see from the report on the previous page, Yarra Glen was originally known as Yarra Flats, however when the railway line reached the town in May 1888, the local station was called Yarra Glen and the School and the Post Office adopted the new name in 1889.

There was also another Hall in Yarra Glen - the Memorial Hall. It was opened in December 1920 and the *Eltham and Whittlesea Shires Advertiser* reported on the event - *Last Saturday, the 11th inst., the Soldiers' Club rooms at Yarra Glen were formally opened by Mr W. H. Everard, M.L.A. There was a fine gathering of district residents, together with many friends from a distance. Mr P. F. Downer presided and introduced the member of the district, who, in a happy speech, declared the building formally opened, and referred eloquently to the generosity which had built and equipped the rooms. The ground, a well-placed corner block, was given by the Herbert family, the money for the building being raised by donations and numerous efforts from the folk of the township and district, and the furniture, which includes a fine billiard table, was a gift from Mrs Woolcott and members of her family.*

*Speeches were also given by Cr Bath, Chairman of the Welcome Home League, the other two councillors of the Riding, Crs Smedley and Hubbard, and by Mr Maroney as representative of the R.S.S.I.L. During the afternoon a medal from the Welcome Home League was given to Private G. Muir, of Christmas Hills. Tea and cakes, provided by the ladies, were handed round, and then the assembled company inspected the rooms and watched the "Diggers" trying the billiard table. In the evening the Victoria Hall was packed to listen to a fine concert programme provided by the Ringwood Diggers.*



Six years later in December 1925 a dance hall was added to the Memorial Hall. In the January 1939 Black Friday bush fires the Hall was nearly destroyed -

*...word came from Yarra Glen that the town was in danger, and most of the fighters from the road area went on, to discover that the Memorial Hall was in imminent peril of being demolished. Outbuildings were alight then, and it appeared to be just a matter of time before the hall itself would catch. Their commendable activity was responsible for a splendid save, as they prevented the flames reaching the main building.*

Left: Yarra Glen War Memorial in its original location outside the Victoria Hall. Image—<https://www.yarraglen.com/RSL/YG-memorial.htm>

However, sadly, on February 16, 1952 the Hall did not escape destruction by fire. The *Lilydale Express* reported on the tragedy - *Destruction of Yarra Glen's Memorial Hall by fire early last Saturday morning is one of the most tragic incidents in the district's history. The Hall, an invaluable asset and of one of most modern in Eltham and neighbouring Shires, was razed to the ground by fire, which began mysteriously. The fire was first noticed at at 5 a.m. by neighboring residents, who quickly raised the alarm.....by 6.20 the hall had been reduced to smouldering ashes.*

A new Memorial building was opened in May 1955. The War Memorial was relocated to the front of this Hall in 1998.

## News from the Melbourne Athenaeum



We have been fortunate enough to be one of 57 organisations to receive a 2022 Community Heritage Grant from the National Library of Australia. Our \$5,500 grant is being used to carry out an archive preservation and significance survey.

Thanks to Heritage Victoria's support, we are currently undertaking works to upgrade the Athenaeum's roof. The works will further assist in our efforts to maintain and preserve the building for centuries to come. Check out their website for book reviews and events, <https://melbourneathenaeum.org.au/>

