

# YASS NSW



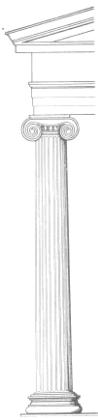
**Name: The Mechanics' Institute 1869**

**Address: Comur Street Yass**

### The Town

The area around Yass had an aboriginal population long before European settlement. The name 'Yass' is believed to derive from an Aboriginal word 'Yharr' or 'Yarrh', thought to mean 'running water'. The Yass river, a tributary of the Murrumbidgee, runs through the town.

Europeans first entered the area in the early 1820s as part of the wider exploration of lands beyond the Blue Mountains. In 1821, Hamilton Hume, his brother-in-law George Barber and William Henry Broughton reached the Yass river. Hume also passed through the area twice during his overland expedition to Bass Strait, in October 1824 on the way south and in January 1825 on his return trip. News of the rich grazing lands observed by explorers soon attracted settlers to the area, including a stretch of the Yass river where there were good crossing points for stock and wagons. This stretch became the starting point for the Yass settlement. Hume received a land grant in the area in 1826.



The site for a village was surveyed in 1836. Major Thomas Mitchell, passing through the area in October that year, noted the early stages of settlement. Among the earliest buildings were an inn near the riverbank and a bark hut which served as courthouse and gaol. The next year saw the arrival of the first doctor, the first police magistrate and the construction of a brick courthouse.

By the early 1840s daily despatches of mail from Sydney were passing to and through Yass. The building of churches and denominational schools was under way. Hume established a steam flour mill in 1842. The first bridge across the Yass river was built in 1852. The *Yass Courier* began publication in 1857 and the telegraph reached Yass in the same year.

Though Yass was not a gold town, the gold rushes of the 1850s helped spur its growth. The Land Acts of the 1860s facilitated the opening up of large sheep runs. Along Yass's main streets, fine buildings of stone and brick increasingly replaced the older slab and timber constructions. Yass received a further boost when the main railway line between Sydney and Melbourne reached the district in 1876. But despite strenuous lobbying by the townsfolk, the line bypassed Yass, requiring construction of a spur line to Yass Junction.

Yass was identified as a possible site for the new federal capital, but eventually lost out to Canberra. From 1907, construction of the Burrinjuck Dam boosted the local economy. The wool boom of the 1950s brought a return to prosperity after the tough decades of the two world wars and the Great Depression.

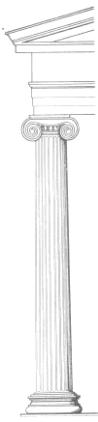
Today, Yass has a population just under 6,000. It remains the centre of a productive agricultural district, renowned for superfine merino wool. The main streets retain many impressive historic buildings lining broad streetscapes.

Prominent Australians who have lived in or near Yass include the explorer Hamilton Hume, who settled in Yass in 1839 and is buried in the Yass cemetery. His home, 'Cooma', now known as Cooma Cottage, is owned by the National Trust and is open to the public. The poet Andrew Barton 'Banjo' Patterson spent his childhood at Illalong near Binalong and later lived for some years at Wee Jasper.

## **The Mechanics' Institute: Early Days and High Hopes**

In many Australian towns in the mid-nineteenth century, townsfolk were proud of their communities but keenly aware that vital infrastructure and institutions - from roads and bridges to churches, schools, and hospitals - were in their infancy. There was concern that young people had limited opportunities for education while temptations such as drinking and gambling lay near at hand. Public education as we know it lay a long way into the future - Yass's first public school did not open until 1879.

So townsfolk took the initiative. Hence the proliferation of 'improving societies' – temperance unions, friendly societies, subscription libraries, schools of art, literary institutes and mechanics' institutes.



Yass followed this trend. A subscription library, started in the 1840s, failed to take root. But between the 1850s and 1890s a wide range of more durable ‘improving’ organisations emerged, from the Mechanics’ Institute (1857) to the Sons of Temperance (1872).

The Yass Mechanics’ Institute was launched at a public meeting on Friday 3 July 1857 in the Courthouse (not the current building, erected in 1880, but its predecessor). The meeting established a committee and opened a subscription list with an annual charge of one guinea. The next day, the *Yass Courier* noted that speakers hoped a Mechanics’ Institute would ‘advance the moral culture of the town’ and provide a safety valve for the ‘effervescence’ of the ‘young mind’.

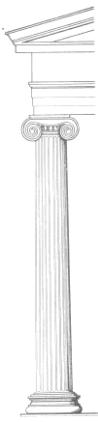
The opening lecture of the new Institute was delivered, again in the Courthouse, on 21 September 1857, by John Richard Hardy, Yass’s first police magistrate and a prominent figure in the district. According to the *Yass Courier*, Hardy spoke before ‘a large and respectable assemblage, amongst whom were several ladies’. Hardy outlined a practical vision for the Institute. He hoped it would ‘tend infinitely more to fit men for the business of life than the more pretentious universities of England’. He saw it giving young men ‘a knowledge of geology, mineralogy, engineering, medicine and surgery, mechanics, of the principles of law, of chemistry, as applied to the ordinary operations of life’, contrasting this with ‘the utter ignorance of these matters which distinguished the young man who had just come to the colony with a university degree’. As we shall see, these lofty hopes were never matched by the resources and personnel needed to realise them.

