

No. 64 Winter 2025

The magazine of the
Mechanics' Institutes of
Victoria



Useful Knowledge



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Cover: Watchem Mechanics' Institute. Image part of the Wesson Collection, Mechanics' Institutes Resource Collection. Presumably 1960s.



**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 Victorian History Library.

President's Report - David Berry

The MIV and other Mechanics' Institutes have recently received some very welcome funding by way of grants from the State Government for the effective running of our institutes and the MIV itself through specific projects. This funding is proving vital to the existence of these institutes now and going forward. Please see report elsewhere in this newsletter of the official presentation of these grants by the Minister at the Melbourne Atheneum in May recently.

Our Secretary and Editor of *Useful Knowledge*, Heather Arnold, gave a very interesting and entertaining talk entitled 'A Social History of Mechanic's Institutes' at the PMI Library. You can view the video of the talk on the PMI YouTube channel https://youtu.be/uaprm_ZnrnU

I will be visiting a couple of our active institutes before the end of the year to experience first hand the diverse activities and approaches of our member institutes. Such learnings should be helpful in providing useful advice and assistance into the future.

Now that our funding has now been made by the Victorian Government, our main mission is to have the website rebuilt. Urgent action on this project has commenced

Planning for the bicentenary of Mechanics Institutes 'and their ilk' has already commenced.

Note from the Editor – Heather Arnold

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this edition.

I am happy to accept articles and photographs for the *Useful Knowledge* magazine - email them to me at mivnewslettereditor@gmail.com. Has your Mechanics' Institute received a grant, had some building works, celebrated a significant birthday, held some great events? Feel free to send me a report. The next newsletter is a Spring edition, I am aiming for the end of October, three months away.

Mechanics' Institutes Grants 2024-2025 presentation May 26, 2025

On May 26, 2025, the Hon Nick Staikos M.P., Minister for Local Government, in a special function at the Melbourne Athenaeum Library, announced the Mechanics' Institutes Grants for 2024-2025.

\$109,000 in funding was shared between the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria and the ten mechanics' institutes still operating a library service, namely Ballarat Mechanics' Institute, Berwick Mechanics' Institute & Free Library, Bonnie Doon Community Group, Footscray Mechanics' Institute Library, Little River Mechanics' Institute, Maldon Athenaeum, Melbourne Athenaeum, PMI Victorian History Library, Talbot Community Library and Arts Centre, Stanley Athenaeum and the Toora Community Hall & Library.

The following photos of the event are from James Baker of the Melbourne Athenaeum.



The audience at the Presentation



Right: David Berry, President of the MIV.

Below: Gary Bester (MIV), Nev Balfour (Footscray MI) and special guest Pam Baragwanath.



Mechanics' Institutes Grants 2024-2025 presentation May 26, 2025

The President of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria, Mr David Berry, gave the following speech at the event.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We would like to thank the Victorian Government for granting us assistance for the effective running of our Institutes and the MIV itself through specific projects. This funding is proving vital to the existence of these Institutes now and going forward.

With the 200th anniversary of formation of the first Mechanics' Institute in Australia (in Hobart, Tasmania) coming up in two years time, we are mindful of the great contributions that the Mechanics' Institutes have made to community life over that period and the contributions that they may continue to make in contemporary contexts over the coming years.

The State Government investment in our institutes, which are not only necessary for our survival but will deliver rich rewards back to our local communities, are very much appreciated. We thank the Government and especially, Mr Colin Morrison, for his ongoing helpful support in assisting with the effective submission of our grant applications. Thank you to the institute representatives for diligently giving the time and effort in submitting their individual grant applications. A big thank you also to Corinne Brewis from the MIV Committee for collating all the member submissions and to our Treasurer, Gary Bester, for his close liaison with Colin Morrison to maximise our effectiveness and understand all the details required for the submission and administration of the successful grants.

Thank you also to the Melbourne Athenaeum, originally the first Mechanics' Institute in Victoria, for hosting today's event.



Above: Sophie Arnold, President Melbourne Athenaeum.



Above right: Hon Nick Staikos M.P., and Pam Baragwanath.

Right: MIV Committee: Pat Anderson, O.A.M., Judith Dwyer, David Berry, Hon Nick Staikos M.P., Gary Bester and Peter Nankervis.



Photographs: James Baker of the Melbourne Athenaeum.

Mechanics' Institutes Grants 2024-2025 presentation May 26, 2025



Mark Potter (Ballarat MI), Heather Pavitt (Maldon Athenaeum) Colin McDonald (Ministerial Staff), Kevin Quigley (Melbourne Athenaeum)

Right: Michael Tonta (Prahran MI), Les Sanderson (Little River MI), Hon Nick Staikos M.P., Lauren Joffe (Prahran MI), Mark Potter (Ballarat MI), Nola Evans (Bonnie Doon MI)



Below: Les Sanderson (Little River MI), Judith Dwyer (Berwick MI), Bob Evans and Nola Evans (Bonnie Doon MI)



Media Reports of the event

Official Press Release.

Mechanics' Institutes Powers On After 186 Years In Vic

<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/mechanics-institutes-powers-after-186-years-vic>

South Gippsland Sentinel Times, May 26, 2025

Boost for Toora library from Mechanics' Institute fund

<https://www.sgst.com.au/news/boost-for-toora-library-from-mechanics-institute-fund>

Maribyrnong Star Weekly, June 2, 2025

Funding for Footscray Institute

<https://maribyrnonghobsonsabay.starweekly.com.au/news/funding-for-footscray-institute/>

Ballarat Times, June 6, 2025

State Supports Mechanics' Institutes

<http://timesnewsgroup.com.au/ballarat/news/state-supports-mechanics-institute/>

Thank you to James Baker of the Melbourne Athenaeum for supplying the photographs and a report on the event.

Badger Creek Hall Centenary celebrations

The Badger Creek Hall celebrated their Centenary at a function held on February 12, 2025. This report and the photographs from the day were supplied by Kathleen Cameron, Secretary of the Hall's Committee of Management.

Preparations for our centenary were extensive: Repainting stage, new curtain surrounds, new stage steps, dance floor rejuvenation, electric battery installation, foyer upgrade including eliminating an entry step, CORE installed air conditioners and had a handyman block up all the draughty gaps. We had been progressively upgrading our kitchen so re-sealed the kitchen floor. Outside we've installed security lighting for the car park. All these upgrades were through various government grants and overseen by our new Committee member Adam Cole – retired businessman and energy galore!

A fantastic day of celebrations involving our regular hall user groups – Healesville Spinners & Weavers, Karate, Dynamic Dancers, Bush Buddies, Birdlife Australia entertained all day. Also on program was local bands, singers, drumming group and a local harpist. Community groups set up displays: CWA Local Healesville branch had their first meeting in the hall; CORE displayed our effective Solar electricity system proving surplus going to the grid even in rain; Healesville Historical Society encouraged locals to record stories of events in the Hall over the last 100 years. We now have a permanent historical photographic display regarding Badger Creek's history – this was funded by our local Healesville Branch of the Bendigo Bank. The Badger Creek Women's Choir sang beautifully and another local singer Catherine Nolan re-wrote some lyrics to the *Road to Gundagai* (Badger Creek) and also John Denver's *Take me Home*, *Country Roads* words were adapted to reflect Badger Creek.

One regular user group is Interchange Outer East's Bush Buddies playgroup – no toys they play on the banks of Badger Creek in all weathers by choice. At our centenary they played mud pies! This group is an integrated opportunity for all abilities pre-schoolers and their families to enjoy our great outdoors.



Above: Bush Buddies playgroup members enjoying the Centenary Day.

