



HARDEN NSW



Name: Mechanics' Institute

Address: Neill Street

The Town:

Harden lies in the region of the South West Slopes of New South Wales approximately 350 kilometres from Sydney, between Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory, and the Riverina in the south west. It is in the area known as 'The Golden Triangle', noted as one of the most outstanding areas in Australia for wheat production. The population at the 2006 census was 1996.

The town is part of what is now known as the twin towns of Harden-Murrumburrah; it was first known as North Murrumburrah.

The region was settled in the 1820s with the site of the town of Murrumburrah identified in the 1840s. The railway came through the area in 1877 and in 1878 a new station was established a mile from Murrumburrah on flat land in the location that became known as Harden, then a part of Murrumburrah. But this area flourished to a greater extent, largely because of the influx of workers to support the railway and its workshops at what was then a significant railway junction. Up to 40 trains a day were marshalled and despatched at Harden. Hotels and businesses developed to respond to the demands of passengers and movement through the station and the area grew as a result.



The period of the Second World War was especially busy with the movement by rail of troops, as well as supplies for the war effort. Local Red Cross volunteers provided refreshments for troop trains. But post war saw the gradual decline of the railways and the area returned to its rural focus. Today, it is an area of prime agricultural and pastoral industry with moves to encourage the growth of tourism based on the scenic and peaceful countryside of the district.



The Railway Station at Harden today: still a working station on the Main South Line from Sydney to Melbourne but much different from the busy rail centre of the early 1900s.

The Harden Railway Precinct is listed on the NSW State Heritage Register.

Establishment: 1874-1879

The Mechanics' Institute was established in 1874 in the settlement then known simply as Murrumburrah. A building erected in 1879 provided the location for meetings. All the customary activities were available, including a library and reading room and billiards, as well as entertainments, discussions and lectures. The Mechanics' Institute played an important part in the life of the local residents. But the building was located in the part of town which was ultimately called Harden, one of the three wards of Murrumburrah designated when that location was gazetted a town towards the end of the nineteenth century. (The other wards were Murrumburrah and Demondrille).

By the mid 1880s many came to feel that the growth of Harden was at the cost of the rest of the town. It was a purely artificial split between the two ends of one town arising when the Postmaster General's Department (PMG) had divided the town for letter deliveries. But the two areas became increasingly divided in all other respects. The Murrumburrah Signal makes comparisons more than once to the 'Irish question', a vexed issue at that time, and reported the view that complete separation would probably allow an advance in prosperity for both. A deep rift developed between the people of Murrumburrah: squatters and professionals and those who had established the town; and the railway men and small business people in Harden, mostly newcomers. This rift is reflected by separate clubs and organisations being set up at each end of the municipality.

It is also reflected in the tensions surrounding the location and use of the Mechanics' Institute, especially the view that it was not conveniently located for ease of access for all.



The building where these activities were located was deteriorating with age, despite efforts to renovate and improve it to extend its useful life. On Saturday 26 September 1891, The Australian Town and Country Journal reported:

The Mechanics' Institute Harden which has for a long time been in a bad state of repair has been thoroughly renovated and is now a credit to the district.

Even so, there were proposals for a new building to replace the existing meeting hall. With these proposals came the idea that the institution could be more centrally located in order to be more easily accessible to the people of Murrumburrah. But this was rejected by the Harden members. Meanwhile, the Harden Institute continued to be well patronised and its members enjoyed a range of recreational and educational activities, together with the benefits of the library and reading room.

But by the turn of the century, the separation of the two parts of the town seemed to be inevitable and Harden became an entity in its own right. It is interesting to note, however, that Harden was not formally gazetted a town until 1974, presumably an administrative oversight.

A new building: 1909

A newspaper report in 1908 summed up the situation:

There has been a soreness between the two towns re the Mechanics' Institute. This is called the Murrumburrah Mechanics' Institute and has been established in Harden since 1879. The institute is at present in a flourishing condition with about 150 members, chiefly employees in the railways and the Harden mines, three miles distant.

Tenders are being invited for erecting a new building which will comprise a large hall. It is to be built on the present site, opposite the Harden post office..... Tenders for the new building will be opened next week.

