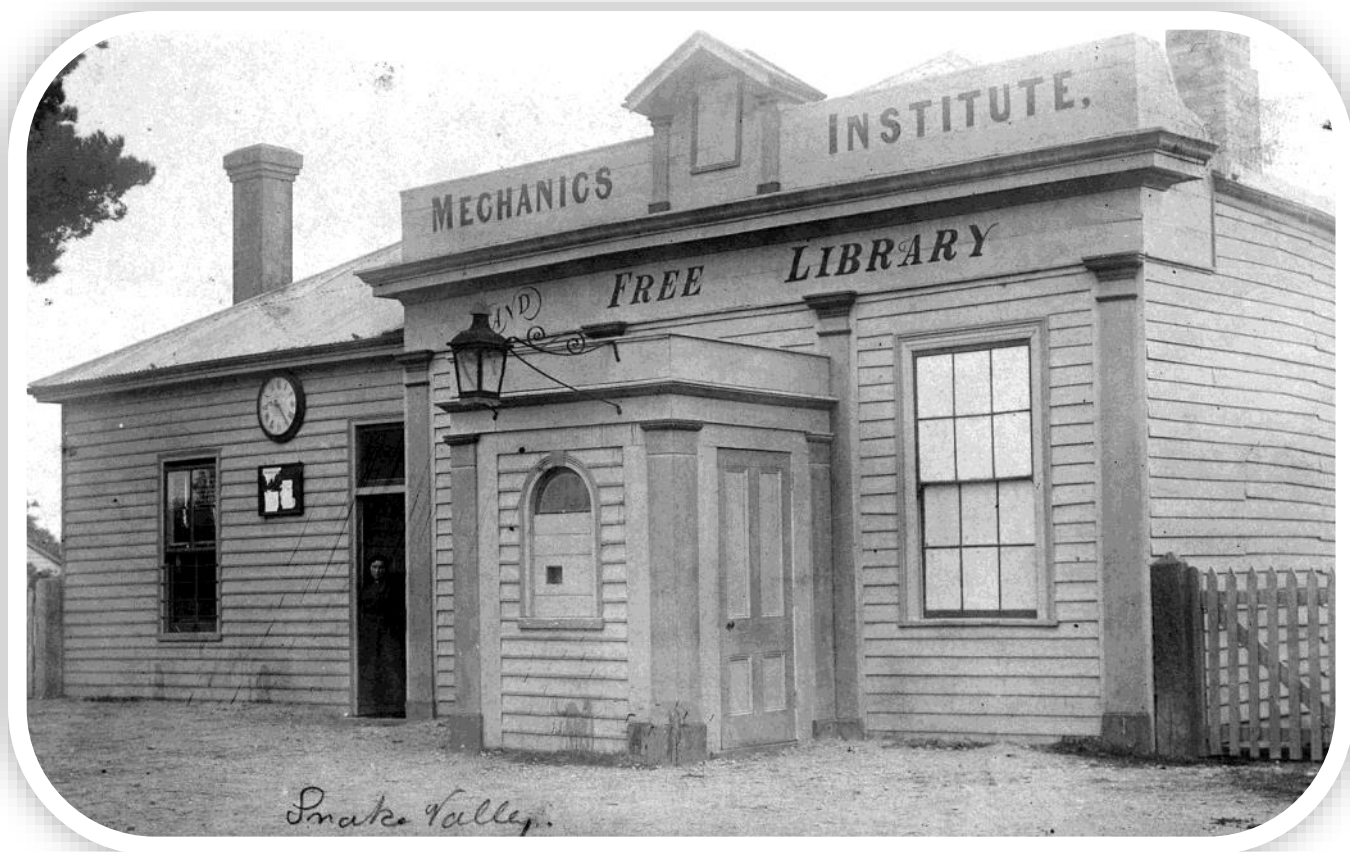


No. 60 Spring 2023

The magazine of the
Mechanics' Institutes of
Victoria



Useful Knowledge



The Snake Valley Mechanics' Institute was built in 1863 and used until a new building opened in 1926.

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2023-2024 MIV Committee elected at the AGM held on November 25, 2023

President: David Berry
 Vice President: Chris Dormer
 Treasurer: Gary Bester - contact email: treasurer@mivic.org.au
 Secretary: Heather Arnold - contact email: mivnewslettereditor@gmail.com
 Minutes Secretary: Pat Anderson, O.A.M.
 MIV Scanning Project Co-Ordinator: Judith Dwyer
 Useful Knowledge Editor: Heather Arnold
 General Committee members -
 Corinne Brewis
 Denys Correll
 Robert Kingston
 Felix Meagher, O.A.M.
 Peter Nankervis
 Peter Pereyra
 Les Sanderson
 Robert Shackleton

Cover: Snake Valley Mechanics' Institute and Free Library, c. 1914
 Image: State Library of Victoria Image H96.106/12



**PMI Victorian
History Library**

Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria, P.O Box 1080, Windsor, 3181.
 ISSN 1835-5242
 Reg. No A0038156G ABN 60 337 355 989 Price \$6.00.
 The MIV would like to acknowledge the support of our 'home' the
 Prahran Mechanics' Institute.

Report from the President, David Berry, presented at the Annual General meeting held on November 25, 2023

Dear Members,

The MIV has still not been in full activity mode after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have receded and create anything substantial other than our ongoing services. However, the MIV, over the past year, has participated in a number of events including the Victorian History Showcase at the Prahran Mechanics' Institute.

Last year the MIV took the opportunity to review our mission and strategic plan. That outcome was ratified by the Committee and progress is continually monitored at each Committee meeting, not just put in a drawer somewhere! The Wesson Lecture, which was inaugurated in 2015 and held in conjunction with the AGM, has had an impressive list of speakers. Over the COVID period, we had been unable to hold it for logistical reasons. It had been hoped to have this event resume in 2023, however it is now planned to do so early next year.

The MIV has a loyal supporter base and we are appreciative of the patience that has been shown by all over the difficult COVID-19 period, and hope that we continue our valuable association long into the future. Our new Editor of Useful Knowledge, Heather Arnold, has done a great job in providing us with some very interesting reading in our new format newsletter and we look forward to her further contributions by way of news and articles.

My thanks also for the fine efforts of Treasurer Gary Bester, who has also temporarily taken on the additional function of MIV Secretary. Pat Anderson, has also been a fantastic support as a very professional Minute Secretary.

Best wishes, David Berry

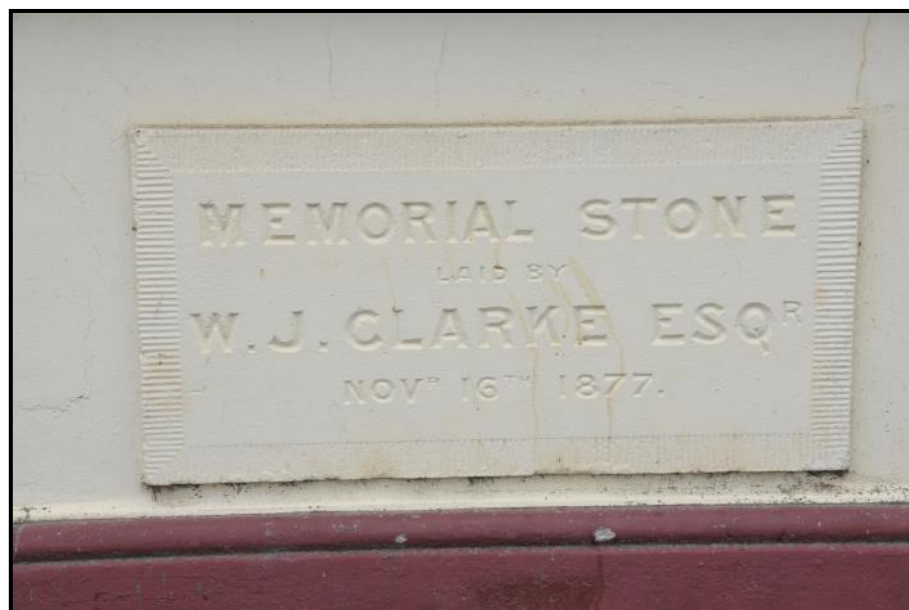
Lancefield Mechanics' Institute

Article by Bronwyn Wilson. Images by Denis Dwyer.

The Lancefield Mechanics' Institute in the township of Lancefield in the Macedon Ranges Shire recently affixed a plaque to the building as part of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria Historical Plaques Program.



The Institute began at a meeting held in Lancefield in 1868 when it was resolved to form The Lancefield Mutual Improvement Society. Shortly after this the name was changed to The Lancefield Mechanics' Institute (LMI). The Institute was formed to establish a free library and also to devote one evening each week for mutual improvements in reading, reciting and lecturing. A free library was established three years later and ran until 1978. After meeting at various locations the foundation stone was laid at the present site in 1877 by Sir William Clarke and the LMI opened in April 1878 with a gala ball. Sir William Clarke, wealthy land owner, pastoralist and first Australian-born baronet built the mansion *Rupertswood* at Sunbury which is now part of Salesian College.