Left: The community celebrating on the day

Badger Creek Hall Centenary celebrations

The day attracted locals and state-wide country travellers. One chap told the story of how his parents met at a dance in the Badger Creek Hall 73 years ago and he was a product of their marriage!



All up about 300 people were celebrating either by being in the program, attending as visitors or in the commercial stalls we had on offer. Badger Creek Men's Shed did the sausage sizzle and also hosted an open day showing their wonderful facilities at the rear of our Hall's property. Our local Coffee Cube trailer supplied good quality hot drinks all day. Our local Indian Restaurant Chula & Chimney set up a tent and offered gourmet Indian street food. Made Locally also set up stall of crafty items including products featuring Melways maps – orders were taken. Our Healesville Environment Watch group offered free indigenous plants and lots of advice. Yarra Ranges Council also set up a stall seeking community input for the future.

Left: Aunty Kim Wandin, Welcome to Country.

The Badger Creek Hall Committee of Management (just five volunteers) Centenary Co-ordinator Adam brought together a full day's program of entertainment and then backed it up by a finale of a Bush Dance. During Covid when we could not use the Hall, a ballroom dancing pair needed space to practice. So we hired the hall to Kate & Ed for exclusive use 24/7 to prepare for a championship competition coming up. They won the Australasian

Ballroom Dancing championship of that year and in way of showing their appreciation wanted to do an exhibition dance to kick off our Bush Dance. Of course different styles but the audience were in awe, observing their graceful ballroom dancing. Next Kate changed out of her exquisite ballgown to join in the fun of country bush dancing! Ed stayed in his tuxedo – looking grand with his tails flying!

To report that our 100 year celebrations were a success is an understatement. Now our committee will take a well-earned breather whilst still voluntarily maintaining our 100 year old community asset.



Above: The Birthday cake and the Bush Dance

Local Member, Cindy McLeish, the member for Eildon, made the following statement in Parliament on February 19, 2025, to officially recognise the work of the Badger Creek Hall Centenary Committee -
 Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:46): Badger Creek hall marked its centenary in grand style on Saturday, complete with birthday cake, all-day activities and a bush dance. Great crowds were there all day, and I was delighted to present the keys to Badger Creek to local historian and long-time volunteer Kevin Mason. Congratulations to everyone involved in making the event a resounding success. Kathleen, Adam, Kevin, you have all done a wonderful job.
<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/parliamentary-activity/hansard/hansard-details/HANSARD-2145855009-29534>

“A fracas in the Institute”

By Sue McClarron, Secretary Friends of Launceston Mechanics' Institute

In the early days of the new Launceston Mechanics' Institute building (opened 1860) its rooms and resources were in high demand. It wasn't always peaceful in the Institute, however.



Launceston Mechanics' Institute Reading Room

Image: Launceston Library LPIC147-4-82.

In the same year the new building was opened there was a 'fracas' that led to fisticuffs and made headline news in the local papers. The gentlemen involved were not, as one might expect, the mechanics for whom the Institute had been provided, but two highly regarded gentlemen.

A polite letter from Mr T. Sharp, music teacher, to the LMI committee, and reported in the *Launceston Examiner*, gives us some insight into the fracas that was to follow:

I have to complain of the conduct of the Rev. Mr. Ewing, who on Wednesday last positively refused to give up the Class room, although a week's notice was given of my intention to use it upon that evening The answer he gave me was that he would give up the room to no one, the room was his and he would not be interfered with. (Launceston Examiner, 1 Nov 1860, p.2, and letter dated 30 Aug 1860.)

Rev. Ewing had bookings for the classroom on Mondays and Thursdays and the option of using it on Wednesdays and Fridays if the other days proved inconvenient. Mr Sharp had been offered the classroom on Wednesdays at a time when Rev Ewing was not using it. The problem arose because the person in charge of room letting had gone on leave and requested that task be dealt with by someone else (Petrow, S. *Going to the Mechanics*, 1998); this did not occur. However it was decided Mr Sharp had a right to the room.

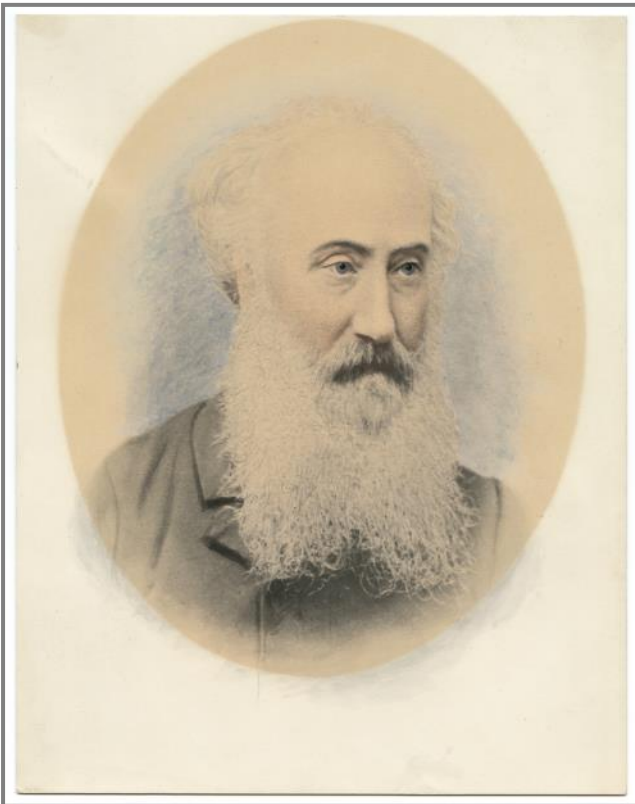
Rev. Ewing's letter of 12 September to the LMI committee reveals an assumed sense of pre-eminence over Mr Sharp. He refers to the "person who used my classroom tonight... Mr Sharp has even presented his possession of my classroom as a triumph over me." (letter dated 12 Sep 1860). The committee offered Rev Ewing the large hall on Wednesday nights instead of the classroom. On the 19th September Ewing wrote not one, but two, letters to the committee asking for a resolution and saying he would not vacate the classroom.

Correspondence continued with no satisfaction to Ewing.

“A fracas in the Institute”

On 20 September 1860 the *Launceston Examiner* reported (entirely on the side of Rev Ewing):
A fracas between the Rev. R. K. Ewing and Mr. Thomas Sharp, of Cameron street, took place yesterday evening in one of the class rooms of the Mechanics' Institute. It is said that Mr. Sharp used some very insulting language to Mr. Ewing, who then quietly laid Mr. Sharp on the floor. Upon regaining his feet some further altercation took place, and Mr. Sharp was compelled to leave the room.

A letter from A.B. Biggs, Librarian to G. Casey Esq., President of the LMI reveals an entirely different story which did not reach the newspapers. Biggs had been requested by both gentlemen to light the classroom for their use on 19th September at 7pm. The secretary, Mr Wathen, confirmed to him that Mr Sharp had the booking for that night and the hall was for Rev. Ewing. Biggs lit both rooms but found Sharp and Ewing in the classroom. Ewing asked for a constable to be called in case Mr Sharp had be “put out”. Sharp agreed a constable should be called. A brief conversation ensued which Mr Biggs could not clearly hear, then:
Mr Ewing immediately unbuttoned his over coat and made an attack upon Mr Sharpe [sic] (who tried to get away) by knocking him down over a chair, dragged him to the floor and struck him twice or three times whilst on the floor. Mr Sharpe called for me & cried “Murder”. I ran to the reading room for assistance. Met Mr Ferguson whom I requested to assist in parting them, went over to the Public house & brought the Landlord by which time they were separated. (a letter dated 20 Sep 1860).