## **The Building**

The Institute was first housed in a small building on Rossi Street. This venue was too small and a larger site in Comur Street was acquired in 1861. Like some other towns, Yass was able to secure some funding from the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, which voted 300 pounds in the estimates in October 1869 for the establishment of a Mechanics’ Institute in Yass.

A tender issued for the design of the Institute was won by the prominent Sydney architect Thomas Rowe. A tender for the construction work, for 2,035 pounds, was won by a leading Yass businessman Thomas Colls. The foundation stone was laid on 15 October 1868, with the ceremony followed by a champagne lunch. The *Yass Courier* reported a crowd of around 500. The official opening on 30 November 1869 was declared a public holiday.

Rowe’s design for the Institute blended elements drawn from classical, gothic and romanesque styles, combining for example pointed and rounded arches. Rowe evidently liked this kind of eclecticism – one of his best known buildings is the Great Synagogue in Sydney, consecrated in 1878, which similarly combines diverse architectural styles.



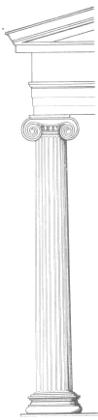
The building presents a handsome two-story façade with a prominent porch. A striking feature of the design is the pair of kangaroos standing upright on the roofline, flanking the central pediment. The use of native animal sculptures in architectural designs was still rather unusual at this date – though Edmund Blackett had placed a kangaroo gargoyle on the Clock Tower of the Main Quadrangle at the University Sydney in 1862.

#### Kangaroo statues flanking the pediment of the Mechanics' Institute

These heraldic marsupials were not to everyone's liking – the author of 'Jottings in the south and west', writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 9 September 1873, observed that 'the façade of the Mechanics' Institute is decorated with a couple of kangaroos, whose abdominal development is almost dropsical. This crowning ornament may or may not be pretty ...'. Despite these reservations, the writer acknowledged the hall itself as 'probably one of the best in the country'.

The building also drew praise from the *Illustrated Sydney News*, which in March 1873 described it as 'conspicuous' among the 'numerous public institutions' in the 'flourishing township' of Yass. It was a 'spacious and comfortable building, well ventilated and lighted ... in addition to the large hall, there are various apartments devoted to the purposes of a library etc and for the occasion of lectures, public meetings or the various "entertainments" provided by the itinerant caterers for public amusements.'

The building's narrow frontage is deceptive, for it extends well back from the street. The building has undergone some significant changes. In 1877 a staircase and front gallery were added. In 1882, a substantial verandah replaced the original façade, creating on the upper level a large 'Balcony Room' which became a popular venue for events. The Institute was further enlarged in 1901-2, with the leasing of Foot's store next door to provide space for a billiards room. The Institute building was sold in 1927 to F F Collins, stock and station hands, for 2,400 pounds. In 1988 the then owners of the building, the stock and station agents F L Kelly and Company, restored the façade to its original appearance.



## Uses

Like other mechanics' institutes around Australia, the Institute in Yass was put to a wide variety of uses, from educational to recreation, entertainment and commemoration. In line with the 'practical' focus envisaged by its founders, the Institute hosted lectures from experts in many fields. As would be expected in a town forming the centre of a farming and pastoral district, farm topics featured frequently. In September 1910, for example, the *Yass Courier* reported a 'largely attended and enthusiastic meeting' to plan a series of lectures by experts on agriculture and on wool- and fruit-growing. Yass was an important enough town to attract, on occasion, some important speakers – in January 1911, for example, the NSW Minister for Lands, a Mr Nielsen, delivered a speech at the Institute explaining the state government's land policies.

The Institute also offered lectures on scientific topics. The prominent University of Sydney academic, Professor Edgeworth David, brought a group of students to the area with him on a geological excursion in 1894 and became a regular visitor to the district. He gave a number of public lectures, including one at the Institute on 17 February 1902 on the geological formation of the Yass District – a talk illustrated by 'lantern views'. Years later in 1911, he lectured again at the Institute on the Shackleton Antarctic expedition of 1907-08, of which David had been a member.

Despite the effort put into educational lectures and talks, however, the Institute never realized its founders' vision of equipping young working people with the knowledge and skills needed to lift their prospects in life. Although some no doubt benefited, occasional lectures and the provision of textbooks and other educational materials was never going to provide the broad educational and technical uplift that had been hoped for. As public schools, technical colleges and public libraries developed, mechanics' institutes inevitably lagged further and further behind.

The problem is reflected in the Institute's library. In one sense, the Institute succeeded – it built up a large collection. The minute books, held in the Yass and District Historical Society Archives, show that in 1898 the Institute held 4,000 books and issued 6,305 loans. In 1899, loans rose to 8,533, though spread across a mere 132 subscribers. And the vast majority of the titles were not on scientific or vocational topics. In 1899, the 6,305 loans included 5,923 fiction works, 150 on travel, 90 on history and biography and 106 on arts and sciences.