Lancefield Mechanics' Institute, continued

Article by Bronwyn Wilson. Images by Denis Dwyer.

A newspaper article in *The Weekly Times* titled *Laying the Foundation Stone of the Lancefield Mechanics' Institute*, provides a description of the festivities that day—

The foundation stone of the Lancefield Mechanics' Institute was laid today by Mr W J Clarke. There were about 500 persons present. The town was gaily decorated and altogether wore a holiday appearance. After being presented with a handsome silver trowel by Mr Car lisle, president of the Institute, Mr Clarke declared the stone well and truly laid. He referred to the educational advantages to be derived from such institutions, and thanked the committee for the honour conferred upon him by being invited to perform the ceremony.



Over the years many improvements have been made to enhance the facilities for the enjoyment of the community. These include a commercial kitchen, upgrading of toilets, building an annexe for additional space with a small kitchen so the main hall and annexe can be used at the same time by separate groups. Recent additions see LED strip lighting that light up the covered roof area. All these improvements are made possible by sourcing and applying for applicable grant applications and funds raised by the committee.



Lancefield Mechanics' Institute, continued

Article by Bronwyn Wilson. Images by Denis Dwyer.



The hall is used by a variety of groups for meetings and a monthly Feed it Forward community lunch is enjoyed by many. Regular group activities include Pilates, Old Time Dancing, Line Dancing, Patchwork group, Music Playtime for Toddlers and a monthly Little Treasures Market. Family celebrations and events take place on a regular basis and the 150th Anniversary of the Lancefield Football Club was held at the hall in April. At least twice a year we host the Savoy Opera Company for a pleasant afternoon event.

And so The Lancefield Mechanics' Institute remains the centre of social and cultural life of the Lancefield community and continually strives to meet the needs of the growing community.

A small voluntary Committee of Management of five are always on the lookout for new members and the President John Severson works tirelessly sourcing funding opportunities for the betterment of facilities, with several large projects in the pipeline.

Mechanics' Institutes in the news—Footscray

Footscray Mechanics' Institute. *Long Shelf Life* by Anita Punton

The Saturday Paper November 18-24, 2023.

28 NOVEMBER 18 - 24, 2023 THE SATURDAY PAPER.COM.AU

Life

The author follows the example of many aspirational working men in the 19th century by joining a mechanics' institute – one of a handful that have survived.



Long shelf life

Anita Punton is a Melbourne-based comedy writer and producer.

At the foot of the State Trustees tower in Footscray, opposite an Ethiopian cafe and a Mexican chicken shop, there is a brick and stucco building that wouldn't look out of place in an English village.

Despite the sign on its wooden portico – "Footscray Mechanics Institute Library" – I always assumed the building was like the vast majority of mechanics' institute buildings all over the country: repurposed into a community hall or a venue for AA meetings or Zumba classes. However, according to a flyer I found in my letterbox recently, the Footscray Mechanics' Institute is still very much alive and has been since 1857.

Also known as athenaeums or schools of arts, mechanics' institutes originated in Scotland in the early 19th century to help skilled working men ("mechanics") supplement their limited formal education, usually by means of access to a library and lectures.

Drawing heavily on the Victorian-era preoccupation with self-improvement – think of literary characters such as a stonemason Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure*, or insurance clerk Leonard Bast in *Howards End* – the movement flourished in industrial towns such as Manchester and Birmingham until World War II.

Australia took to the movement early, with the Van Diemen's Land Mechanics' Institute opening in 1827. It's estimated there were about 2000 institutes across the country; of these, about half were in Victoria.

There's a needle exchange around the corner," explains librarian Cameron Borg. "It's like any inner-city suburb, it has its characters. We can't put our little street library out-side either, because someone always vandalises it or throws the hard-backs at our windows."

Once inside the library, I'm transported to an oasis of antique charm. High-ceilinged and filled with light, it retains many original features of the 1913 building, including the doors with signage to both the ladies' and gentlemen's reading rooms. Upstairs, there is a beautiful billiards/snooker room with two full-sized tables.

I pay \$5 for an annual membership and borrow the latest Ian Rankin and an obscure Muriel Spark. Each book has a paper "Due Date" slip on the last page. As Borg wrinkles his date stamp, it makes a satisfying, nostalgic crunch.

I ask if Borg gets tired explaining what a mechanics' institute is. "Yeah, I still get people ringing to ask if they can book their cars in for a service," he laughs.

He tells me about the institute's heyday, when the billiards, cards and chess rooms would be full of members and the library would still be busy at 10.30 on a Friday night. Cribbage tournaments, travelling waxworks shows and, intriguingly, male-only "Smoke and Fossil" evenings, are all recorded in the institute's archives.

How exactly has this little relic of the past managed to survive? "That's something to ask Doug," says Borg.

Committee member Doug Clymo is a gentlemanly, quick-witted 95-year-old. When we meet, he is returning a book to the library. In the course of our conversation he mentions completing an arts degree ("just because I was interested"), his painting lessons and how he recently read a book about artificial intelligence. I suspect he is exactly the sort of self-directed learner the founders of the mechanics' institute movement had in mind.

It was the premise of a game of billiards that first brought Clymo to the institute back in the 1960s, but it was the fellowship with the men and women he met there that kept him coming back.

At the time, the PM's popularity was already on the wane. The advent of television and mass car ownership meant people were choosing to spend their leisure time differently. It endured several lean decades, both financially and in terms of membership.

"We had no salaries, had to watch every single cent," Clymo says. "We only bought books at an absolute minimum, and everything was done by volunteers."

Just before the Covid-19 pandemic, the current committee decided they were finally in a position to hire a qualified librarian.

Borg, who had managed libraries in Teppoon and Biloela in rural Queensland, was excited by the potential of the library, but knew he had to make some changes.

"The entire back wall was just Mills & Boon," he remembers. "They had to go. And for some reason, all the historical fiction was hidden in a back room. The entire non-fiction section was shelved by author, rather than the Dewey decimal system."

Crime fiction makes up most of the collection, including many vintage hardbacks with fabulously lurid cover art.

"We've got regulars who come from the other side of Melbourne because they can't find these books anywhere else," Borg says. "Most public libraries call books if they haven't been borrowed in three or four years. But we're able to build up a complete bibliography of an author. We've got complete sets of Agatha Christie and Alastair MacLean, for example."

Borg is also building up the classics section. "You generally won't find classics in your local library anymore, unless it's a movie or TV tie-in."

Whatever initiatives he proposes must be approved by Clymo and his fellow committee members – a significant percentage of whom are in their 80s and 90s.

"When I started in 2020, they were still writing cheques and charging 50 cents to hire a billiard table for an hour," says Borg. "I managed to convince them they could charge at least \$1. But they still agonised over it."

The committee has been open to all of Borg's ideas, provided they fit with the institute's stated purpose of the diffusion of knowledge and healthy social contact among members. He is delighted they have such a progressive attitude.

Borg, who's played in hardcore punk bands since the 1980s, has added books on The Cure, The Clash and heavy metal music to the collection. He's put the institute on X, Instagram, Goodreads and TikTok. It now has more than 500 members.

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Clymo has been active within the local multicultural community for decades, having spent most of his working life as a maths teacher at nearby Sunshine West High School. He is also enthusiastic for new members, particularly if they can play billiards with him.

Clymo makes me promise to come back so he can teach me the ins and outs of the game. "Always grab every opportunity to learn something new," he says enthusiastically. ■

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Each institute adapted to its community's particular needs. A library usually remained central to its purpose, but some were more concerned with providing entertainment rather than education – somewhere for locals to go that wasn't the church or the pub.

I'm keen to see what is going on in the two storey cottage in Footscray but I have to wait a few minutes for the doors to be unlocked. "There's a needle exchange around the corner," explains librarian Cameron Borg. "It's like any inner city suburb, it has its characters. We can't put our little street library out-side either, because someone always vandalises it or throws the hard-backs at our windows."

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Mechanics' Institutes in the news

Footscray Mechanics' Institute: *Long Shelf Life* by Anita Punton continued

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Mechanics' Institutes in the news—San Francisco

Downtown San Francisco's Coolest Library Doubles as a Remote Work Sanctuary

By Julie Zigoris

San Francisco Standard 27/6/2023

<https://sfstandard.com/2023/06/27/the-best-deal-around-is-a-literary-oasis-in-the-heart-of-downtown-san-francisco/>

In a city known for its ballooning price tags on everything from real estate to retail, the Mechanics' Institute, a literary oasis in the heart of Downtown, might be the very best deal in town. For a mere \$120 a year—\$10 a month—members get access to a lending library, workspace with WiFi and a calendar filled with a range of five to 15 events each week, many of which have free food and drink.

"It's way cheaper than any coworking space," said freelance software developer Keegan Leary, who has been a member of the institute for two years. He likes walking the stacks and breaking up his work-from-home routine by being around other people. "It's a hidden gem," Leary said. "I love the old-timey feel."

Rudi Miller agreed. On a recent Wednesday, the former New Yorker and University of California Berkeley law student was trying out the space for the first time—but she already knew she was going to join. "Other coworking spaces are too loud and too expensive," she said. "I like the quiet here, and the events look fun."