The result was that both men were barred from using the room for three months. Ewing called for a public meeting which occurred on 30 September. Upwards of 400 members were present and the speakers on the platform included the Mayor and two members of the House of Assembly.

After this spectacular climax the event fizzled out to a quiet end in early November when both Ewing and Sharp said they didn't need the classroom anyway until the following year.

Mr Thomas Sharp had had a connection with St John's Church for 18 years where he taught singing to the girls' Sunday School class. He was a violinist in the Launceston Sacred Harmonic Society before becoming the President and then conductor.

Left: Rev Ewing, whose portrait was to adorn the walls of the LMI reading room in later years.

Image: Launceston Library LMS745/1/44.

The Reverend R. K. Ewing, although a minister of religion, was a controversial figure. He found himself in many disputes before and after the 'fracas'. Despite the controversies in which he became embroiled, Ewing was thought of by many as an exemplary citizen. His enthusiasm and tireless efforts to raise money played no small part in the construction of the new LMI building. He had been President of the LMI for four years prior to the opening of the new building.

How two such respected men could come to blows over the renting of a room is a mystery. But it does show the passion which users felt over the use of the Institute.

Mechanics' Institute talk during the National Trust Heritage Festival

On April 30, 2025 as part of the National Trust Heritage Festival and in conjunction with Hobsons Bay Libraries, Pam Baragwanath and Ken James gave a talk, *These Walls Speak Volumes*, at the Newport Hub in the lecture hall of the former Newport Mechanic's Institute. The talk explored the history of Mechanics' Institutes and their cultural significance in Victoria and beyond. Pam and Ken, are the authors of *These Walls Speak Volumes : A History of Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria*.



During the talk a tribute was paid to Janette Hodgson, formerly the Historic Places Officer of the Department of Conservation Forests and Lands, who with Pam created the Mechanics' Institute database in 1988.

This Index listed MIs by local government area and produced some interesting statistics. There were 956 Mechanics' Institutes (MI) on the database and the top ten municipalities were:

South Gippsland Shire with 55 MIs; Wellington Shire, 43; Baw Baw Shire, 40; East Gippsland Shire 33; Loddon, Shire, 30; Corangamite Shire, 26; Hepburn Shire, 25; Moyne Shire, 25; Ballarat City, 24; Greater Bendigo City, 24.

You can find the full list on page 683 of *These Walls Speak Volumes : A History of Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria*. On page 685 of the same book is Janette's list of MIs in rural Victoria, of which there are 795 and metropolitan Melbourne, of which there are 161.

Left: Ken James, Pam Baragwanath and Janette Hodgson at the talk.

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The talk took place at the Newport Mechanics' Institute which opened on July 6, 1935. It is pictured below, in the 1960s.

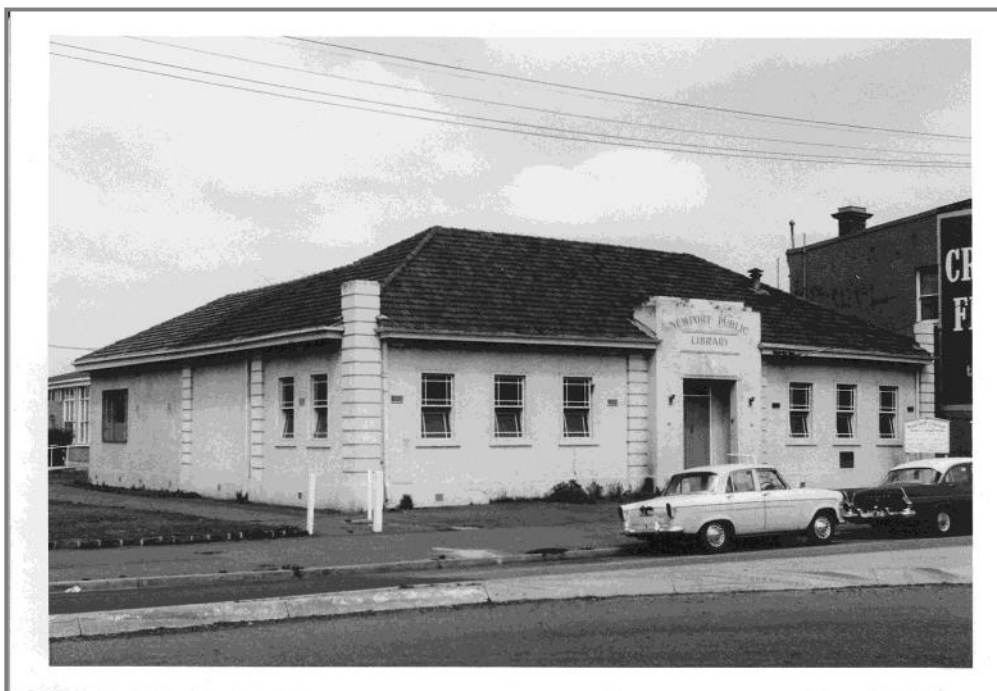


Image: Wesson Collection part of the Mechanics' Institutes Resource Collection (MIRC).

Identical Halls

These photographs are from the Wesson collection, Mechanics' Institutes Resource Collection (MIRC) and show not quite identical, but very similar halls. The same design was often used for rural Churches.

What these images tell us, is that it didn't matter that the buildings were small and plain as they were almost always built by community effort and then became the heart of the town where they were situated as a place to learn, a place to socialize, a place to read, a place to be entertained and a place where the community felt some ownership.



Top Row: Left - Elphinstone Right - Pomborneit

Middle Row: Left - Alberton Right - Barfold

Bottom Row: Left - Ventnor Right - Eddington

Mechanics' Institutes Australian Bicentenary, 2027

A small committee has been formed to organise events to commemorate the 200 years of Mechanics' Institutes in Australia. The committee, which is formally known as the Mechanics' Institutes Australia 2027 Bicentenary Committee, will organise events in Melbourne and surrounds on the weekend of March 13 & March 14, 2027. This will most likely take the form of an all day conference at the Melbourne Athenaeum and a bus trip to look at some Mechanics' Institutes.

We are working closely with our Tasmanian colleagues, who are planning a series of bicentennial events in Hobart and Launceston from Friday, March 19 until Sunday, March 21, 2027.

The Mechanics' Institute movement began in Australia in Hobart in March 1827 when the inaugural meeting of the Van Diemen's Land Mechanics' Institute was held; they later became known as the Hobart Mechanics' Institute. The Tasmanian events will concentrate on the history of Mechanics' Institutes in that state, whilst the Victorian events will look at Australian Mechanics' Institutes more broadly.

We are in the planning stage and more details will be published in future *Useful Knowledge* magazines. We will also provide information about any events in other States. In the meanwhile, save these dates for two weekends of interesting events to celebrate 200 years of Mechanics' Institutes in 2027.

