The Hobart colony initially struggled to survive. Expected supply ships did not arrive in the first year, the small area of wheat combined with droughts in the years 1805 and 1806 instigated rations for all. Settlers turned to fishing, gathering seaweed, and prudent use of livestock. Convicts were sent out to hunt which later led to bushranging. Lack of tools hampered building and farming.
In 1811 Governor Macquarie toured the settlement and was disappointed at the poor state of defence and general disorganisation. The town was essentially a collection of crude wattle and daub huts and Government House was falling to pieces. He divided Hobart Town into a principal square and seven streets to be named Macquarie, Elizabeth, Argyle, Liverpool, Murray, Harrington and Collins.

Buildings were to be constructed properly or repaired. There was to be a new Church and Court House and Macquarie identified locations for several civic institutions such as a hospital, barracks, a system of signal stations, and the Bond Store. Using convict labour, docks built in 1808 have survived to today, as have the Commissariat’s Store completed in 1810, and the Bond Store a decade later. Macquarie directed that the northern settlement, Launceston, was to be administered from Hobart Town.
The climate, similar to England’s, was found to be suitable for fruit orchards, wheat, and raising livestock. The River Derwent is one of the finest natural deep-water harbours in the world. In twenty years after settlement Hobart Town became a base for the Southern Ocean whaling and sealing industries which became the major economic resource for the infant town, and the largest whaling port in the World. Hobart Town’s shipyards built many of the whalers and were kept busy with repairs and maintenance. Whale oil was used for lighting the streets of London.

Van Diemen’s Land began to attract free settlers; early land grants, first used for farming, were made in the suburbs of Battery Point (Mulgrave Point), Sandy Bay (Queenborough), Dynnynne, South Hobart, West and North Hobart, and New Town. By 1813 Governor Davey had made 356 grants of land, mostly in the Clarence Plains east of the Derwent, along the Derwent Valley, and at Norfolk Plains in the north. The group of citizens who acquired personal land holdings formed the basis of a new society of landed gentry, despite many of them having had no previous upper-class background.
In 1820 Hobart’s population reached 19,000; it was an important Pacific base for the Royal Navy and a vital re-supply stop for the international shipping trade. Wapping, near the port, was an area of prostitution, gambling, and excessive drinking; but numerous grand stone houses were built in Battery Point and surrounding suburbs.

In 1828 the Van Diemen’s Land Bank, the first in the colony, opened. Entertainments included theatre, horse racing and regattas. Whaleboat rowing was a feature of early regattas.
Only 6% of convicts in Hobart were confined in gaols; the majority worked on Government building projects such as the Bridgewater causeway or as assigned servants for free settlers. Good behaviour was rewarded after several years with a ticket of leave. For secondary punishment, penal settlements had been established on Maria Island in 1825, and Port Arthur in 1832. Female convicts were sent to the Cascades Female Factory built in 1828.

The architect John Lee Archer designed and oversaw the construction of many buildings including the magnificent Customs House, now Tasmania’s Parliament House (below).

Education and religion were increasingly important: in 1828 there were eight government schools; by 1835 the number increased to 29. Secondary education remained in private hands until the 1850s. Libraries came early to Hobart Town, a Reading and Newspaper Room was established in 1822, the Wesley Church Library in 1823, and the Mechanics’ Institute Library in 1827.
Attempts had been made in the 1830s to settle the Tasmanian Aborigines on Flinders Island and then Oyster Bay south of Hobart; by the 1860s they were getting wider attention but it was too late. William Lanney, the last full-blood male died in 1869 and the last full blood female, Trugernanna, died in 1876.

When Sir John Franklin became governor in 1837 the colony was orientated towards commerce and industry but lacking in culture and opportunities for education. Lady Jane Franklin was as passionate about this as her husband, but their views were not well received by Hobart’s civil servants. Despite the opposition to Sir John and Lady Franklin, they did much to reform Hobart society and the Colony in general. (Lady Franklin ordered *Ancanthe*, a replica of a Greek temple modelled on the Parthenon and designed by James Blackburn in 1843, to be built in the bush at Lenah Valley; it housed models of the Elgin marbles). However, evening gatherings to discuss art, literature and science proved most unpopular with ‘well-to do’ Hobartians who preferred that Lady Franklin host parties and dances. Governor Franklin opened the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 1843 and was patron of the Royal Society of Tasmania, the first outside the United Kingdom.
In the 1840s a strong activist group led by the Reverend John West was formed; it was known as the Anti-Transportation League. It received widespread support both locally and interstate and by 1853 transportation ceased, although some convicts had yet to complete lengthy sentences.