Yet despite the appeal, most people don't even know the Mechanics' Institute exists—or exactly what it is. On a recent public tour—which happens every Wednesday at noon—of the historic nine-story building, more than half hadn't known it existed, despite living in San Francisco their entire lives, according to Alyssa Stone, senior director of programs and community engagement.

"We are a hidden-hidden gem," Stone said. The treasure behind the doors at 57 Post St. is about much more than affordability, though. And while the concept of a members-only library might seem exclusive, it's baked into the more than a century-and-a-half-old mission of the Mechanics' Institute to be accessible to all.

When the Mechanics' Institute opened in 1854, a mechanic wasn't someone with their head under the hood of a car. "The word mechanic in the 19th century was used very generally to describe people who made things," said Taryn Edwards, a former librarian at the institute who worked there for over 15 years. "You could be a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker and be considered a mechanic."

Founded in the Tax Assessor's Office in the city of San

Francisco because it was a nonreligious, apolitical space, the Mechanics' Institute was meant to be an institution of learning and training.

"From our earliest years, there have been no barriers to joining," Stone said. "Anyone could become a member, regardless of immigration, race, ethnicity, gender, age, financial background, familial background. Even from our earliest days, women were always welcome." It was unusual at the time, when many clubs and memberships—like the Bohemian Club, the Olympic Club and the Family Club—were open only to men and remain so today (the San Francisco Italian American Club is also exclusive to men).

The organization was part of a larger social movement, a response to the Industrial Revolution, which aimed to improve the livelihood and rights of the working class. There were some 800 Mechanics' Institutes in England alone in 1854, the year the San Francisco branch was founded. Run as independent entities, there were handbooks available at the time with instructions on how to set up your own Mechanics' Institute.

Typically the institutes had three components: a library, a lecture hall and a game room—for the San Francisco Mechanics' Institute, that game has always been chess. While many such institutes have since shut down or been transformed into entities with different names, our own Gold Rush-era branch is going strong, despite going through numerous upheavals—including being burned to the ground.

"Our mission is to serve writers, chess players, readers, thinkers, the curious, film lovers," Stone said. "We're here for people's interests and to be able to provide them with information."

A Hidden Bounty

The people who do know about the Mechanics' Institute duck in to take photos of its spiral staircase—what very well might be the most Instagrammed set of stairs in all of San Francisco. The undulating staircase is the tallest in the nation, according to Stone, and it was fabricated on the East Coast before the building's opening in 1910 and then shipped around Cape Horn to be assembled at the library. "The staircase is very, very popular stuff on our tours," Stone said.

Mechanics' Institutes in the news—San Francisco

The metal grate on the spiral staircase has an image that repeats throughout the institute: a key that symbolizes the unlocking of knowledge. What looks like a square-shaped lollipop, the motif is repeated on tile floors and hanging lamps.



The spiral staircase at the San Francisco MI
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

The institute's knowledge to be unlocked is not only in books but also in recreation—namely, chess. The building houses the oldest continuously operating chess club in the nation. When Vinay Bhat achieved grandmaster status in 2008, he was the youngest person ever to hold the title—and he learned to play chess at the Mechanics' Institute. Bhat recently returned to the institute for the release of his book, *How I Became a Chess Grandmaster*, which is filled with pictures of him playing chess at the Mechanics' Institute. The event also included the "Summer Blitz" tournament; the room was packed with chess players, including two grandmasters.

Other jewels of the institute include an 1853 survey map of San Francisco that survived the fire of 1906. It's one of only a handful to exist in the world, and it now hangs on the second floor. "The only reason it survived is because it was in a safe," Stone said. "Everything else around it was destroyed."

The building also has offices for rent. Literary magazine *Zyzyva* has its offices there, along with several lawyers and doctors, and an organization called the International Wizard of Oz Club. "I can't imagine a better place to have an office," Stone said. "These beautiful high ceilings with huge windows that look out across the city."

The More Things Change

Given that the organization has been through its fair share of struggles in its century-and-a-half history, the Mechanics' Institute may have a lesson for us—and for Downtown San Francisco.

A climate of fear took over Downtown San Francisco in 1856, after the murder of the publisher James King of William, who was killed by James Casey, a member of the Board of Supervisors. The killing resulted in the formation of the second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco.

"This was no joke; people moved out of the city because of this," Edwards said. "Namely Mechanics' Institute President Roderick Matheson, who was concerned about raising his kids in such a violent environment."

In what could have been a story ripped from today, Matheson moved out of town—to Healdsburg.

The fire after the 1906 Great Earthquake burned the original institute to the ground, but the library came back bigger and better, in part by buying materials the city would need—like books on engineering and masonry—for the massive rebuilding effort.

"That is how we pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps," Edwards said. "With the aim of helping the city with the rebuilding effort."

During the Great Influenza of 1918, the institute closed for only couple of days—our present-day pandemic was much more catastrophic. World War II was another difficult time in the institute's history.

"There were limits on nighttime activities because of fear over air raids," Edwards said, and staff and clientele were drafted to fight in the war.

With big-name retailers pulling out of Downtown, acres of empty office space and deteriorating safety conditions Downtown, will the Mechanics' Institute—located just a stone's throw from the Montgomery Street BART Station—be able to survive this latest downturn? It's hard not to wonder, especially in light of the recent departure of the organization's CEO. But just like San Francisco's phoenix rising from the dust, the organization has been through boom-and-bust cycles before.

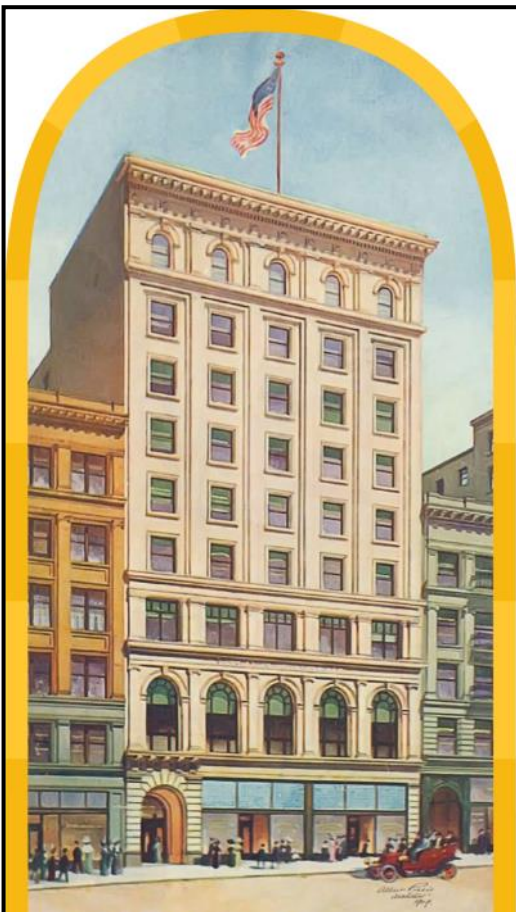
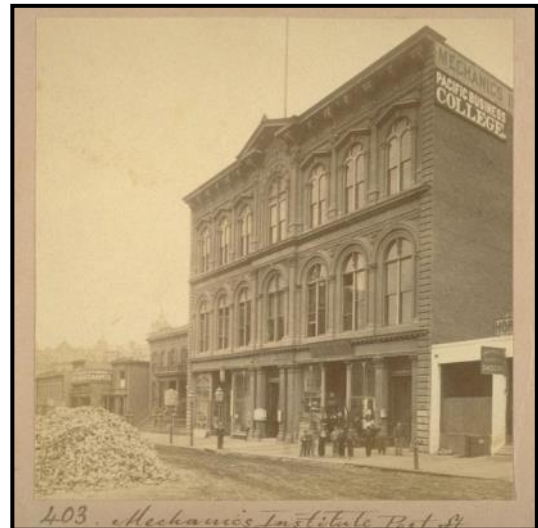
"We are here to serve the community," Stone said when asked about the organization's future. "And we will continue to serve the community."

San Francisco Mechanics' Institute

Images and text from <https://www.milibrary.org/about>

The first building, below left, was occupied from 1855. The Institute rented two rooms on the 4th floor of the Express Building which was on Montgomery Street at California. A visitor described our lodgings as being very comfortable with some 400 books and a growing collection of scientific curiosities including samples of California's minerals, petrified Oregon pine, and an eagle's leg and claw of monstrous size.

From 1866 to 1906 they occupied 31 Post Street, shown below on the right. At the beginning of 1906, the Institute had 4,150 members and 135,000 volumes. In January that year, it absorbed the collections of art, literature and rare editions held by the Mercantile Association, another independent library that was founded in 1852. This union formed a magnificent collection amounting to some 200,000 books. When San Francisco was leveled by the earthquake and fire of April 1906, the collections and building were completely destroyed. The loss included the Institute's priceless files of California newspapers, its complete set of British patent reports dating back to James I of England (1603–1625), its collections of technical, scientific and artistic works, plus its Post Street building and pavilion



The existing San Francisco Mechanics' Institute (shown left) was designed by Albert Pissis. Pissis was known for his stately structures of steel and stone. For the Mechanics' he proposed a nine-story steel-framed mixed-use building, finished in reinforced sandstone on a granite base, with a symmetrical, severely classical façade. The street floor would be rented out as retail space; the second and third floors would be library and offices. On the fourth floor there would be a room for the Chess Club, and the rest of the building would be given over to offices for rent. The cost of construction would run close to \$250,000.