Mechanics' Institutes Australia 2027 Bicentenary Committee

President: Ellen Coates (PMI Victorian History Library) ellen@pmi.net.au

Secretary: Heather Arnold (MIV) mivnewslettereditor@gmail.com

Treasurer: Gary Bester (MIV) treasurer@mivvic.org.au

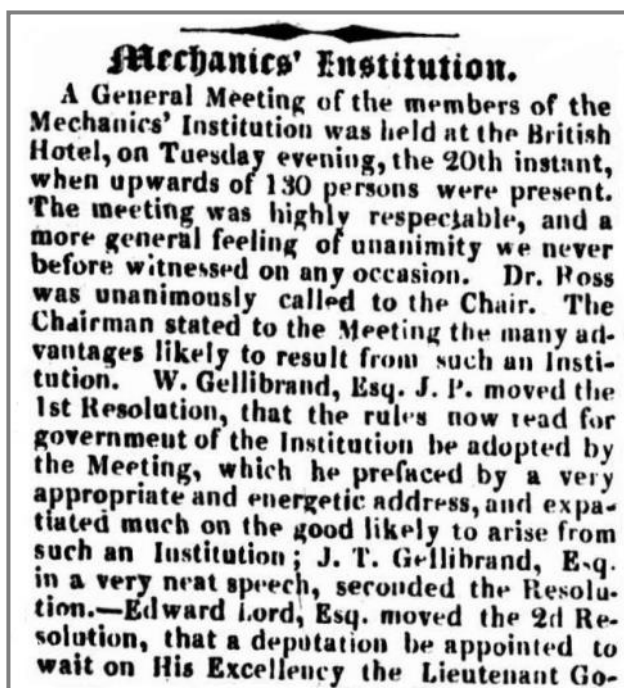
Marketing: Ellen Becker (Ballarat Mechanics' Institute)

Committee: James Baker (Melbourne Athenaeum)

Further Reading

If you wish to brush up on some history, the Libraries Tasmania website has three interesting articles on the Hobart, Launceston and Oatlands Mechanics' Institutes, access them here

<https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Digital/1231820>



The article on the Hobart MI notes the initial meeting date to establish the organization was March 23, 1827. However the *Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser*, reports that the meeting took place on March 20, 1827.

A General Meeting of the members of the Mechanics' Institution was held at the British Hotel, on Tuesday evening, the 20th instant, when upwards of 130 persons were present. The meeting was highly respectable, and a more general feeling of unanimity we never before witnessed on any occasion.

The article finishes with -
Here, Tasmania takes the lead of Australia - long may she keep it - and we heartily wish success to the Mechanics' Institution.

Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser, March 23, 1827
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2449778>

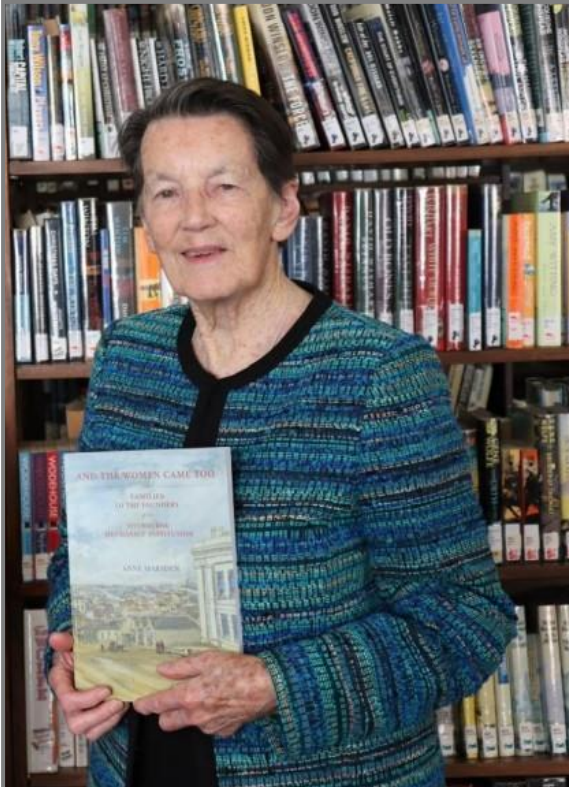
Vale Anne Marsden

November 10, 1931 - January 15, 2025

Obituary published in the Melbourne Athenaeum June News

<https://melbourneathenaeum.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/June-2025-eNews.pdf>

We were all saddened to hear of the passing of Anne Marsden, whose work in researching the history of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution (now the Ath) was invaluable. Anne, a long-time volunteer with the archives, penned *The Making of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution*, which took a close look at the 50 men elected to the first committee of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution.

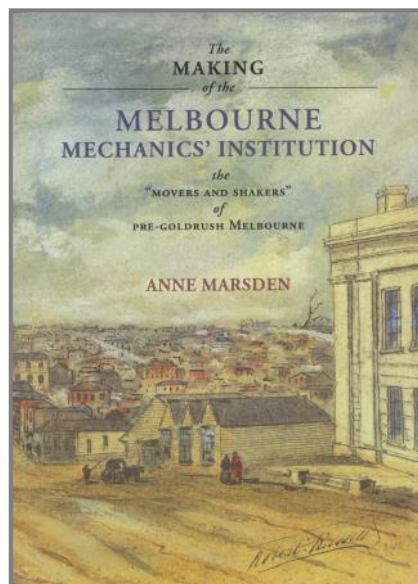
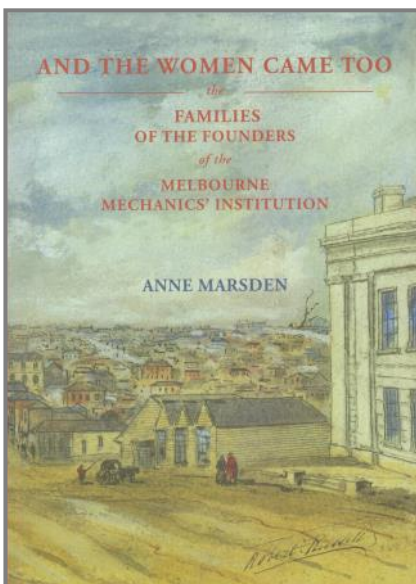


While researching that book, Anne unearthed fascinating stories of the pivotal role of women in the fledgling settlement and this led to *And the Women Came Too: the Families of the Founders of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution*. Both books are available to borrow from the Athenaeum library.

Anne became a writer later in life. She graduated from Leeds University with a science qualification and came to Australia in early 1957. She married an Australian and, while busy with a young family, did her teacher training and worked at University High School. After retiring, and when her husband became ill, Anne decided to write a book about his family, who had arrived in Melbourne in 1841.

Her husband's great-grandfather, Joseph Ankers Marsden, was on an early committee of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution and Anne spent time in the Athenaeum archives doing research. She loved being in the archives and vowed to return as a volunteer.

As well as the books, Anne wrote many essays and spoke about the history of the mechanics' institute movement at numerous conferences.



You can read Anne Marsden's article *Gentlemen Versus Players: public squabbling over the membership of the foundation committee of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution* in the *The La Trobe Journal* No. 92 December 2013

Here <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/La-Trobe-Journal-92-Anne-Marsden.pdf>

Mechanics' Institutes Seminar at Deakin University, March 14, 2025

By Jim Lowden

The fast approaching bicentenary of the Mechanics' Institute Movement in 2027 in Australia was the spur to mark the recent visit of Heriot-Watt Emeritus Professor Susan Roaf to Deakin University. (Professor Roaf headed up the Scotland Mechanics' Institute Hunt Project in 2020-2021.)

It was an opportunity that was taken up at short notice and Deakin University offered their superb new facilities at Deakin Melbourne Downtown in Docklands for an afternoon Seminar. Themed 'Mechanics' Institutes: Heading to Their Australian Bicentenary in 2027', the Seminar attracted five supporting papers to Professor Roaf's keynote. Proceedings were conducted both in person and remote participants were from New South Wales, Tasmania and Bradford, UK.

The Seminar started with an excellent light luncheon at which delegates and visitors indulged. Deakin's Distinguished Professor Jane Matthews welcomed all to the Deakin University Campus.

Keynote Professor Roaf outlined her discovery and mapping of some 192 Mechanics' Institutes across Scotland and then adding their geographical setting, the key players in their establishment, their buildings and their activities and their fate.