Many problems came with the general economic downturn in the 1840s, and this was followed by migration to the Victorian Goldfields, causing a shortfall in local labour resources. However, by 1853 with Transportation abolished, the calls for responsible self-government were successful. A new constitution was drafted and in 1856, Van Diemen’s Land became an independent British colony. The new colony changed its name to Tasmania, to disassociate itself from its past as a penal colony.

A form of self-government was begun and people looked forward to a bright future. They were used to prosperity through investment, the spending of the British Government money on the convict system, and through wool, wheat and whale exports. There had been large profits made from supplying timber, wheat and livestock to the Victorian goldfields but the population growth was waning. A lengthy period of economic depression cast its shadow and government revenues declined.

Nevertheless, the Crimean War in 1855 received astounding support and huge sums of money were donated to assist widows and children. There was great loyalty to Britain, of which Queen Victoria was the symbol. Her reign was one of growing social awareness, particularly by the Protestant Churches, of the need to promote moral improvement and education.

![Government House built 1860](Cyclopedia of Tasmania)

![Urbanisation: 2 and 3 storey premises in Liverpool Street Hobart, 1866.](State Library of Tasmania)

![Port of Hobart 1866](Crowther Library)

![Whaling ships with Salamanca warehouses behind.](State Library of Tasmania)
In Tasmania, a ray of economic sunshine was the 1871 discovery of the Mt Bischoff tin mine. This lit up the economy but it failed to save the Mechanics’ Institute which closed in November of that year.

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Establishment of the Van Diemen’s Land Mechanics’ Institute:

Detail of Jarman’s 1858 map of Hobart Town

Drawn and engraved by R.Jarman (1808-1877)

The location of the Mechanics’ Institute is highlighted.

It is interesting to observe how the Mechanics’ Institute is located in the midst of other newly evolving institutions in Hobart Town — to name a few: the Friends’ Meeting House, the Israelites Sanctuary, the Baptist Chapel, the Central Public School, the site of the intended Roman Catholic Cathedral, the Tasmanian Museum, the Hutchins School, the Bank of Australasia, and many more.
Hobart was only 23 years old when the inaugural meeting of the Van Diemen’s Land Mechanics’ Institute was held on 23 March 1827, the first established in Australia. Just six years earlier, the world’s first Mechanics’ Institute had been opened in Edinburgh, with the aim of providing technical and adult education for skilled workers and elementary instruction to other workers at the cost of a small subscription fee. Instruction in the various branches of science and other useful knowledge through formal lecture courses was to be included; sometimes a library and a museum contributed to the education. In England at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, unemployed soldiers and poor social and working conditions were leading to unrest; riots and machine breaking were common amongst those whose livelihoods were threatened; and the Chartist movement was drawing support for electoral reform. Growth of the Mechanics’ Institutes was encouraged as a counter to these problems.

The meeting in Hobart Town was attended by ‘130 highly respectable persons’; Dr James Ross, the editor of the Hobart Town Courier, was chairman. The rules, similar to those of the Edinburgh Mechanics’ Institute, were read. Temperance, science, and education, it was thought, would lead to moral enlightenment in Van Diemen’s Land, which was then a penal colony. Governor George Arthur also expected moral improvement when he agreed to be patron of the Mechanics’ Institute; 50 members were enrolled. Money was subscribed and donations were made of books which promoted the arts, sciences, mechanics and literature. There was to be a Circulating Library and one for reference. Books have always been seen as a door to self-education.
The secretary was George Augustus Robinson who had educated himself by reading widely. After his arrival in Hobart in 1824, Robinson had prospered as a builder, he was on the committee of the Bible Society, and visited prisoners and the condemned in gaol. George Augustus Robinson became known as the Protector of the Aborigines in Van Diemen’s Land and Victoria.4 Lectures on chemistry were to be given by Dr Scott, the colonial surgeon, and by Dr Ross, who was to lecture on philosophy and astronomy.5

The initial ten years of the Mechanics’ Institute were difficult, public support was minimal; but the Institute was nurtured by two men: Dr Adam Turnbull, a medical doctor and later a Presbyterian minister, who was a believer in education6 and Dr James Ross, chairman of the first meeting. Dr Ross, editor of the Government Gazette and Hobart Town Gazette/Courier, made his new reading rooms available from 1833-1836 for the Institute lectures and for depositing the library and scientific apparatus.7 The population in 1837 was 8323 free, 7260 convicts, 1050 military and 300 aborigines.8 The society was and continued to be class conscious, with grades of importance in government employees, the convict department, free arrivals, emancipists, and convicts.