A similar story can be found in many other mechanics' institute library collections, lending credence to the criticism that the libraries failed in their vocational goals for working men and instead catered to the recreational reading habits of the literate middle classes.

Even if the Institute failed in its vocational challenge, it was still in many respects a success. For almost fifty years, it served as a hub for community life. Though Yass had other venues for meetings and entertainments, the Institute was central and spacious. So it provided the most attractive venue for balls, concerts, musical and dramatic shows, displays of art and performances by travelling companies.

Billiards was a popular sport and tournaments were frequent. Among the more unusual events was a 'live chess and draughts carnival' in June 1906, 'with pieces and men properly



costumed, interspersed with part songs'. Some of the 'amusements' would be considered in poor taste today, such as the visit in 1870 of a troupe of entertainers from the United States led by 'General Tom Thumb' (Charles Sherwood Stratton). Described in the *Yass Courier* as 'four of the smallest human beings of mature age in the world', Stratton and others suffering from growth disorders had gained fame working as 'midgets' for P T Barnum in the USA and then toured various countries including Australia.

Alongside the entertainments, the Institute continued to offer lectures on matters of public and national importance. 'Banjo' Patterson, who went to the Boer War as a war correspondent, spoke of his experiences in a lecture entitled 'Australia in Action' at the Institute in October 1906. Given his national prominence and local connections, it's no surprise that Patterson was welcomed at the station at Yass Junction by a large crowd and the town band.

The Yass branch of the Red Cross – the third branch to be opened in New South Wales after those in Sydney and Newcastle – held its official opening in the Institute's Balcony Room in 1914. The Institute was frequently used during the First World War to raise funds for the troops overseas. In December 1915 the building hosted a welcome home for wounded soldiers from the district. And the first ANZAC Day ceremony in Yass was held at the Institute in 1916 (an outdoors event had been planned but the weather forced it indoors). In 1919, the building was used as a vaccination centre during the influenza epidemic that swept the world at the end of the First World War.



Recruiting march in Yass en route from Wagga Wagga, where the march started in December 1915, to Sydney. The Mechanics' Institute is on the left: the kangaroo statues can be seen above the Balcony Room, from which is hanging a banner reading 'God Save the King'.  
*Australian War Memorial ref. P02966.001, donated by the Yass Historical Society.*



## A new home – and gradual demise

The steady growth of Yass's population meant that sooner or later the town would need a venue larger than the Institute. Soon after the end of the First World War, the town decided to build a Soldiers' Memorial Hall, which, like the Institute, would be in Comur Street. In 1921, the Mechanics' Institute Committee proposed amalgamation of the Institute with the new Memorial Hall, the foundation stone for which was laid by the Governor-General, Lord Forster, before a crowd of 5,000 on Empire Day, 24 May 1922. The building was officially opened in March 1923 by Brigadier General H E 'Pompey' Elliott.



**Façade of the Soldiers Memorial Hall**

The Institute remained in use while the Memorial Hall was under construction, hosting for example the inauguration of the Yass Country Womens' Association in 1924. But the writing was on the wall. The Institute building was sold in 1927. The library and reading room were relocated to the Memorial Hall which thus became the Soldiers' Memorial Hall and Literary Institute.

The Hall was designed by the Sydney architect Hugh Venables Vernon and built by Walter MacIntosh of Yass. The Hall is built of brick with stone dressing. The central two-storey part of the building has a portico with a screen of four Ionic columns. The flanking wings were originally single-storey; the upper stories were added in 1928 and 1930. Inside, a cantilevered gallery provided space for nearly 700 people and projection facilities for screening films.



The Memorial Hall took over many of the functions of the Institute building. It was now Yass's best venue for balls; 800 people attended a free ball to celebrate Victory over Japan Day. Films, concerts and plays were staged. The subscription library, relocated to the southern wing of the Hall in 1928, offered a 50 per cent reduction in fees for service personnel. The Literary Institute continued to provide library services up till the establishment of Yass's first public library in 1966. The Yass Historical Society, created in 1961, also operated from the Hall until a new purpose-built building was opened in 1972.

## **Current use**

The Mechanics' Institute building currently houses the Old Linton Medical Centre. The Soldiers' Memorial Hall currently houses the Yass and District Historical Society offices and archives.

### **Acknowledgements:**

Yass and District Historical Society Archives

Yass and District Historical Society Museum

### **References:**

William A Bayley, *Yass Municipal Centenary History*, 1973  
(this publication was produced for the Yass Municipal Council)

Geoffrey Burkhardt, *The Libraries of Schools of Art and Mechanics Institutes – Time Capsules of Australian Book Collections*, [bookcollectorsnews](#) 08/09/2011

Trove, National Library of Australia, digitised newspapers: *The Sydney Morning Herald*; *The Queanbeyan Age*; *Illustrated Daily News*. These papers reproduced or quoted from articles from *The Yass Courier*, which is not in the NLA's digitized holdings.

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Australian War Memorial

**Compiled by** Marcel Dimo

**Photos:** Marcel Dimo