Next on the Program was Ellen Coates, Collections Manager, PMI Victorian History Library who spoke to the paper title 'Pahran Mechanics' Institute: Finding Its Niche'. James Baker, Cataloguing Manager, Melbourne Athenaeum followed with the paper 'Melbourne Athenaeum – 185 and Counting', which he had compiled in conjunction with Library Manager, Fiona Malcolm.

The afternoon tea break saw another round of very tasty offerings, again courtesy of Deakin University, and a further rare chance to chat with fellow Mechanics.



From left: Ellen Becker, Ellen Coates, James Baker, Professor Susan Roaf, Jim Lowden, Mike McCausland.
Photographer: Robert Shackleton.

Mechanics' Institutes Seminar at Deakin University, March 14, 2025

Session two opened with Mike McCausland, Chair of the Friends of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute Library, arguably the largest single remnant MI library in Australia. Mike's paper was titled 'Into something rich and strange; adapting the promise of Mechanics' Institutes to the Hobart Town of 1827'. It concentrated on the 'intrigues' of the first six months, which adapted the Van Diemen's Mechanics' Institution to local circumstances. Mike also alluded to the future move of the former Launceston Mechanics' Institute into purpose-built storage premises.

In recognising the bicentenary of the founding of the Bradford Mechanics' Institute in the industrial heartland of Britain 1825, Patricia Restorick, Bradford's first woman President, gave her paper 'Bradford Mechanics' Institute at 200... and Still Going Strong. Moral Imperative? Paternalism? Nudge Theory?'. Bradford's population climbed from 6000 in 1801 to 216,000 in 1891 and along the way it became a powerhouse of industrial innovation and technical education. Given that there has not been a history of Bradford Mechanics' Institute published, Tricia's paper was truly a rare insight.

The final paper of the day was from Ellen Becker, Heritage Collection Curator, Ballarat Mechanics' Institute. Ellen's paper was titled 'Von Mueller's Herbariums and the 'Diffusion of Useful Knowledge' at the Ballarat Mechanics' Institute'. BMI holds a rare extant set of von Mueller's plant specimens distributed to Libraries and Mechanics' Institutes in the 1870s and Ellen took us through some examples. She also detailed how, with a Government Living Heritage Grant, the fragile collection was conserved to enable it to be part of their working Educational Collection.

Brief discussion followed on what had been a full and enlightening afternoon. The way forward was canvassed and it was agreed that Papers be collated and distributed.

Bradford Mechanics' Institute



Postcard of the Bradford Mechanics' Institute, c. 1910. (source EBay)
This building was erected in 1871 and demolished in the mid 1970s.

Levuka Mechanics' Institute

The Golden years of Mechanics' Institute of the 1800s

By John Lamea

Published in the *Fiji Times* March 16, 2025

<https://www.fijitimes.com.fj/the-golden-years-of-mechanics-institute-of-the-1800s/>

Levuka officially ceased to act as Fiji's capital from 1882. Four years later, in 1886, it was still regarded a lively place to live in, with all the trappings of a colonial port township. Then some very fine stores made up of weatherboard and iron, lined Beach Street.

Leading Levuka firms at the time included Messrs W. Hennings and Co., G. Morgan, Sadingham and Co., H. Cave and Co., Hoerder and Co., Sadingham and Co., Brodzrak and Co., and Bentley and Co. According to Levuka.wordpress.com Levuka had "three good hotels" - Polynesia, Planters Club and Royal. The latter still stands today, making it the oldest hotel in the South Pacific.

Shops and businesses included butchers, tailors, bakers, boat makers, chemists, watchmakers, sail makers, blacksmith and boot makers, among others. There were two bank branches, the Bank Of New Zealand and the Union Bank of Australia and three established churches belonging to the Church of England, Roman

Catholic and Wesleyan Mission.

Levuka.wordpress.com further noted there were two newspapers, *The Fiji Times* and the *Polynesian Gazette*. The former owned one of the "handsomest and most prominent buildings" in the town. And there was also something called "The Mechanics' Institute". The website levuka.wordpress.com says, "The Mechanics' Institute is a large and imposing structure, with the town clock its steeple; in the hall amateur theatricals, and assembly balls are held."

In the 1800s, Mechanics' Institutes were established in Europe and America as educational organisations for craftsmen and skilled workers. These institutes were set up to disseminate knowledge from trade to trade, and provide education for members through lectures on science and a variety of self-improvement topics. Subscription libraries, for the use of institute members and for the public, usually formed part of the institute.



Levuka in 1880. The Mechanics' Institute is the white structure on a thin strip of land jutting out to sea near Niukabe

Image: Royal Museums Greenwich <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-1174273>

Levuka Mechanics' Institute by John Kamea

The library in a Mechanics' Institute included works of fiction and non-fiction, a reading room for newspapers and magazines, and a venue for lectures, classes, book and play readings, and light entertainment. Some institutes became educational establishments originally formed to provide adult education, particularly in technical subjects, to working men in Victorian-era Britain and its colonies.

They were often funded by local industrialists on the grounds that they would ultimately benefit from having more knowledgeable and skilled employees. The mechanics' institutes often included reading spaces for the adult working class, and were said to provide them with an alternative pastime to gambling and drinking in pubs.

In New Zealand, Mechanics' Institutes were formed very early during its European settlement period. The Auckland Mechanics' Institute for instance was established in July 1841, and a Wellington Institute started in April the following year. The Wellington organisation took over the collection of the Port Nicholson Exchange and Central Library, a subscription library set up in 1841 with Dr. F. J. Knox as librarian. Although the Wellington Institute was suspended for four years after 1844, it was revived again in August 1848.

In Levuka, Ovalau, following the style of similar buildings throughout the world, the Mechanics' Institute was used as Fiji's first library of sorts and a centre of the arts and entertainment. According to the journal article, *The Levuka Reading Room: Fiji's first library*, author Philip James Calvert noted that the first public reading space in Fiji was established in the capital of Levuka between 1858 and 1862 by William Thomas Prichard, who was at that time the British consul in Levuka. However, this did not survive for very long.

Prichard thought that such an institution was necessary to bring about some semblance of civic pride and civic mindedness among citizens of Levuka since within the first month of having him as the consul, he had to deal with at least 10 cases of drunkenness and riotous conducts among members of the British community.

However, in 1868, a second reading room became a reality but not without its string of problems. The stock was inadequate and the room never had a secure financial base. It was successfully used for community activities such as dances, meetings, and lectures. The public house was located in a small thatched building erected on Niukabe Hill on land leased from the Wesleyan Mission.

Because it was a popular place, its support helped it resist an attempt by the Polynesia Company and the Wesleyan Mission from taking over its site. In 1871, when the room was used for the assembly of the new Cakobau government, its use as a reading room/library came to an end. Its collection of books was then passed on to the Mutual Improvement Association and later to the Levuka Mechanics' Institute which became the first known library in Fiji.

The Mechanics' Institute was the centre of activities, art and entertainment in early Levuka. In Turpin's *Fiji Directory* (1874), similar to today's Yellow Pages, the Mechanics' Institute was looked after by Mr F.H.Duff as president, Mr T.A.Cartledge as vice-president and Mr John Harman as secretary.

For some time it was used to hold court sessions when the government offices on Niukabe Hill had to be refurbished. When sites in Levuka were scouted to permanently build what is today known as Levuka Public School (LPS), the school board initially wanted to set up the school at the Mechanic's Institute but that never happened.