The new building was occupied on July 15, 1910.

Mechanics' Institutes in the news—Narre Warren
Narre Warren—Hall set for a creative twist.
Berwick Star News 16/10/2023



Casey Council is getting ready to transform the under-utilised Narre Warren Mechanics Institute Hall to create its new Emerging Artists Creative Hub, thanks to a commitment from the latest round of the State Government's Creative Neighbourhood Infrastructure Support Program.

Part of the State Government's \$6 million Creative Spaces and Places program and supported by the Community Support Fund, the grant program is supporting local councils to provide artists and creative practitioners with fit-for-purpose, accessible and secure facilities where they can develop their work and careers, and opens up creative spaces for local communities across the state.

With opportunities for every community across metro, suburban and regional Victoria, the grants will ensure more creatives have the opportunity to showcase their work and celebrate their artist flare alongside other local creative practitioners.

Casey Council administrators chair Noelene Duff PSM said the council welcomed the State Government's funding towards the project, thanking them for their continued investment in the region, which is one of the fastest growing regions in the state. "The Emerging Artists Creative Hub will provide a working studio space in the heart of the Narre Warren business precinct," she said. "The Hub will be a place where artists can develop their practice in a dedicated arts space, collaborate and network with other artists and hold exhibitions and performances.

"The Hub will be able to accommodate two to three emerging and youth-focused art and culture organisations concurrently for a three-year residency pilot program." Ms Duff said the new space could be utilised to cover a number of creative endeavours, including design, visual arts, performing arts, film, literature and dance. "The proposed infrastructure upgrades to the Narre Warren Mechanics Institute Hall will allow greater flexibility in the range of creative industries," she said. "Expressions of Interest are expected to open in early 2024."

Creative Industries Minister Colin Brooks said the new spaces will allow all local artists to create and exhibit their work in their own community. "This program is all about unlocking and improving the spaces available for creative work across every corner of Victoria," he said. "Whether you're a creative professional in metro or regional Victoria, we are giving more local communities access to facilities that enable high quality productions, exhibitions and other creative offerings."

An Acrostic and Eclectic social history of Mechanics' Institutes

By Heather Arnold

This is an acrostic and eclectic look at some themes from the social history of Mechanics' Institutes and the first letter of each theme spells a seasonal greeting. (TL;DR Merry Christmas!)

M is for Marriage. The local hall or Mechanics' Institute was the usual venue for wedding receptions in the past and there are hundreds of reports in the newspapers of these happy occasions. Many couples returned to celebrate significant anniversaries - Golden and Diamond Anniversaries.

The Mechanics' Hall, Footscray was the scene of a festive gathering on Saturday evening last, when about 80 members and friends of the family of Mr. and Mrs. F. A. Kruse, of Paisley street, assembled to celebrate the golden wedding of that genial couple. The breakfast was tastefully set in the small hall, and ample justice was done to the good things provided by Mr. G. Stewart. (Footscray Independent, September 28, 1918)

Golden Wedding - An event of unusual local interest was held in Yinnar Mechanics' Institute on Wednesday evening, June 23rd, the occasion being the celebration of the Golden Wedding of Cr. and Mrs. A. M. Coleman, "Fair View", Yinnar. Upwards of 50 relatives representing four generations attended the function. After games of a various nature had been indulged in supper was partaken of. (Morwell Advertiser, July 1, 1948)

There is something sublime in the contemplation of a diamond jubilee whereby 60 years of life hand in hand together are celebrated by an aged and honored couple amidst about 50 of their descendants. This great privilege has just been enjoyed by Mr J.F. Walther, of Murtoa, and his worthy wife, and the Mechanics' Hall was requisitioned for the occasion last Saturday evening by the numerous relatives. Mr Walther is now 83 years of age, and his wife is three years younger; and the couple were united in holy wedlock on November 21st November, 1854. Whilst the old couple are not as nimble as of yore, they nevertheless enjoy fairly good health and their faculties are as bright as ever, demonstrating the value of living pure and healthy lives. (Kaniva Lawloit Times, December 1 1914)

E is for Explosions. The use of generators in Mechanics' Institutes to power lighting and film projectors etc presented a danger as the acetylene gas used as the fuel was extremely flammable – here are two explosive accounts, one from Werribee in 1908 and the other from Merino in 1910 -

Acetylene Gas Explosion - Mr. Thomas Peacock, the caretaker in charge of the Werribee Mechanics' Hall, met with a serious accident while opening a drum containing carbide, prior to charging the acetylene gas generator. He struck a match, and an explosion took place. He was burnt on the face and neck. (Geelong Advertiser, July 24, 1908)

Acetylene Generator Explodes, Merino Mechanics' Hall unroofed - An explosion occurred in the Merino Mechanics' on Monday night while the secretary (Mr. Clarke) was attending to the acetylene generator. The roof of the house was blown off. Mr Clarke was thrown some distance away, and received injuries to his leg, shoulder and face. He is confined to bed, but is doing well. No lights were used, and it is hard to account for the explosion. (Geelong Advertiser, June 22, 1910)



Werribee Mechanics' Institute, c. 1911, the location of an explosion in 1908.
State Library of Victoria image H96.200/1479

R is for Rules. All Mechanics' Institutes had their own rules and here are some of the rules the Newport Mechanics' Institute adopted in 1934.

Newport Mechanics' Institute. Conditions of Membership. At a public meeting last week 61 rules and five by-laws were adopted for the control of the Newport Mechanics' Institute. The rules were originally drawn up in 1886, and are now revised in view of the erection of the Institute. The following rules are of special interest:—

The Newport Mechanics' Institute and Free Library has for its objects the diffusion of literary, scientific, and other useful knowledge, and recreation, among its members, to the exclusion of controversy on religious subjects. These objects are sought to be obtained by means of a library of reference and a circulating library, a reading room, a lecture hall, the establishment of classes, and the delivery of lectures, particularly those which have more immediate reference to the Commonwealth of Australia.

The Institution shall be under the sole control of a committee of management of nine members, who shall be elected every three years. Males of 18 years and upward shall be eligible to become members. Youths over 14 years and under 18 years of age, and ladies shall be eligible as associates.

The annual subscription for members shall be ten shillings, and for Associates five shillings.

Due order shall be preserved, and no person shall be allowed to smoke in any part of the Institution, except in the room set apart for that purpose. And no person shall be allowed to bring a dog into the Institution under a penalty not exceeding five shillings for the first offence, and subject to expulsion from the Institution on a repetition of the same if the committee of management shall think fit. No intoxicating liquor shall be brought into the building under any pretext whatever. (Williamstown Advertiser, July 21, 1934, see here)

R is for Rubbish. The constant battle in Libraries between popular novels and high-brow improving works. This report is from Wagga Wagga in 1871.

At the monthly meeting of the Committee of Management of the Mechanics' Institute, on Wednesday last, it was resolved to clear out of the library the accumulation of rubbish in the shape of trashy novels and worn out volumes which at present cumber and disgrace the shelves, and to set apart such a sum as the funds will admit (probably from £20 to £30) for the purchase of new and standard works. This very necessary step has long been contemplated, and we are glad to see that the Committee have at length taken action in the matter. (Wagga Wagga Advertiser, March 4, 1871)

Y is for Youngsters. The Frankston Standard newspaper sponsored the Grand Champion Baby Contest of the Peninsula at the Somerville Mechanics' Institute in 1947.

The "Standard" grand champion Baby Contest of the Peninsula was finalised at the Mechanics' Hall on Friday afternoon, when three months old Lynne Higgins, of Somerville, was judged grand champion (all ages), also champion under six months (boy or girl) of the Mornington Peninsula. There were 40 finalists, representing all parts of the Peninsula. Peninsula age champions are: Lynne Higgins (Somerville), under six months; Dorothy Peterson (Sorrento), under 21 months; Harry Lockett (Mornington), under two years; and Lorraine and Edward Scully (Sorrento), twins. Sole judge was Dr. V. L. Collins, eminent Melbourne child specialist, Colonel A. Sage (former Matron-in-Chief Australian Army National Services), officiated as honorary matron supervisor, and was ably, assisted by Sister McDonald (Truby King sister), and Miss B. Duncan (secretary Frankston Infant Welfare Centre.) (Frankston Standard, April 24, 1947)



Champion Twins of the Baby Show. LORRAINE AND EDWARD SCULLY, of Sorrento.