## A séance at the Merino Mechanics' Institute

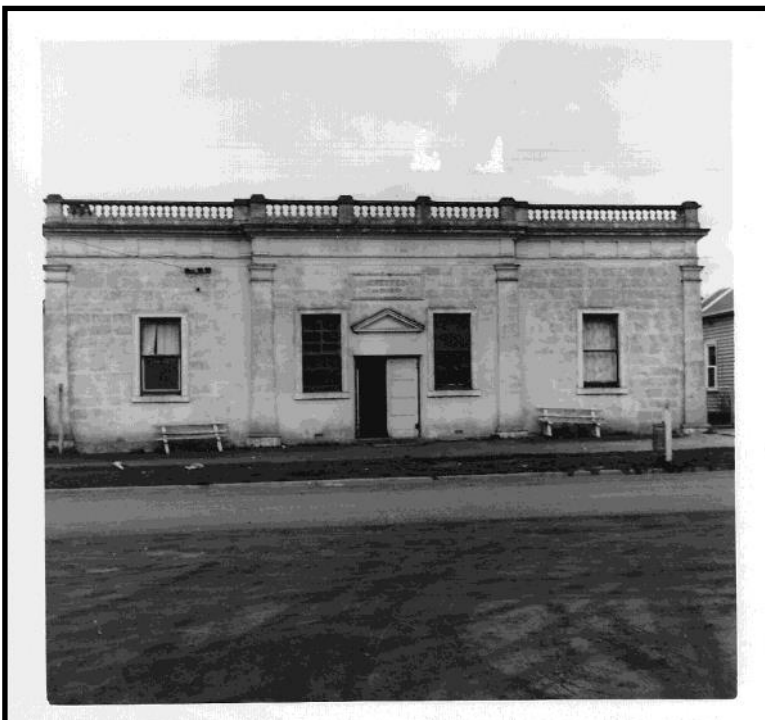
Spiritualism, the belief that the spirit of a deceased person still exists and may be communicated with, usually through a medium, came to prominence from the 1870s. The movement had some high-profile supporters including Alfred Deakin, our second Prime Minister; E.W. Cole, of Cole's Book Arcade, and the publisher of Cole's Funny Picture Books and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes.

This is a (slightly cynical) account from the *Hamilton Spectator* of April 2, 1878, of the visit of the Medium, Anne Raynor, to the town of Merino, in the Western District. Her séance was held at the Merino Mechanics' Institute.

*Merino—Last week we had a visit from Mrs Raynor, a "lady medium," who has been causing quite an excitement in the neighbourhood of Sandford by her mediumistic powers. She was invited to give a seance to a select few, but the crowd to be enlightened by the "spirits" was so great, that the private room at the hotel would not hold a quarter of those who were desirous of being present, and an adjournment was made to the Mechanics' Institute, where nearly a hundred persons both sexes soon congregated. A chairman having been appointed, Mrs. Raynor was briefly introduced, and a fair hearing asked for her. The lady medium then took her seat at the table, and at her request, Mr. Keighley played "Home Sweet Home;" softly, during which time, Mrs. Raynor closed her eyes, and with the assistance of a small magnet, a few spasmodic twitches of the face, and the "slow" music "went off" into a "beautiful trance." The music being stopped, the spirit of some departed brother began to hold forth on Spiritualism. I don't whether many of the listeners found it edifying, but a great many undoubtedly found it tedious, for they left the hall. The thread of the lecture was delightfully disconnected, and when the medium had finished, she left the audience about as much enlightened on Spiritualism as before she commenced.*

*At the close of the lecture, the chairman stated that he was quite convinced about spiritualism (but did not say which way), and hoped everybody there was also. (A slight interruption here took place, by some unruly "spirit" sending a shower of gun caps cent through the window in the direction of the chair). The chairman was then required to read a written notice to the effect that Mrs. Raynor was also a "medicine medium," and if any person were suffering from chronic complaints in which doctors had been of no avail, she would give them a private interview on the following day at her hotel, and prescribe accordingly. Spiritualist tracts were then freely distributed by Mr Layly, who acted as business manager.*

*A private seance was held afterwards at the hotel, also on the following day, when two or three sought the medical advice of the medium, with what success I am yet unable to say, but to one old man who had suffered with a bad leg for many years, she prescribed 1 lb of oatmeal, boiled for four hours, till it was thick enough to cut with a knife, a little salt and butter to be added, and placed as a poultice on the old man's leg, with the assurance that it will cure him. From his appearance, the patient looked as if it would do him good — if taken inwardly. I don't think there were any converts made that night, but whether there are some "halting between two opinions," will probably be seen at the next seance held here.*



The Merino Mechanics' Institute and Free Library was formally opened on Thursday, January 19, 1871. It was extended in 1930, with part of the original building being used as a supper room; and modified and extended again in 1969.



Images: Wesson Collection, MIV.