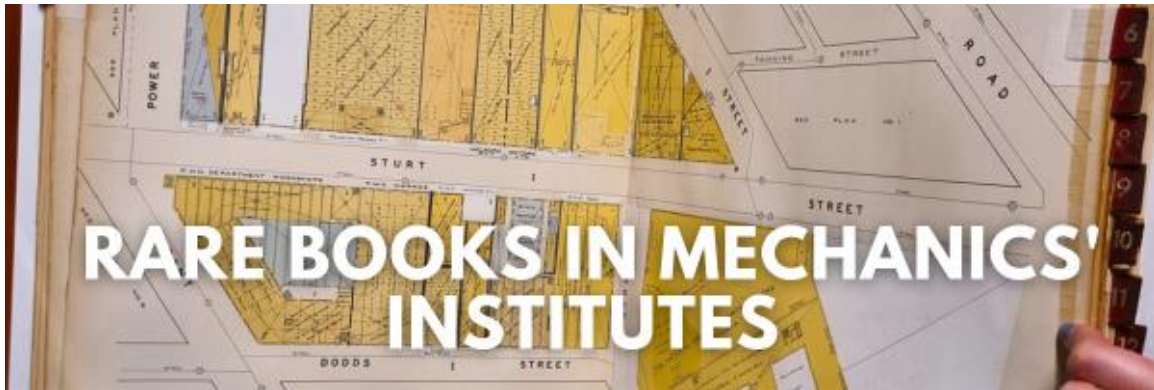
According to LPS records, in 1879, school management started looking for a permanent place to build the school, then called Levuka Common School. By the end of the year, the lease of the Oldfellows Hall had expired so the school temporarily used the Mechanics' Institute, "where the town folks had their balls, plays, entertainment and other social events".

In its search for a lasting home, the school Board eyed two pieces of land – one on the south of Totogo Creek and one near Niukabe Hill, today the site of the European War Memorial. The former site was chosen "in accordance with the decision arrived at by ratepayers".

When the capital of Fiji was moved to Suva, on Viti Levu, a mechanics' institute was also set up in Suva at the corner of Butt Street and Gordon Street. According to Fiji Museum records, the Mechanics' Institute was opened in 1884 and provided a library to the adult working class who were interested in technical subjects.

At a public auction in March, 1904, the Wesleyan Mission made a successful bid of £1375 for the property and had since acquired it. The Wesley City Mission Church, commonly known as "The Butt Street Church" was the former location of Mechanics' Institute Suva and originally opened as a school when the church took over.

Events at the Prahran Mechanics' Institute Victorian History Library



Uncover Hidden Treasures: Rare Books in Mechanics' Institutes

Join an expert panel featuring librarians from three historic Victorian institutions: the PMI Victorian History Library (est. 1854), Ballarat Mechanics' Institute (est. 1859), and Athenaeum Library (est. 1839).

Delve into the rich history of these community learning hubs, explore rare books and materials in their collections, and gain behind-the-scenes insights into rare book collecting. Learn how these libraries are shaping their collections for the future, preserving our literary heritage for generations to come.

Don't miss this unique opportunity to explore Victoria's literary treasures and engage directly with our knowledgeable panel.

When: July 30, 2025 at 6.30pm

Where: PMI Victorian History Library

Bookings: <https://brushfire.com/pmivictorianhistorylibrary/rarebooks/600338>



Victorian History Showcase

You are invited to join us at a remarkable event where we have joined forces with numerous societies and special interest groups, including the MIV. Together, we are presenting a captivating one-day showcase exhibition, bringing together various areas of historical research.

Prepare to be amazed as our esteemed exhibitors offer their expertise, providing invaluable guidance and directing you to resources and locations that will enhance your research journey in your specific historical interests. Whether you're fascinated by architecture, local history, family history, or general history, our event promises to enrich your knowledge with insights from experienced historians and experts.

When: September 13, 2025 @ 10.30am – 3:30pm

Where: PMI Victorian History Library

Bookings and information on the exhibitors : <https://brushfire.com/pmivictorianhistorylibrary/showcase-2025/598644>

Little River Mechanics' Institute receives a grant

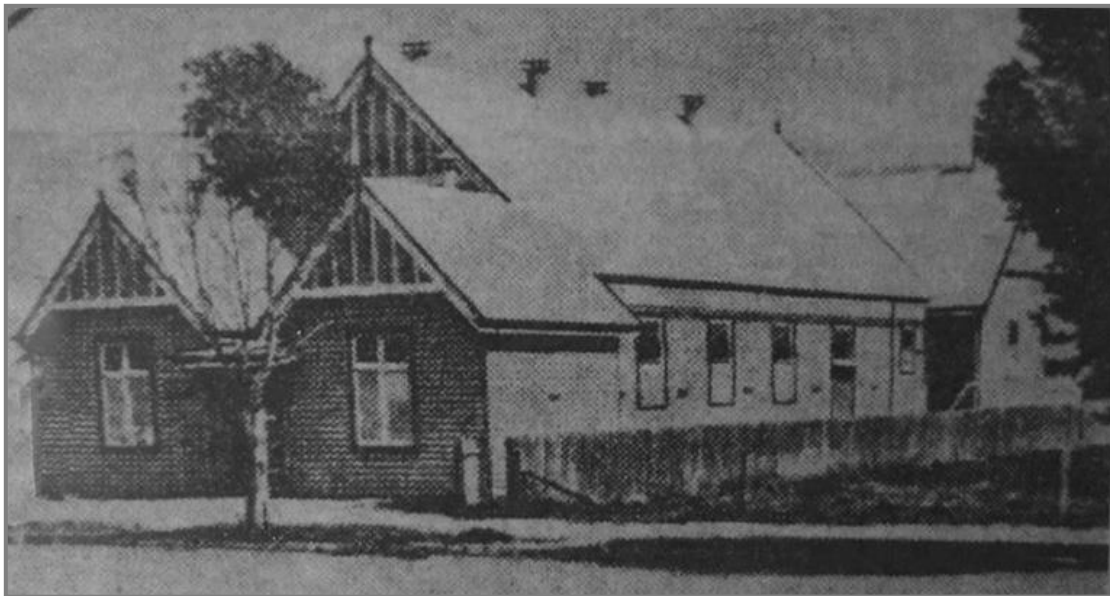
Source: *Wyndham Star Weekly* 13/5/2025 <https://wyndham.starweekly.com.au/news/stage-lights-in-sight/>

Stage Lights in Sight

The Little River Mechanics Institute has received funding to install stage lighting at its historic hall. The mechanics institute, which opened in 1910, provides education, recreation and a focal point for community activities and events for Little River and the surrounding districts. The \$5000 grant is being delivered through stage two of the state government's Tiny Towns fund which is intended to support towns with a population of 5000. Secretary treasurer of the institute Les Sanderson said the contribution will be a helpful addition to the project which will cost roughly \$22,000.

"We've been looking for ways to generate some more income to manage the building and the place operational, so this will be helpful," Mr Sanderson said. He said the lack of stage lighting so far has made it difficult to host performances. "Hopefully this [will allow us to] to get some stuff done with the council art teams will allow a few more performances to come along." "It's going to be a bonus for us and gives a broader scope of what we can actually do there."

Mr Sanderson said there is interest from performing arts and production groups from across Wyndham in using the facility. He said the institute is always looking for more volunteers and members from the community are welcome anytime.



Little River Mechanics' Institute in 1910, shortly after its opening.

Image: <https://littlerivermechanicshall.weebly.com/>

The Little River Mechanics' Institute opened on August 3, 1910; and on July 23, 1911 the Free Library opened in a room in the front of the Hall. The architects were the Geelong firm Seeley and King.