Champion Twins who won at the Baby Show at the Somerville Mechanics' Institute
 Frankston Standard, April 24, 1947 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article73596136>

An Acrostic and Eclectic social history of Mechanics' Institutes, continued

C is for Critters. Mechanics' Institutes were the venue for pet shows, dog shows, bird shows and the like. The Coonabarabran Mechanics' Institute hosted the Church of England pet show in July 1947 and Graham Smith won the best trained dog class. As reported -

Chief amongst the star items for the afternoon was young Graham Smith's blue and white cattle/collie dog "Butch", which won the best trained dog class. Showing remarkable intelligence, "Butch" sat up and begged, laid down and "died," walked through a hoop between two chairs, jumped over six feet high to reach a stick held in its young owner's hand, lay down at command and stayed there whilst Graham walked around the building, fetching and delivering a tennis ball, with skill and sagacity. (North Western Watchman, July 3, 1947)

H is for Heat and Cold – the weather. The Geelong Mechanics' Institute was an official Bureau of Meteorology weather station. *The Geelong Advertiser* reported -

The Geelong Mechanics' Institute has as one of its main functions, the recording of rain and weather conditions generally. In a district so noted for its primary products as the Western District the existence of a station with such a replete means of keeping a systematic record of the weather is an asset in many directions. Men on the land, more dependent than anyone upon the weather, are wont to make a study of its fluctuations in modern times. Information gleaned from the weather bureaux enables them to make comparisons that are often valuable in subsequent years as a guide in planting and carrying out other rural processes. Much interest centred in the record of last year's rainfall which was prepared at the Mechanics' and published in the "Advertiser" and other periodical returns are always eagerly awaited. The bureau is also serviceable as a centre for the dissemination of weather reports from near and far, and the daily weather bulletins and maps are available to be perused from 9 o'clock every morning. (Geelong Advertiser, January 7, 1926)



Geelong Mechanics' Institute, c. 1882, which also housed a weather station.
Photographer: Fred Kruger. State Library of Victoria Image H39614/5

R is for Raffles. Mechanics' Institutes hosted an array of social functions to raise funds for community groups and a raffle was frequently a feature of these functions. Raffles were also run to raise funds for building or maintaining Institutes. In Brisbane in 1879 it was reported that -

An allotment of land in Stanley-street, was raffled for at the Mechanics' Institute, South Brisbane, on Thursday week. Between, four and five hundred persons, ticket-holders were present. As often happens in these cases, the man who least expected to win did win. Mr. Joseph Kelly, principal messenger for the Legislative Council, invested in a solitary half-crown ticket and thought no more about it. (The Brisbane Week, December 27, 1879)

In Victoria in 1914 a raffle was held, which sold over 6,000 tickets, which seems an extraordinary amount -

In August last a bazaar was held in aid of the Long Gully Mechanics' Institute. In connection with the bazaar a raffle was conducted for a canteen of cutlery, valued at £50, made by Joseph Rogers, of Sheffield, and supplied by Messrs. White Bros., Pall Mall. Five other prizes were also offered. Since the issue of the tickets 6400 were sold, including more than 1000 on Saturday and yesterday. The drawing took place at the Royal Princess Theatre last night in the presence of the large crowd which had witnessed the Tivoli pictures. The drawing was done by two small girls - Misses Irene Foley and Rose O'Callaghan - and under the supervision of Mayor Wilkie, Mr. J. Jewell, president; Mr. Wm Bidwell secretary, and other members of the committee. (Bendigo Independent, September 1, 1914)

I is for Inquests. Inquests were held at Mechanics' Institutes and these sad events were reported in the papers, sometimes in graphic detail.

Violet Town in 1902 - *At the Mechanics' Hall on Monday afternoon an inquest was held as to the cause of death of an illegitimate female child, named Kate Corbett, the infant of an unmarried woman, named Johanna Corbett, residing at Tamleugh. (Violet Town Sentinel, January 24 1902)*

Loch in 1915 - *At the Mechanics' Hall, today an inquest was opened by Dr. R. H. Cole, the City Coroner, concerning the death of Elizabeth Dunbabin, single, 44, whose body was found at Woodleigh, on August 24, and of Peter Allen, a railway navvy, who was found dead in his tent at Woodleigh on August 26. (The Herald, September 8, 1915)*

Morwell in 1924 - *Keen interest was taken in the inquest held in, Morwell Mechanics' Hall, on Wednesday last, touching the unfortunate death of Catherine Dawson, 68 years of age, who was found brutally murdered in her hut between the Eastern Camp and Brown Coal Mine on the morning of 10th inst, her head having been battered in with an axe. (Morwell Advertiser, November 28 1924)*

At most of the Inquests the body was not present, but there was this tragic case from 1891- *The funeral of Mrs. Haussman, the wife of a Presbyterian minister at Barnedown, had been stopped by a telegram from Superintendent Ryall, just as the mournful cortege was approaching the Goornong Cemetery. The body was then conveyed to the Goornong hall, where an inquest was held by Mr. G. W.F. Patterson, P. M. Mounted-constable Murray watched the case on behalf of the police. After reviewing, a quantity of evidence adduced the jury returned a verdict as follows: - That the deceased, Blanche Haussmann died on the 21st. October at Barnedown from bronchitis, complicated by childbirth, and we are of opinion that if a medical man had been called in sooner her life might have been saved, and the husband, J. G. Haussmann, and Sophia Heatley, a niece, were guilty of negligence in not calling in a doctor sooner, but we do not intend this verdict to be one of manslaughter against either of them." (Tarrangower Times, October 28, 1891)*

S is for Soldiers. Mechanics' Institutes were the usual venue for 'Welcome Homes' to returning soldiers. This event took place at the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Hall -

Koo-Wee-Rup Welcomes Soldiers - About the biggest and best function of its kind ever held at Koo wee-rup took place on Friday night last, when the local hall was crammed, jammed and packed to its utmost capacity, over 300 being present. Koo-wee-rup was honoring its returning heroes, Corporal Gilchrist, Privates Cochrane and M'Gree. On arrival the schoolchildren formed a guard of honor, and Mr W. Eason welcomed the soldiers on behalf of the committee. At the local hall, which was most tastefully decorated by the ladies, Councillor O'Brien presented each man with a ring, bearing the colors of their respective battalions. They were enthusiastically received, and made suitable responses. The returned men all fought in France. Corporal Gilchrist was injured in the body with shrapnel, a piece still lying close to his heart. Private Cochrane was wounded in the hand and elbow, and Private M'Gree's leg was injured. The latter was on board the Ballarat when that troopship was torpedoed in the Channel. (Lang Lang Guardian, May 4, 1918)



Welcome home to soldiers, Les, Bill and Billy. at the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Institute, in 1918.

Image: Koo Wee Rup Swamp Historical Society

An Acrostic and Eclectic social history of Mechanics' Institutes, continued

T is for Toilets. In the past public toilets were not provided in many towns, and thus the toilets in Mechanics' Institutes became the de facto public toilets, which put an added burden onto the committee who was responsible for keeping them clean.

Deplorable condition of conveniences. The request of the Moe Mechanics' Committee that the council should bear the whole cost of servicing and cleaning the lavatories at the Mechanics' Hall because they were used by the general public, met with a favourable response from councillors at the last meeting. Councillors agreed with the committee's description of conditions. Cr. K. Mitchell said that they were deplorable. The conveniences are far too accessible to police properly. He was inclined to agree with the suggestion of the caretaker and the committee, that they should be closed up during the day and only open when functions took place in the hall. Cr. Guy: It's a sorry state of affairs. I don't blame the hall committee in the least. They are doing a good job and should not be charged rates for the service. Cr. Balfour: The shire has a responsibility in this matter. A comfort station will relieve the situation. The council should provide a free service. A motion writing-off the rates on the notice serve on the committee was later carried. The engineer is also to see what can be done about cleaning the conveniences daily. (Narracan Shire Advocate, October 19, 1951).

M is for Moving. This is a great account of moving the Kongwak Hall in 1924 (Not sure if Kongwak was a Mechanic' Institute but it is too good a story to leave out)

Moving a Public Hall – Remarkable Feat - What was regarded as an impossible achievement has been carried out at Kongwak, in South Gippsland, by the firm carrying on business under the name of A. McGregor, of Doveton street, Ballarat. For many years past local residents have been desirous of transferring the public hall, which was situated on top of a hill 200 feet from the road, to a new and more accessible site about 300 yards further up the road. From the top of the hill down to the road there was a drop of 60 feet in the 200 feet, and some idea of the difficulties to be overcome will be gleaned when it is stated that it took 42 bullocks to draw the empty jinker up the hill to the hall.

After the structure had been placed on the jinker and secured, the necessity for turning it around in the required direction confronted the contractors. However, they succeeded, and jinker and building were lowered down the hill to the road on two wire rope tackles. The work was accomplished without mishap. The hall was conveyed to the site chosen, and that same night a wedding celebration took place in it. People came from miles around to watch the hazardous work in progress. Practically a local holiday was observed. Everything was suspended, and even the children were allowed out of school to witness the unusual operations. The ladies turned out in their best attire. Many of the parties brought their hampers, and altogether the occasion was made quite a day in the district. The building measured 60 ft by 26 ft, and it was shifted without removing the furniture and fittings.



Above: Kongwak Hall at the top right, in the original location.

Right: Kongwak Hall in new location in the town. The School building is on the left and the Hall, with extensions, is on the right.

