



GOULBURN NSW



Name: Mechanics' Institute

Address: Corner of Auburn and Montague Streets.

The Town: Goulburn is a major centre in southern NSW, population approximately 26,000 (2006 census). The region was first settled in the 1820s, having been explored by Throsby, Hamilton Hume, Meehan and Oxley. Originally surveyed in 1825, the town was established in 1833 on another site laid out by Hoddle, assistant surveyor to the Surveyor-General, John Oxley. It was proclaimed a town in 1833 and by 1841 it had a population of 1200. The discovery of gold in the region in the 1850s saw further rapid development and Goulburn was proclaimed a city in 1859, the first in inland Australia. The late 19th century saw it a flourishing rural city and most of its notable buildings date from this period. Its railway station (1875) and associated railway yards and workshops were examples of both the architecture and burgeoning industry of the time. As well, Goulburn became the major centre of the Australian fine wool industry, famous for both breeding and production of superfine merino in its locality.

The decline of railways, the fall in demand and prices for wool, coupled with the development and growth of Canberra as Australia's national capital, saw Goulburn's importance begin to fall away. As a result however, it has retained its ensemble of important Victorian architecture and is now a centre for tourism.

Establishment: 1853 - 1854

At a meeting held in the Commercial Hotel on the evening of Tuesday the 27th day of September 1853 it was resolved 'that endeavours be made to form a Mechanics' Institute in



Goulburn'. A subscription list was opened immediately. At the November meeting it was resolved that the annual subscription of members be one guinea per annum payable half yearly in advance. Later, in April 1854, it was proposed and carried *that Ladies introduced by a member be admitted to the Lectures free.*

The stated aims of the Institute were:

The mental and moral improvement and rational recreation of its members, by the maintenance of a Library and Reading Room, and by any other means that may appear desirable to the Committee.

In his inaugural speech for the Institute the Reverend William Ross opened with

The march of the human mind along the highway of science, literature, and art, is wonderful.

Meetings were held in the Commercial Hotel and in the Court House.

The Institute meeting of October 1853 resolved to *write to the Reverend Mr Ross* [President of the Institute] *requesting him to apply to Government for a grant of land as a site for a Mechanics' Institute.* A letter from the Colonial Secretary, dated 6 July 1854, informed the Committee that a piece of land in Market Street was granted for the purposes of a Mechanics' Institute in the town of Goulburn.

The initial (1854) membership of the Goulburn Mechanics' Institute was 130, rising to a peak of 1088 in 1925. It was one of the longest surviving in NSW. In 1945, the membership numbered 583.

The Institute ceased to function in 1946: the final meeting of the Committee was held on 27 June of that year.

Building: 1856 -1860

A Building Committee of nine members was first established in August 1855 but this Committee resigned after 'a period of commercial depression'. Nevertheless, a new Committee was established early in 1856. The Governor-General of Her Majesty's Australian Colonies and Governor-in-Chief of the Territory of New South Wales, His Excellency Sir William Denison, accepted the role of Patron. He visited Goulburn on 10 June 1857 and in his address to the citizens he remarked:

.....as Patron of your Institution and as one deeply interested in the diffusion of knowledge, I rejoice to hear of the success which has hitherto attended your exertions.....

The Committee reported in February 1857 that 1000 pounds was expected to be granted by the government for the purpose of building the Institute, providing a matching sum could be raised by the citizens of Goulburn. In July 1857 the proposed site in Market Street was identified as unsuitable, resulting in a new site, in Auburn Street, being offered and accepted. The architect, a Mr Carson, was given instruction:

The chief front of the building to be in Auburn Street.....A hall to seat 300 persons. A library not less than 14 x 20. A reading room not less than 300 feet area. These rooms to adjoin with a light partition between them.....

The foundation stone for the building was laid by the Reverend William Ross, first President of the Institute, on 10 January 1858. The building was opened formally on 2 January 1860.



In 1862, architect Thomas Rowe designed a Public Hall to be attached to the building. The Hall was enlarged in 1869 and licensed as a public theatre. A skating rink was opened in the hall in 1877.



Above: Original window incorporated in 1990s restoration

In 1880, because the building had fallen into some disrepair, it was proposed it be demolished to afford a better view from the park [Belmore] of the Court House and Post Office. This idea was dismissed and from that date the noted local architect E.C.Manfred and his son, who were in practice in Goulburn from 1880 to 1940, influenced the design and development of the building. In 1881 Manfred designed a new roof, facade, parapet, verandah and extension reflecting a Victorian Boom period style in keeping with the Court House and the Post Office. This was followed in 1894 by a new stairwell, roof lantern and vaulted plaster ceiling, together with an iron roof, replacing the former shingle wooden roof, and a pressed metal ceiling. A new facade provided a well

proportioned arrangement of arched windows and pilasters to the upper storey, with a parapet concealing the roof lines. There is currently a modern horizontal awning to the facade cutting across the strong vertical lines of the building.