TENDERS invited for **ERECTING W.B. HALL** at Little River, returnable 12 o'clock on Thursday, 14th inst., and addressed Seeley and King, architects, Post-office, Little River.
Plans and specifications to be seen at the office of **J. H. Stainsby, A.R.V.I.A., Stalbridge-chambers, Chancery-lane, Melbourne.**

The Argus, April 9, 1910 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article10847817>

Brunswick Mechanics Institute—the first sixty years

By Heather Arnold

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

<https://victoriaspast.blogspot.com/2025/06/brunswick-mechanics-institute-first.html>

In September 1867, *The Age* reported that - *A special entertainment, in aid of the projected Brunswick Mechanics' Institute and Public Hall, took place in the Assembly Rooms recently erected adjoining the Retreat Hotel, on Thursday evening last. The programme comprised selections from Dickens, Hood, Lord Brougham and other popular authors, and a selection of duets, songs and quartettes; Miss Lowcock presided at the pianoforte, and the entire entertainment gave every satisfaction to the large assembly present.*

The next report I can find of this institution is in July 1868 when £300 was itemised in the Chief Secretary's Department budget for the purchase of a piece of land for a Mechanics' Institute, Brunswick. The building is on the corner of Sydney Road and Glenlyon Road, next to the Retreat Hotel and opposite the Brunswick Town Hall. There is another source which notes that the land for the building was actually donated by Theodotus John Sumner, the first President (more of whom later). It may be the case that Sumner sold the land for a discounted rate, I have no other information on this.

Some sources note that the building dates from 1868; the plaque on the building lists the establishment date as 1868, even though there was obviously a committee in 1867 working towards the projected building; so the dates in these early years are a bit murky. However, it wasn't until 1869 that an Architect, Mr T.A. Kelly, was appointed. He advertised for tenders to erect the building in November 1869.

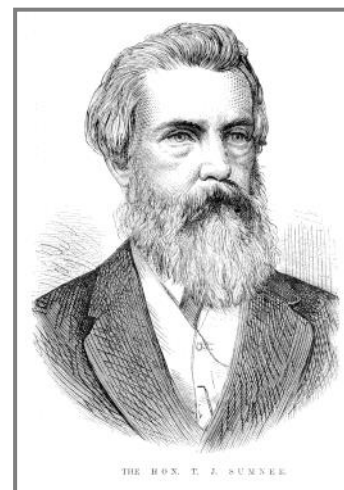
TENDERS are invited, for ERECTION of MECHANICS' INSTITUTE, at Brunswick. Plans, &c., may be seen at the office of Mr. Kelly, architect, 100 Elizabeth-street.

A few weeks later, the foundation stone of the Brunswick Mechanics' Institute was laid on Monday, December 20, 1869 and the *Weekly Times* had this report -

The laying of the foundation-stone of the Brunswick Mechanics' Institute, by the hon. the Chief Secretary, on Monday, as anticipated, caused considerable excitement throughout the borough. The various friendly societies assembled near the Quarry hotel, and formed in procession, headed by the band of the Pentridge Rifle Corps, and marched to the grounds of the Mechanics' Institute near the Retreat inn. Here a

large number of people, including a very fair attendance of the fair sex, had assembled to inaugurate the event. On the preliminary arrangements having been got through, the mayor of the borough (Mr. J. W. Fleming) came forward and presented the Chief Secretary with a silver trowel, bearing a suitable inscription, and to be used for the occasion. Mr. MacPherson then used every precaution in seeing that the stone was "well and truly laid," after which he addressed the assemblage, and said that he was highly gratified to be present on this occasion, especially as, when a boy and living in the district, what is now known as Brunswick, he had ridden over the ground where he had that day laid the foundation-stone of such an important institution; also, that whilst a resident of Brunswick he became a member of Parliament, and subsequently Chief Secretary of the colony of Victoria. Three cheers were then given for the Chief Secretary, the president of the institute, and the mayor of the borough, after which a fruit soiree was held at the Retreat-hall, which was fairly attended. The president of the institute, Mr. T. J. Sumner, occupied the chair. Several addresses were delivered, and the proceedings were agreeably interspersed with vocal and instrumental music.

Theodotus John Sumner (1820-1884), the President of the Mechanics' Institute, lived at *Stony Park*, in Brunswick, and was well connected and wealthy. In 1852, the



same year that he married Sarah Peers, Theodotus became a partner with businessman Richard Grice (1813-1882). In 1876, Sumner's daughter Annie married Grice's son James and the firm became known as Grice, Sumner and Co; *it was by then one of the oldest and foremost mercantile houses in the Australian colonies.* The firm had large land holdings in Vic-

toria, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland. Grice senior, died in Fitzroy in 1882 and left a substantial estate valued at £320,000. Sumner's estate was a more 'modest' £194,883.

Brunswick Mechanics' Institute—the first sixty years

The Mechanics' Institute was opened on April 5, 1870 and the *Weekly Times* again reported on the event - *Something more than ordinary gaiety was evinced by the people of Brunswick on Tuesday, on the occasion of the opening of their Mechanics' Institute and Public Library. A tea meeting on a large scale in the new hall, followed by a concert, interspersed with various addresses by gentlemen notables, was chosen as the most agreeable mode of inaugurating this valuable institution. The tea and substantial accompaniments were provided by ladies of the borough, and was done ample justice to by some 800 persons. Upon the tea and tables being cleared away, the Hon. J. MacPherson, M.L.A., in the absence of the president of the institution, Mr. T. J. Sumner, took the chair, to preside over the further and more intellectual engagements of the evening. The Orpheus Quartett party furnished the principal harmony of the evening ; and complimentary addresses to the ladies and gentlemen of the borough for their energy in raising so commodious and handsome a building were delivered by his Honour Judge Bindon, the Hon. David Moore, Mr. E. Cope, M.L.A., and other gentlemen.*



Brunswick Mechanics' Institute, 1949.
Photographer: Colin Caldwell.
State Library of Victoria image H84.276/2/13D

The Australasian also had a report which had some interesting building details, including the fact that it was planned to have another storey, which was never built - *The inhabitants of Brunswick were called together on Tuesday, to celebrate the opening a mechanic's institute by the holding of a tea-meeting and concert afterwards. The building, which is of brick, is to have, when completed, a handsome frontage rising to two stories in height, ornamented with rusticated pilasters on the ground floor,*

and Ionic columns above, the whole to be surmounted by a handsome cornice and open balustrade. The ground floor will be devoted to the purposed of library, committee, and retiring rooms, while above will be the reading and class rooms. The architects are Messrs. Kelly and Beswicke, who estimate the total cost at about £2,000. The only portion at present constructed consists of the concert hall 60ft. by 30ft., and 22 ft. high, the inside of which presents a fine and imposing appearance, with a coved ceiling rising from a moulded cornice. The ventilation with Watson's cupola vents and the lighting with ornamented sun lights are very perfect, while the acoustic qualities of the hall, which were well tested last evening, were considered first-class. This portion has cost a trifle under £700, Mr. B. Crooke being the contractor....[after the refreshments] The hon. treasurer read a report, from which it appeared that the sum of £250 was still required to complete the present contract, but confident hopes existed that the amount would shortly be forthcoming.

Kelly and Beswicke, the Architects were Thomas Anthony Kelly and John Beswicke. Thomas Kelly was noted for his design of many Catholic Churches in the 1860s and 1870s - including - St Brigid's, Fitzroy; the church of St Peter and St Paul in South Melbourne (Emerald Hill); St Augustine's in West Melbourne; St Monica's in Footscray; Sacred Heart Geelong; St Mary's in Echuca and St Mary's in Sorrento. He also designed the Footscray Town Hall.

John Beswicke designed hundreds of buildings including the Hawthorn Town Hall; Australian Buildings at the corner of Elizabeth and Flinders Lane; the Kronheimer Wing at the Austin Hospital and many private houses including his own, *Rotha* in Harcourt Street, Hawthorn.