Images: *Valley of Peace: a history of Kongwak* (Kongwak Public Hall, 2009)

In consequence of this feat Messrs' McGregor have received several other contracts, but as there has been 76 " inches of rain registered in that part of the State during the past eight months, and it is still raining, they are not anxious to remain there for any indefinite period. All transit was by means of bullock waggons, and one of the contractors remarked, "I will never complain about mud in Ballarat as long as I live" Some of the hills over which the tackle and plant were taken must have made the Ballarat contractors persuade themselves they were on top of the world. Twenty-two bullocks were required to convey the jinker and plant from Korumburra to Kongwak. (Horsham Times, May 27, 1924)



A is for Amusements. Should Mechanics' Institutes be a place of amusement? Here are two views from the 1860s, the first one taking a light-hearted look at the matter.

Early next session an Act will be passed for altering the name of Mechanics' Institutes to some more appropriate title. These places are not intended either for the working classes or for educational purposes. Books and papers should be abolished, and skittles and dog-fighting, ratting, boxing, and other congenial amusements, substituted. We recommend the latter suggestion to the serious consideration of the managers of the various miscalled institutions in and about Melbourne. (Melbourne Punch, December 14, 1865)

Sir - Happening to be with a friend an evening or two ago, the conversation turned upon Mechanics' Institutes and what amusements given in them were suitable for the caterers to supply to the public. We differed, and hence arose a warm argument upon the subject, I maintaining that by proper amusements people were educated; therefore, the caterers ought to study to select those which would really give relaxation to the hard-wrought mind and wearied physical frame, at the same time giving a healthy moral tone by raising the mind above what is low and debasing to what is grand and sublime, and endeavoring to cultivate and permanently fix a taste for such. The grand question is, how is this to be done, and by what class of entertainment? Amusements must be had, especially by young men, for if they do not get them one way they will seek them in another that is most deteriorating to humanity; and it ought to be the aim of every philanthropic individual to lend a helping hand - to raise that fallen thing to its proper elevation. Every stone helps to build the cairn, therefore if every hand, by its writing - every tongue, by its words - every action, by its example - would lay a stone, how soon would a mighty pyramid be reared, how soon would prostrate humanity's noble form be uplifted from grovelling in the dust. Let those who take an interest in the moral and intellectual culture of youth take the above question into their serious consideration, previous to the opening of the Mechanics' Hall after the additions and improvements now going on have been finished, that they may give the result for the guidance of those who are the managers of that institution, and who are deeply desirous of promoting the welfare of the masses. (Mount Alexander Mail, February 1, 1867)

S is for Stealing. Sadly not every treasurer of Mechanics' Institutes was honest, some were tempted and embezzled funds.

The Kyneton Guardian writes that Wm. Gordon, late secretary to the local mechanics' institute, has absconded. It is believed that he has embezzled about £14 or £15 belonging to the institute. (The Advocate, December 15, 1877)

Mr Cyril Haviland, well known as secretary of the School of Arts (Mechanics' Institute), Sydney, has confessed to the committee of management, that he had embezzled L1800, the moneys of the Institution. Since then a committee of investigation has discovered that his total defalcations amount to L2300. (Mount Alexander Mail, December 13 1893)

James Sutherland Armstrong, the secretary of the Boulder Mechanics' Institute, was presented at the City Court this morning on a charge of having on November 17, stolen the sum of £33, which money had come into his possession by virtue of his position. (The Fremantle Evening Mail, November 25, 1905)



And it was not only money stolen, as this report notes, reading material was also stolen.

Wholesale thefts have been taking place at the Goulburn Mechanics' reading room. Judging by the periodicals and magazines stolen, the thefts are not the work of small children. Among the magazines being stolen are Readers' Digest, World Digest, Strand, Illustrated London News, Sketch, Punch, Saturday Evening Post, Picture Post. All these have been taken during the past fortnight. (Goulburn Evening Penny Post, September 14, 1939, see here)

Left: The original Goulburn Mechanics' Institute, c. 1870.
Image: Goulburn Mulwara Library



MERRY CHRISTMAS



Kyneton Mechanics' Institute—the Raffle case

I came across the following article in *The Argus* of March 29, 1956 and it makes the interesting claim that the Kyneton Mechanics' Institute is the oldest Institute in Victoria (but that's a story for another day) and that a raffle conducted at the Kyneton Mechanics' Institute led to a summons. The article is transcribed below.

THE RAFFLERS RAFFLED THE SUMMONS

SEVENTY years ago, supporters of Kyneton's Mechanics' Institute conducted a raffle.

But in those days, raffles were not regarded favorably by "the authorities." So a summons was issued against the raffle-holders.

THEY IMMEDIATELY RAFFLED THE SUMMONS—WITH RESOUNDING SUCCESS.

Such was the vigor of the Mechanics' Institute of 70 years ago. And such is its vigor today.

Kyneton's "M.I." is now 98 years old — it stands on one of the original Crown grants for such establishments.

"It has carried on as it started," said the secretary of the institute, Mrs. Florence Brown. "For this reason we claim it to be the oldest Institute in Victoria."

Once the "M.I." was the centre of the district's social life — it was the place where the shire council met, where its theatre, dances and balls were held, it was the setting for Vice-regal dinners

sit in this room," said Mrs. Brown, "you may not meet all the people you wish to, but you can get a message to them. For you are certain to meet somebody who knows them, or who is 'going their way.'"

The Institute library holds 8,400 volumes, and now a collection of significant Australiana is being built up. There is, too, a free children's library.

All in all, the cultural life of Kyneton is deep and active. It has its drama and musical groups, art

The Argus, March 29, 1956 <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/71794856>

The Raffle holders raffled the Summons

Seventy years ago, supporters of Kyneton's Mechanics' Institute conducted a raffle. But in those days, raffles were not regarded favorably by "the authorities." So a summons was issued against the raffle holders. The immediately raffled the summons — with resounding success.

Such was the vigor of the Mechanics' Institute of 70 years ago. And such is its vigor today. Kyneton's "M.I." is now 98 years old - it stands on one of the original Crown grants for such establishments. "It has carried on as, it started," said the secretary of the institute, Mrs. Florence Brown. "For this reason we claim it to be the oldest Institute in Victoria." Once the "M.I." was the centre of the district's social life - it was the place where the shire council met, where its theatre, dances and balls were held, it was the setting for Vice-regal dinners and receptions, and, all in all, it was the first place of entertainment.

The substantial old building, with its great bluestones, completed in 1858, has mellowed with the wisdom of Time. Its members room is known throughout Australia for its fine collection of paintings and for its unique collection of carvings and other craft examples made for display at Victoria's Great Exhibition. The Room - it is always spoken of with affection by Kynetonians - has a reputation something like that of Singapore, where, legend has it, if one waits long enough one will meet everyone in the world. "They say that if you sit in this room," said Mrs. Brown, "you may not meet all the people you wish to, but you can get a message to them. For you are certain to meet somebody who knows them, or who is 'going their way.'"

The Institute library holds 8,400 volumes, and now a collection of significant Australiana is being built up. There is, too, a free children's library. All in all, the cultural life of Kyneton is deep and active. It has its drama and musical groups, art groups, and play-readings; its study circles, and its craft "guilds."

I wondered if the story of the summons for a raffle was true or folklore and it appears that it is true and the Court case went all the way to the Supreme Court. The raffle took place at the Kyneton Mechanics' Institute in March 1869 (so a little bit more than the 70 years as noted above). I have summarized the Court case from a report in the *Kyneton Guardian* of March 13, 1869.

Kyneton Mechanics' Institute—the Raffle case

On Friday, March 12, 1869 William Langford, Salathiel Booth, William G. Blair, Henry B. Stiles and Alfred Purdeu, were charged on summons with being concerned in a raffle at the Church of England Bazaar, held in the Mechanics' Institute, on the evening of Wednesday, the 10th inst. The prosecutor, Sergeant Babington, deposed that in consequence of instructions received, he went to the Hall of the Mechanics' Institute at Kyneton where a Bazaar was being held in aid of the Church of England. He told the Bazaar committee, that the authorities had instructed him to call and inform them that information had been received that raffles and lotteries were to be carried on in connection with the bazaar. He later returned when the tickets were being sold, at two shillings each the prize being a 'water monkey' - an earthenware jar for cooling water, valued at eight shillings. There were only five tickets and when the last ticket was sold, Sergeant Babington, said " Gentlemen, as this raffle or lottery is illegal, I feel it my duty to seize this article,"