In the 1920s as part of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the Mechanics' Institute, the building was upgraded to provide a more prestigious library and community building. The Public Hall was, however, in a state of disrepair and condemned by the Building Inspector. In 1928, the refurbished structure, designed by H.C.Manfred, was opened.



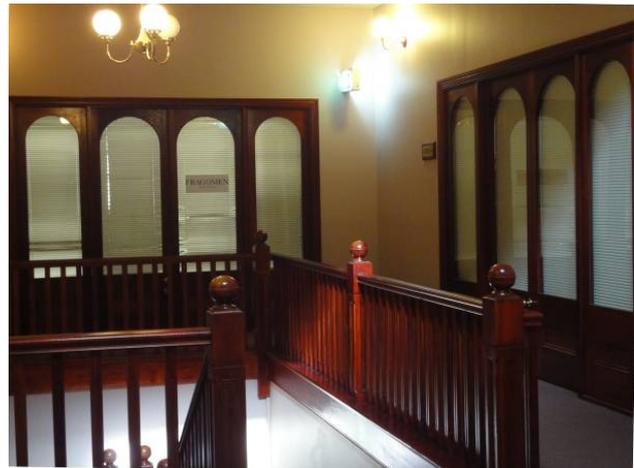
Above: Lantern with pressed metal ceiling; 1990s restoration



The Goulburn City Council took over the operation of the building and the library in 1945 and the Goulburn City Library continued there until 1990, when in February the Council and the Library moved to a new purpose-built building.

After this move, the building was refurbished in the 1990s with efforts made to restore or recreate features reflecting and in sympathy with earlier work.

Right: First floor interior of 1990s restoration



Left: Plaque marking an award for the building restoration

A *Conservation Analysis and Management Plan* was drawn up by Garry Dutailis and Associates. These documents are held by the Library in Goulburn.

The building is registered by the National Trust where it is identified as the *National Bank building (old Municipal Library)*.

Uses:

The Institute and its building provided an important focus for the people of Goulburn. It was a venue for local entertainment including dances and balls and concerts, as well as for the educational functions of the Mechanics' Institute. For a period, a skating rink was part of the amenities provided; a Smoking Room was a venue for members to play chess and draughts and engage in conversation. Billiards was very popular and also a source of revenue for the Institute: a receipt book dated 1912 shows an income of sometimes more than one pound a day deriving from use of the billiard tables.

Lectures and debates were an integral part of the program of events. One of the early lectures, in July 1854, was delivered to members at the Goulburn Court House by Daniel Henry Deniehy, editor of the *Goulburn Herald* and later the local Member of Parliament. His topic was The Poetry of Ireland and the newspaper reported that he spoke to *a numerous assemblage of visitors, amongst whom were many ladies. The audience was evidently electrified by the exquisite language, deep pathos, and racy humour of the lecturer, and by repeated applause, testified to their delight. 'The lecture was a most delicious treat'*.

The members of the Mechanics' Institute published the Lecture on Railways delivered to the Institute by a Thomas Woore Esq on Friday July 6 1855, printed by the Empire General Steam Printing Office, 173 George Street Sydney. This item is still held by the Library in Goulburn.



In 1857 the President reported on matters debated at fortnightly meetings, including some that are still recognisable and even currently topical:

- Is state aid to religion advisable in these colonies?
- Whether a Republic or a Limited Monarchy is the preferable form of government?
- Whether it is expedient to impose duties in protection of native produce and manufacturers?

The Institute Library was extensive. In 1888 a catalogue of the available works identified more than nine thousand items; by 1900, there were more than 10,000. Amongst the many categories listed were books on theology, poetry, technical subjects, natural history, trade and commerce; and with the most numerous titles, voyages and travels, and biography. All this, together with more than six thousand works of fiction. The latter included all the works of authors such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Walter Scott and George Eliot; and long lists of what must have been the popular novels of the day, much in demand by the readers. The Annual Report of 1900 records 38,571 issues of books, of which 32,872 were fiction. The Reading Room carried a total of 130 publications, including a wide range of provincial newspapers mostly provided free by the publishers.

**Below : Staircase leading to first floor landing;
part of 1990s restoration.**

The [Technical] College and the Museum were in close connexion with the Institute for a considerable period. In 1899, the Museum recorded 24,526 visitors, an average of 79 per day.



As was the case everywhere, the depression years of the early 1930s were a difficult time for the Institute. The local Council was unable to continue its subsidy to the Institute but this was restored in 1936. The war years of the 1940s also made an impact on operations: in 1941 membership fell by eight to 452, though this was regarded as very satisfactory.....*in view of the many enlistments, compulsory call-ups and increased war duties of potential subscribers.*

In 1942 the Committee gave permission for all members of the Military Forces stationed in Goulburn to have free access to the Reading Room; additional papers and magazines were acquired for their use.