(The Albury Banner and Wodonga Express Friday 13 November 1908)

The request for tender for a two-storied brick Mechanics' Institute was duly advertised in The Sydney Morning Herald of Tuesday 6 October 1908, tenders to close 21 October. The architect was identified as Mr Ernest R Laver of Cootamundra. It was indicated that plans would be posted to Sydney builders wishing to tender.

The new building was opened in 1909 with a function to mark the opening held on Saturday 10 July, when The Sydney Morning Herald reported:

A successful juvenile and plain fancy dress ball was held in the Mechanics' Institute last night in connection with the opening of the Institute, 468 attending.....

The building is of brick construction with a corrugated iron roof. The interior ceiling is of fibrous plaster. Dimensions include an auditorium 75 feet x 33 feet and the width of the proscenium is 19 feet. The Federation style façade has a horizontal banded cream and brick effect with dating integrated into the design of the facade to indicate that the Institute was first established in 1879, and that the building itself was erected in 1909.

The popularity of the Institute seems to be evident in a further newspaper report less than one year following the opening, when it was decided that there was a need for extended facilities:

At a meeting of the local committee of the Mechanics' Institute it was carried that the building committee obtain tenders for the erection of a two-storied addition to the rear of the stage in the hall.

(The Albury Banner and Wodonga Express Friday 22 April 1910)



This was to allow for dressing rooms upstairs; refreshment rooms for dances and socials below. As well, it was proposed to use space for technical classes which it was intended to try to establish in the winter, especially cookery and carpentry classes.

The tender was let on 26 August 1910.

The purchase of adjoining shops occurred in 1951 along with other improvements to the facility. Additions over the period of its life are discernible in the fabric of the building.



Additions over its life, including a side annex, are able to be identified at the rear of the building. Changes are visible in the brickwork where new work is cut in, including where a side door has been bricked up.

Uses:

The Institute was the focus of community life. It served as the Town Hall for Harden. As well as the services of the library and reading room, there were billiards, lectures and discussions, and classes in useful skills. All the facilities provided through the philosophy of the mechanics' institutes were available to the townspeople.

In addition, there were all kinds of activities for which the hall provided the venue. Masonic Lodge meetings, political addresses, moving pictures, touring companies, amateur theatricals, flower shows, card parties, balls, dances and concerts, all took place in the hall.

During the First World War, the Institute was the focus of several recruiting campaigns, including the historic march through this area of southern New South Wales as part of the early recruitment drive to enlist men to fight in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). The Burrowa News described on Friday 17 March 1916, a local *Queen of Allies Day*, organised to raise funds for patriotic causes. *The hall was so packed that many were unable to gain admission.*



In 1918, The Queanbeyan Age and Observer reported on 17 December that *The committee of the Harden Mechanics' Institute has decided to extend the privileges of free membership to all returned soldiers who may settle in the district, whether they enlisted there or not.*



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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April 1918: A gathering of local citizens outside the Mechanics Institute to hear speeches in support of a war bonds drive. In the background in front of the building, standing on the tank used as a prop to support the drive, are Victoria Cross winner Sergeant George Julian Howell MM, with the Mayor of Harden.

Photo: Australian War Memorial

Currently (2013):

The hall is now managed by the Harden Shire Council. It still serves as the Town Hall when required, in addition to being a focus for gatherings of the local community, both meetings and social events. It is used for private as well as public functions.

The Annual Report of the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts, dated 22 July 2006, shows that in the year 2005-06 the government made a grant of \$36881 to the Harden Shire Council 'for acoustic refurbishment of the Harden Mechanics' Institute for cultural and community use'. This grant has enabled the hall to be brought up to a proper standard and arrested the deterioration of the previous decades, so allowing once more for regular community use.

Because there was first one town but this was subsequently split into two (now twin) towns, the story of the development of their institutions in the School of Arts movement is inevitably intertwined. First there was one but this later became two: one each in Harden and Murrumburrah.

This ADFAS series includes accounts for each building. For a more comprehensive story, please refer to both.



Acknowledgements:

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References:

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