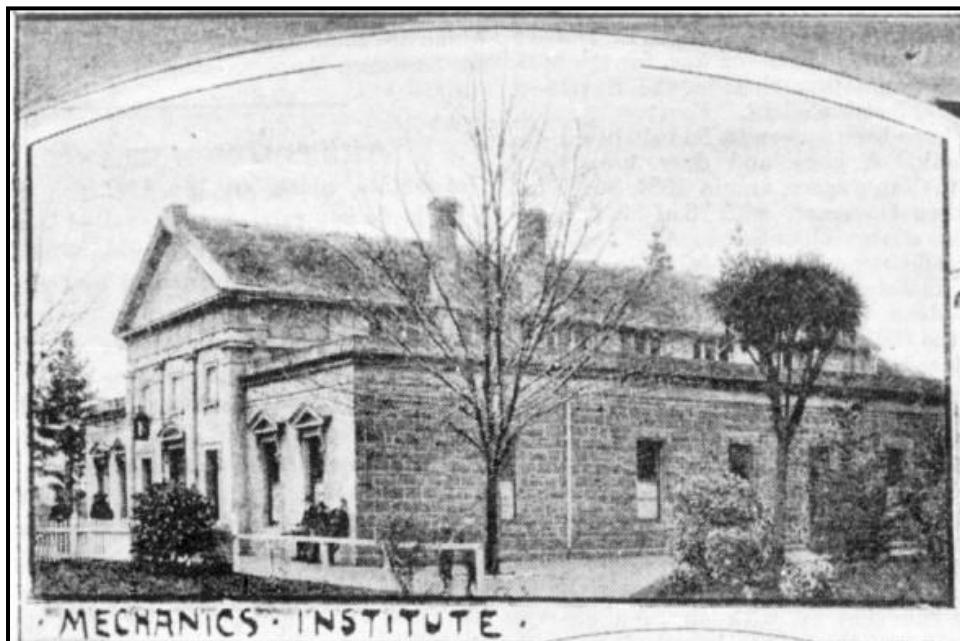
Mr Booth said, "Well, who'll the article belong to? We may not all meet again. Let's draw for it, and see who it is to belong to." The tickets were then placed on the stand of the monkey, and defendants each drew a ticket, and Mr Blair pronounced Dr Langford the winner.

At the court case, after the Sergeant gave his evidence, the Defence lawyers, Mr Bayne and Mr Hurry, argued that there was no case made out for the prosecution. It was essential that the parties interested in or originating lotteries should be beneficially interested, and there had been no attempt whatever made to prove that this was the case in the present prosecution. This had been decided by the judges of the Supreme Court in the case of the Police v Cohen, wherein the defendant was charged with having been concerned in getting up a raffle at a bazaar in aid of the funds of the Melbourne Hospital. Numerous prosecutions have been initiated since then, but in no case had the Bench of Magistrates taken upon them to reverse the decision of the highest judicial authority of the colony. Mr Bayne argued that the law against lotteries was never intended to apply to these trivial raffles which were got up in aid of charitable and religious institutions.

The Bench retired to deliberate, and after an absence of some quarter of an hour returned into Court. The Police Magistrate said that the Bench were unanimously of opinion that the case was one which came distinctly within the ruling of the Judges in the case of *Bergin v Cohen*. It was therefore dismissed with £5 5s costs.

Sergeant Babington was not happy and he appealed to the Supreme Court, the hearing being held on April 9, 1869 and the appeal was dismissed. Presumably then, Dr Langford received his water monkey back.

Read the full report of the Court case in the *Kyneton Guardian*, March 13, 1869, [here](#).
Read the full report of the appeal in *Kyneton Guardian* April 14, 1869, [here](#).



The Kyneton Mechanics' Institute, 1893, where the raffle took place.
State Library of Victoria <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/254964>

The Elwood Mechanics' Institute

By Heather Arnold

You can read the original of this article, with footnotes, here

<https://victoriastpast.blogspot.com/2023/05/elwood-mechanics-institute-and-infant.html>

On January 25, 1916 at the fourth annual meeting of the Elwood and South St Kilda Progress Association, on the motion of the newly elected President, Mr J.M. Balfour, a committee, consisting of Captain Wills, Messrs. J. F. Allen, M. Cohen, Russel, Brown, Allitt, and the president and secretary (ex officio) were appointed to consider the desirability of building a public hall at Elwood.

The editor of the *Prahran Chronicle*, thought the idea an excellent one -

The proposal contains all the more merit because of the fact that the idea is that Elwood people should own and manage their own public hall. Every community, large or small, is entitled to its own meeting place, and it is the duty of the Elwood Association, as one of the principal guardians of the interests of the residents, to bring the proposal to a satisfactory conclusion. The President mentioned that it might be possible to have a building on the lines of a Mechanics' Institute, and thus secure financial assistance from the Government. To such assistance Elwood would be fairly entitled. Then, again, as time goes on branches of the various friendly societies will be established in Elwood. An Elwood branch of the A.N.A., an Elwood Masonic Lodge, and likewise branches of the I.O.O.F., M.U.I.O.O.F., Druids, and organisations of a kindred character are all possibilities of the near future, they are essential sources of income in the way of rents and in this connection Mr Balfour and his co-workers will no doubt give some consideration when planning out the scheme for the proposed building. It would be advisable to look a little ahead. In itself the principle that Elwood people should own their own public hall is an excellent one.

The Committee recognised there was little prospect of building a hall, due to the War, however they sought the support of the St Kilda Council to approach *the Government with a request that they reserve an allotment of land at Glenhuntly road, Elwood, for the purpose of erecting a Mechanics' Institute at an early date, adjoining or in proximity to those allotments already ear-marked for the building of the proposed post office, fire brigade and police stations.* The Council was supportive and in July 1916 a deputation from the Council and the Hall Committee met with the Minister for Lands, Mr Hutchinson, and he promised to set aside and on the corner of The Broadway and Glen Huntley Road for a public hall and library.



Elwood c. 1925.

Intersection of Glen Huntley Road (runs from top to bottom of the photo) and The Broadway (comes from the left of the photo) and Ormond Road (comes from top right of photo on the diagonal). The building on the bottom corner of the vacant land is the Elwood Post Office, erected in 1925. It faces Glen Huntley Road. The blocks reserved for the Police Station and Public Hall are to the left of the Post Office in The Broadway. The building with the tower/spire is the now demolished Maison De Luxe dance hall.

Image: Detail of Elwood area on Port Phillip Bay, c. 1925. Photographer Charles Daniel Pratt, Airspy.

State Library of Victoria Image <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/20531>

The Elwood Mechanics' Institute

No doubt due to the War, things moved slowly and in July 1924 it was reported that *the St Kilda Council has decided that the Lands Department be asked to forthwith permanently reserve such allotments, and in the case of the site for the public hall to appoint trustees*. It wasn't until September 24, 1924 that the land, Allotment 17, Section 5, City of St Kilda, was officially reserved from sale. The allotment closer to Glen Huntly Road, Allotment 16 was reserved for the Police Station, which was built in 1952.

Two years later in June 1926, *The Age* could report that *A proposal will be submitted by Elwood Progress Association for consideration at a meeting of residents next month for the establishment of a local mechanics' institute, to include a public hall, reading room, library and billiard room. The association hopes that residents will co-operate towards this end. The money to finance the scheme will be raised by means of debentures. It is expected that the institute will become a payable proposition, and that the income received will soon liquidate the initial expenditure*

Nine years later, in 1935, there was still no progress on the matter, in fact the site was *so overrun with weeds that it was an eyesore*. That year the Elwood and St. Kilda Progress Association had approached the Carnegie Trust for the funding of a Library. The Carnegie Trust was established by Scottish born American, Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) who led and benefited from the expansion of the American steel industry. He sold his company, Carnegie Steel, to J.P. Morgan in 1901 for 480 million dollars and then devoted his life to philanthropic activities including Libraries and managed to give away 350 million dollars in his life time

However, the Carnegie Trust was not prepared to subsidise the proposed Elwood Library, as *The Age* noted - *At a meeting of Elwood and St. Kilda Progress Association, Mr. W. Bleaszby reported that practical assistance from the Carnegie Trust in establishing a public library at Elwood could not be expected. He had ascertained that the trust was not prepared to subsidise a library at which only a caretaker would be in charge. It would, however, make the services of a qualified person available to assist in the conduct of an established library. The chairman (Major Kean) said that when a representative of the trust had last visited Australia he had been reported to have said that this country was the most backward in availing itself of the opportunities offered by the conditions of the trust for the establishment of libraries*

There was some local frustration about the pace of the project, as well as at a State Government level as in May 1936 the - *St. Kilda council last night received a reminder from the Secretary for Lands that a block of land in The Broadway, Elwood, reserved in 1924 as a site for a public hall, had not been developed. The Minister of Lands was now considering the revocation of the resolution, with a view to putting the land to some use. Cr. Robinson said he intended to convene a meeting of ratepayers to discuss an issue of debentures to build a hall. The Minister should be asked to stay his hand until that meeting could be held. Cr. Morley said the Dunstan Government seemed to be possessed with earth hunger. It was remarkable that it should suddenly concern itself about a 60 foot block of land at Elwood. A motion that the Minister for Lands on asked to defer action in the meantime was carried.*

This missive from the State Government, as well as the fact that the Boys' Scouts Association had asked for permission to erect their own hall on the land, created some action. Thus on June 10, 1936 a meeting was called to discuss the erection of the Mechanics' Institute *attended by the trustees of the land Councillors Robinson, Burnett Gray and Morley of the St. Kilda Council; Mr Michaelis M.L.A.; and representatives of the St Kilda and Elwood Progress Association and the Boy Scout movement in the district.* The meeting resolved to request the St Kilda Council engineer to prepare plans for the Hall, to cost £2500. *At the meeting Cr. Burnett Gray, in moving that the request be granted, said the land had a frontage of 60 feet to the Broadway and a depth of 200 feet. He estimated its value at about £1800. The provision of a public hall and library would be of great benefit to the district. Portion of the land could be used later for the erection of a baby health centre. Cr Robinson said that councillors had frequently expressed regret that St. Kilda did not have a public library. It was desired by the progress association that the building should be of a good type, in accordance with the high standards of premises in the neighborhood.*

The money for the hall needed to be raised and one avenue was Unemployment Relief Funds and in August 1936, both the hall and Infant Welfare Centre were listed as part of the Councils proposed works using these funds, but seemingly nothing came of this.