Despite a gradual increase in membership and users, in 1943 the Committee was concerned by the loss *as a result of wartime conditions* of rental income from the commercial premises housed in the Institute building. The Council again provided a subsidy: thirty pounds per month. Membership continued to increase gradually and books were more plentiful: nearly 700 were purchased in 1945 (598 fiction and 98 general works). The billiard tables were sold: they had depreciated through lack of use and the money raised from this sale was paid to the mortgage held against the building. Also in 1945, there are references to the 'Library Act' which seem to indicate that the Council would become responsible for the Library. The Annual Report for 1945 shows that

Your Committee, accompanied by Mr McGreal, of the Public Library, waited on the City Council to explain the method of taking over the Institute under Council control. The aldermen present appreciated Mr McGreal's visit and hope the matter will be finalised in the near future.



The monthly meeting of November 8 1945 discussed

.....whether Council would be prepared to receive suggestions from this Committee as to improvements necessary to conform with the Library Act.

The final meeting of the Committee of the Mechanics' Institute was held on 27 June 1946.

The Library, controlled by the Council, continued in the Institute building until it was moved to its current location in 1990.



Left: Archival records of the Mechanics' Institute Goulburn:

Regional History Room, Southern Tablelands Regional Library. Goulburn NSW

Some interesting sidelights:

A Visitors Book (1882-1913) is one of the items in the archival collection of records held by the Library in Goulburn. It includes some interesting and revealing comments from a range of visitors: they came from 17 countries and from every state and territory of Australia then existing - the ACT had not yet been created. There were many visitors from all areas of NSW: from the mountains to the coast, the Far West, cities such as Sydney and Newcastle, the Southern Highlands and Tablelands to the Riverina; and colourful place names such as Dog Lane, Nanny Goat Flat, and Dead Man's Gully.

There were 125 visitors recorded in 1882, 165 in 1883, 188 in 1885. In the early part of the 20th century, entries tailed off dramatically, from 21 in 1899 to just one or two in the last years.

Some entries:

25 October 1882, William M Logan of Newcastle wrote-

As a stranger in the District and one feeling an interest in the success of such Institutions my visit to the Goulburn mechanics' institute has through the courtesy of the Secretary afforded me great gratification. I have been struck by the evidence of business like order and system observable in the Library and reading room particularly with the air of comfort and cleanliness in the latter spacious apartments - all in my opinion matters of much importance and which reflect great credit on the management of this Institute.



The overwhelming majority of entries praised the Institute for its facilities and the valued role it fulfilled as a resource: *a boon for travellers*.

Some of the more unusual or amusing entries:

- *Some things are better left unsaid.* (1873 entry from a Goulburn visitor!)
- *I found at least 3 or 4 fleas on every chair I sat on and we tried every chair.* (Sydney visitor 1892)
- *Second only to the library at St Kilda* (St Kilda lady [of course!] 1894)
- *If there were more institutes like this in this colony, larrikinism and pigheadedness would not have found its way into the brains of the New South Welsh people. Goulburn is to be congratulated on having such a good institute before other districts.* (Sep 1894)
- *Not too bad for a country town. Not supplied with enough Queensland newspapers.* (A Queenslander [naturally!] Dec 1894)
- *Supplied with a good dunny [!!]* (1897)
- *Not bad considering* (A Sydney visitor 1898)

A Suggestion Book had some interesting proposals:

- H.E.Russell 10 February 1871: (This was referred to a Special Sub-Committee for consideration.)
That the Lecturers be asked to come up from Sydney for the purpose – the Institute offering to pay the actual expenses of the trip which in point of fact would be only the Railway fares, as it might be arranged amongst a few of the members to provide such accommodation as would otherwise have to be obtained at an Hotel.
- Another in 1872:
I suggest that 2 or 3 spittoons be placed in this room. (the Smoking Room)
- 20 Dec 1877 from James Brownhill:
It is suggested that the Committee should make arrangements for carrying out some of the objects of a “Mechanics’ Institute” eg
 1. *The holding of evening classes for the instruction of young men and others in various branches of knowledge*
 2. *The delivery of Lectures in Science, Arts and general subjects of information and interest.*

Currently: 2011

The building is no longer used as a community resource. Its facade still identifies it as the Mechanics’ Institute but today it houses on the ground floor a branch of the National Australia Bank, a long term occupant of the Institute building, including under its earlier titles (eg the National Bank); as well as shops and offices.

Regional offices of State government agencies are located on the upper floor: the NSW Police Service and the Valuer-General.



Acknowledgements:

Southern Tablelands Regional Library (Goulburn): Lynn Bonomini, Daphne Penalver, Jane Cush.

Goulburn and District Historical Society: Gordon Thompson

Goulburn Tourist Information Centre

References:

The Southern Tablelands Regional Library holds archival records of the Mechanics' Institute, including original minutes of Committee meetings 1853-1946 (with some gaps). These are drawn on extensively and quoted in the text of this document. (Quotations are in *italics*).

Towards a history of the Goulburn Mechanics' Institute by Peter J. Hopcraft (manuscript) 1979

Mechanics' Institutes, Schools of Arts, Athenaeums etc: An Australian Checklist

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