Beswicke was also in partnership for a time with Ralph Wilson with whom he designed the Presbyterian Church in Alma Road, St Kilda; the Essendon Town Hall and the Malvern Town Hall.

John Beswicke and family.

Image: Hawthorn Historical Society Facebook page.

Brunswick Mechanics' Institute—the first sixty years

The Victoria Government Statistical Registers provides the following information about the Brunswick Mechanics Institute -

In 1874 they had 1,450 volumes and the opening hours were 7.00pm to 10.00pm.

1877 - 1,750 volumes, same opening hours; 1880 - 3,000 volumes, same hours.

1884 - 2,000 volumes, same hours.

1887 - 3,000 volumes, same hours.

Three years later in 1890, the collection was 2,749 volumes, the opening hours were 10.00am to 5.00pm, 7.00pm to 10.00 pm and there were 41,000 visits that year.

In 1894 - 3,150 volumes, same opening hours and 57,000 visits.

It is possible that the extra statistics provided to the Government about visits were due to the new Librarian, Arthur Goding, who was employed in 1889. Mr Goding, then living at 12 Duckett Street Brunswick, retired in 1919 and he died in June 1926 aged 84.



The Brunswick Mechanics' Institute, 1960s.

Photographer: Alf Wesson.

Image: Wesson Collection, Mechanics' Institute Resource Centre.

In 1912 the Library had 3,736 volume and 45 members, not including life members. The *Coburg Leader* of February 16, 1912 published this unfavourable report on the Institution, and supported the idea that the Council should take over the building -

The Brunswick Mechanics' Institute is unquestionably not an evidence of the progress of the municipality. It is conservative in its very being, and represents the ideals of a past age when free libraries as they are

known today did not exist. In many up country townships similar establishments to the Brunswick Mechanics Institute are to be found. The so called "free liberry " turns out to be a small portion of the library room shut off from the rest and furnished with very ancient copies of illustrated papers. When the visitor unwittingly seeks to look at the contents of the larger quarter where the books are ranged on shelves and more up to-date journals and magazines are to be read, he is repelled by the notice "For subscribers only" or by the warning voice of the librarian. It is under these circumstances that the name of "Free" or "Public Library " becomes a misnomer. The places are merely institutions for the convenience of those ratepayers who subscribe to their funds and the free library or public reading room is merely retained in order to save the situation in the event of Government making inconvenient inquiries.

Cr. Hickford carried a motion at the Brunswick council the other night that the council wait upon the Minister of Education and request to be informed whether Government will lend assistance towards the erection of a technical school provided the council acquires possession of the property. Crs Fleming and Methven both opposed any such transfer protesting that the institute was private property and as such would be free from any interference by the municipal council. It would be beyond all question a benefit to the community the throwing open the library to the public and letting them share in what was always intended to be for the public good. People talk largely on keeping our boys off the streets yet what sort of attractions do the miniature rooms with the out of date periodicals offer? Were the resolution moved and carried by Cr Hickford to become law the council would have to take over the ground on which the institute stands and without a doubt there is room for a row of shops which should certainly be easily let on advantageous terms. Altogether the idea is one that commends to all reasonable people and it is to be hoped the public will not let the matter drop. Once the council assumed control of the Mechanics' Institute the rest would be easy.

The Council did not take over control then and two years later, in 1914, the *Brunswick and Coburg Leader* reported that there were still only 45 subscribers and that *The place is rapidly falling to pieces through senile decay, sadly neglected, and altogether the institution presents an appearance of desolation which is beyond description.*

Brunswick Mechanics' Institute—the first sixty years

In 1915, the Brunswick Mechanics' Institute and Free Library Bill was passed by the Victorian Parliament and the new committee of management was to consist of four members of the Brunswick Council and four members of the Institute. The local member Mr Jewell was happy with this bill as he noted -

I am very pleased that the Government has seen fit to bring in this Bill. The Institute has been established since 1868, and in later years it has become rather neglected. It is not a free library, because people have to pay so much a week for taking out books. For many years the Council contributed certain sums to the institute, but they did not care to provide very much, because they had no control over the funds. If the Bill is passed, it will be a great boon to the people of Brunswick, because the library will be free to every young man and woman in the district who cares to take books or to pass time in the institute reading the periodicals

This new management did result in improvements - in 1923, membership was 216, library visits were 37,500 and book stock was 2,987, of which 444 were new.

However, in June 1925, the building was described as an eyesore, by the *Sun News-Pictorial* - *The Brunswick Mechanics' Institute is in a dilapidated condition, and has been a source of complaint for a number of years. With a view to renovating the institute, at a cost of £800, specifications have been prepared.*

The Council made the decision to renovate the building and appointed the Architect, Charles Heath, to draw up plans for the renovations and additions. Charles Heath's other work includes designing the new Coburg Town Hall in 1923; the Parish Hall and Sunday School at the Holy Trinity Church in Coburg in 1926 and the Crematorium at the Fawkner Cemetery in 1927.

In October 1925, Heath advertised for tenders for the additions and renovations to the Brunswick Mechanics' Institute.



The *Sun News-Pictorial* reported on the result of the tender process in December 1925 - *Brunswick Mechanics' Institute, Sydney-road, is to be improved and renovated. The chairman (Cr. Holbrook) stated that the committee had accepted a tender of £865 for the work. "We intend to make the building, which is one of the oldest in Brunswick, a most up-to-date institution," said Cr. Holbrook. "Recently we have improved the front by lawns and concrete groundings. Inside improvements will include a bigger reading room, and more shelves and books."*

Sadly, these improvements to the front required the destruction of a fine Moreton Bay Fig tree, planted nearly 70 years previous by Cr John Ward Fleming and T.J. Sumner, as the roots were impacting the foundations of the Retreat Hotel and causing the wall of the Mechanics' Institute to crack. Another tree of the same age was also removed at this time.

In December 1926, the Annual Report noted that the building works expenditure was £1289 including £865 for the contractors Phillips and Greeney; £211 for extra items; £79 for linen; £63 for Mr Heath's fee and £20 for two stone tablets (you can see the stone tablets in the image below). Membership had risen to 264 and book stock to 4,411.



The Mechanics' Institute, 1960s, showing the two stone tablets which were purchased for £20.

Photographer: Alf Wesson.

Image: Wesson Collection, Mechanics' Institute Resource Centre.

The building provided library services until March 1976, when it closed and the library moved to a new location on the old Town Hall site. It is now an Arts and Cultural Centre.

Gilbert & Sullivan Operas at Mechanics' Institutes

Mechanics' Institute.

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H.M.S. PINAFORE

OR

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Saturday, August 30.

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Orchestra—Piano, Mr F. Herbert ;
Violins, Messrs W. Ross, I. Perry and
A. Cameron; 'Cello, Mr L. Ross.
Special Scenery by Mr T. Hardy.

Reserved Seats ... 2s 6d

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◆

Mechanics' Institute
Electra St., Williamstown

◆

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Daily, except Saturday, at Town
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Nightly, at Mechanics' Institute.

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By Pupils of Miss Nicholls,
assisted by other district
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PRICES—2/- & 1/-

Iolanthe—Castlemaine Mechanics' Institute.
Mount Alexander Mail, December 9, 1903.

H.M.S Pinafore—Orbest Mechanics' Institute.
Snowy River Mail, August 21, 1913.

Patience—Williamstown Mechanics' Institute.
Williamstown Advertiser, November 26, 1949.

Gondoliers—Korumburra Mechanics' Institute.
Great Southern Advocate, October 9, 1919

The Mikado—Horsham Mechanics' Institute.
Horsham Times, June 21, 1901.