Article continues overleaf

The Elwood Mechanics' Institute, continued

A year later, in May 1937, the St Kilda Council offered to contribute £1,250 to the cost of erecting a public hall on a site reserved for the purpose in Broadway, Elwood, on condition that citizens should provide £1,250 more. This decision was not made without some debate about the need to spend money in Elwood -

Cr. Robinson said it would be to the advantage of St. Kilda if a reading centre was established. The upkeep of the hall would be defrayed by rentals. The Mayor [Cr Levy]: I am strongly in favor of a library in the civic centre. It is not needed at Elwood. Cr. Dawkins said it was preposterous impudence for a deputation to ask the council to foot the bill for a hall at Elwood. It was not until recently that there had been any local effort to do anything with the site. He favored a central library.

The Elwood Library debate even made it to the letters page of *The Age* on November 8, 1937, when the following two letters were published -

Library Conscience.

Kindly permit me space in your valuable columns to refer to your able leader and the commentary thereon by our respected chief librarian (Mr. E.R Pitt), so far as St. Kilda is concerned as follows:— (a) St. Kilda city council was first instrumental in obtaining grant of a valuable site in Broadway, Elwood, for a public, hall and library, adjoining Elwood P.O. (b) The council then made a special grant of £1250 to assist same, (c) Site for carnivals on the foreshore to assist this cause granted, also patronage for all functions. (d) The mayor, mayoress, councillors, their wives, innumerable other ladies, and well-known citizens helping voluntarily, most generously and energetically with all entertainments, and expert advice on all beach events and masters generally, to bring into being as speedily as possible this very vital element of practical utility, pro bono publico. South St Kilda, now officially Elwood, is admittedly a very large, important, valuable and prosperous area of St. Kilda city, and all are doing their utmost here to have the hall and library an accomplished fact.

— ADVANCE CULTURE (Elwood).

While the library correspondence is proceeding the impression has arisen in some quarters that the St. Kilda city council and the residents of St. Kilda and Elwood are not awake to the value of library accommodation. May I through your columns correct this impression? The citizens of Elwood have acquired a site near Elwood post office, valued at £1700, upon which to

erect a public hall, library and cultural centre. St. Kilda city council has made a grant of £1250 towards the building. An active committee has been formed, the first £100 is within sight, and many functions are being organised to augment the funds, to enable a first class cultural hall and library to be established, so that this progressive district shall be among the foremost where intellectual development is paramount, —

W. T. JONES, Org. Secretary, Elwood Hall and Free Library Fund

Some of the functions organised by the community to raise money for what was now often called the Elwood Culture Hall, included a gala variety night at the Broadway Theatre in Elwood; carnival dance at the Maison de Luxe dance hall in Elwood in November 1937; a Beach Carnival with a scooter derby held over Easter in 1938 and the Elwood Horse Club's Gymkhana in November 1938.

Even though the Elwood Mechanics' Institute was still in the planning stage, there was a potential supply of books for the Library. In November 1937, it was reported that -

the St Kilda council appointed a committee to inquire into and report on the question as to whether a municipal library should be established.....Many years ago St. Kilda possessed a municipal library which was allowed to lapse. The books which formed it, how ever, were retained, and have for a long time been stored at the town hall. It has been suggested that if it is decided to re-establish the library these volumes, or such of them as are worth retaining, could be restored to the shelves. If the committee of the council referred to reports adversely to the proposal it is felt the books could appropriately be made the nucleus of a library at Elwood.

A hall and library was not the only community facility needed in Elwood. In August 1940, an Infant Welfare Centre was established in St Bede's Church Hall in Elwood. This proved to be most inadequate and there was community agitation to have a new Infant Welfare Centre in conjunction with a public hall. However, in the end the Infant Welfare Centre, named after Cr Burnett Gray, was erected on the land set aside for the Public Hall and it was opened on August 22, 1950, The Elwood community never got their Mechanics' Institute or Hall.

Mechanics' institutes, schools theme for 2024 Historical Society calendar

By Linda Giddy

<https://foster.vic.au/mechanics-institutes-schools-theme-for-2024-historical-society-calendar/>



Foster and District Historical Society Inc. committee member Rob Pritchard and research officer Nola Taylor with copies of the Society's newly-released 2024 calendar and two precious side plates marked with the Foster Mechanics Hall logo.

MECHANICS' institutes, free libraries, and schools, and their importance to their respective local communities as centres of learning and social activity form the theme for the Foster and District Historical Society Inc.'s 2024 calendar. The cover of the new calendar features the logo on two of the known remaining pieces of a once-extensive dinner service that was especially made to grace the tables of the Foster Mechanics' Hall built in 1895, the second of three in the town. Produced in England by Smith and Sons of Burslem in Staffordshire, the two white vitrified porcelain side plates are now safely held in the Foster Museum's collection.

According to *These Walls Speak Volumes – A History of Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria* published in 2015 by Pam Baragwanath and Ken James, the area covered by the present-day South Gippsland Shire had 55 mechanics' institutes by the 1880s, more than any other current Victorian municipality.

The calendar's cover also includes a quote from the same book's introduction stating that "mechanics' institutes were local, independent, self-funded, self-help initiatives. "They were the first voluntary system of libraries, education and community buildings in Victoria," the book extract continues. "Their aims generally were the diffusion of useful knowledge, literary and scientific, by means of a library and lectures" and "provided early civic infrastructure, as well as a necessary venue for social and community events."

The Historical Society's popular annual calendars are illustrated with images chosen from the extensive archives housed at the Foster Museum. A labelled aerial photograph of Foster, circa 1890s, shows the location of many of the town's early buildings, including the first Mechanics' Institute built where today's Foster Post Office now stands in Main Street, was selected for January 2024.

The page for February 2024 shows the graceful lines of Foster's second Mechanics' Institute in the 1950s, which was built on the site of the present Foster Fire Brigade station in Main Street in 1894 and opened the following year. This building was destroyed by fire in 1962 and was later demolished and replaced in 1965 by a new brick hall.

Article continues overleaf

Mechanics' institutes, schools theme for 2024 Historical Society calendar, continued

March 2024's picture is of a formal gathering in the second Foster Mechanics' Institute hall, with the tables laid with some of what could well be the Foster Mechanics Hall set of crockery! The original Foster State School Number 1172, which opened in 1875 and appears on the page for April 2024, was located in Pioneer Street near the first Shire of South Gippsland Office.

May 2024's page boasts Toora's second Mechanics' Institute hall in Gray Street, which was opened in 1909 to take over the role of the original smaller building in Dutton Street and was, in turn, replaced by the present brick hall in 1961. This building is still home to some of the original Toora Hall Library's volumes, which form the basis of the township's current library book collection and lending service.

A group portrait of those attending the "Flashlight" Military Ball held at the Toora Mechanics' Institute in 1919 may be seen on the page for June 2024, while July 2024's snap captures the pupils of the Toora State School in Gray Street in 1917. The Buffalo Mechanics' Institute, as seen on the page for August 2024, was built in 1894 and served as a school, a cinema, a library and an ecumenical church.

September 2024's image is of the Fish Creek Mechanics' Institute hall and library, built on railways land and opened in 1900. The building burned down in 1929 and was replaced by the current red-brick Fish Creek Memorial Hall in Falls Road. The Stony Creek Mechanics' Institute, the feature for October 2024, was erected in Main Street in 1894 and still serves as a community hub today. Its remnant library collection of 154 books may be seen in their own cupboard at the Foster Museum.

The image for November 2024 is of the current Welshpool Memorial Hall, which opened as the town's second Mechanics' Institute in 1953, after the original 1907 hall burned down when a film caught fire while being screened in 1942. The Toora Tin Mines Public Hall and Library, on the December 2024 page, was opened in March 1907 and in October of the same year it also entered service as the Toor Tin Mine State School Number 3547. The final photo in the Historical Society's calendar, for January 2025, is of the Bennison State School Number 3025.

The Foster and District Historical Society Inc.'s 2024 calendar is priced at \$20 and is available from the Foster Museum, the Foster Post Office, Natural Living Foster, Atticus Bookshop and Gallery in Foster, Rare Earth Studio Gallery in Toora, and the Yanakie General Store. The calendar may also be purchased online via the Foster and District Historical Society Inc.'s website at <https://promcountryhistory.org.au/>



Mechanics' Institute, Toora—one of the halls featured in the calendar.

Image and the information below from Gippsland & Regional Studies collection, Federation University.

A crowd of women and children are at the Mechanics' Institute in Gray Street, perhaps on Peace Day, November 1919. The building was constructed in 1909, incorporating an earlier building, and demolished about 1960 to make way for a new hall.