In 1837 the new Governor, Sir John Franklin and his wife Lady Jane Franklin arrived in Hobart. The couple were supporters of culture and in 1841 the Mechanics’ Institute began to benefit from the British Government’s annual grant of £100 which Sir John had recommended. This certain income enabled the Institute to commit to a twenty-one year lease of the Wesley Hall in Melville Street and to making additions to the building which were paid off in 1849.

Lady Franklin collected specimens of natural history and established a small library, and built Ancanthe, a miniature Greek temple designed by convict James Blackburn, to house this collection. The books had to be illustrative of Tasmania and neighbouring colonies, and the authors inhabitants (or formerly so) of Tasmania.9

From 1839 to 1855 the Presbyterian Minister, Dr John Lillie, the President of the Mechanics’ Institute Committee, was a staunch supporter. His presidential addresses, and the lectures he gave at the Institute were lauded. He believed in the unity of the design of creation and in the need for the religious and moral ideas necessary for enlightenment. Lillie helped establish the Hobart High School and was a foundation vice-president of the Royal Society. His great achievement as a churchman was to uphold the equality of his church with the Church of England. Lillie’s health began to fail and he left Tasmania in 1856 three years after transportation ceased in Van Diemen’s Land and the year it became the separate state of Tasmania. He had been a stabilising and harmonising influence in the Hobart Town
Mechanics’ Institute as it was renamed. Membership of the Institute then began to fluctuate and the debt began to increase.

From the 1840s the Hobart Town Mechanics’ Institute had been a subject of criticism in the newspapers when it was noted that ‘few of the humbler classes take any interest in the Institute’ and that ‘mechanics had no control over the management’. It was suggested that ‘working classes were not prepared to avail themselves of the opportunity of self-instruction.’

And again ‘the largest proportion of subscribers were those who joined (the Mechanics’ Institute) for the advantage of reading the light literature in the library, viewing it as a place of fashionable resort; some again subscribe because it is a duty to patronise such an institution; a few, and a very few, join with the object of gaining practical instruction in the Arts and Sciences.

The diaries dated 1850, 1852 and 1855 of the unfortunate engineer Alexander Cheyne reveal a lonely man frequently walking to the Mechanics’ Institute for company in the Reading Room as well as for the lectures.

From 1864 the grant given by the Tasmanian State Government was withdrawn because the Institute was no longer living up to its educational ideals. That same year the Hobart Workingmen’s’ Club opened, where recreation was given higher priority than learning, and a savings bank and a provident fund were established. This was a severe blow to the Mechanics’ Institute; they were making strenuous efforts to reduce expenditure and increase income but the Institute could not be kept open without the loss of the annual £100 grant.

In April 1866 the Institute Committee was informed by the Methodist Wesley Board that the terms of the lease would be strictly enforced. The Institute was not to sublet the said premises or any part thereof for a theatre or Public School, or to any religious denomination, or to hold any public meetings on the Lord’s Day or Monday or Wednesday evenings. Unpaid rent for one calendar month after due date would mean that ‘it shall be lawful for the trustees to re-enter the Mechanics’ Institute and its additional rooms and improvements and to repossess and enjoy them as if the term of lease had expired.’

In 1869 the Wesley Trustees were unwilling to extend the lease but were prepared to accept the Mechanics’ Institute as tenants for £10 a quarter year on condition the Hall was not let for concerts or Theatrical Entertainments.

‘The Institute should become a dead letter as a thing of the past, or it should have support. The object of the Founders (of the Institute) was to detach the masses from dangerous political associations and to place within their reach sources of information by which they might learn that knowledge is power.’

Again in the Mercury:

‘The persons who most benefit by the Mechanics’ Institute comprise all that class whose means are limited, and who would, were such institutes not in existence, be unable to avail themselves of all the advantages they are capable of conferring.’
The population of Tasmania in 1871 was nearly 100,000 people although departures were outnumbering arrivals, 5326 to 4648. Professions and trades occupied 33.14% of the population and nearly 60% were literate; the 29% who could not read were less likely to benefit from the Mechanics’ Institute. Other organisations such as the Workingmen’s Club, the Hobart Public Library, and Debating Clubs were providing alternative attractions. There had been no wealthy patrons of the Mechanics’ Institute who would defray the costs of extra teachers and many of the lectures were given gratis by gentlemen with knowledge and interest in their subjects. But these were not necessarily relevant to ‘mechanics’.

In September 1871 a portion of the £57 of the rent arrears had been paid. Membership of the Mechanics’ Institute continued to drop, debt increased, and life drained out of the Institute. At a November 1871 meeting which just twelve members attended, there were no dissenting voices when a motion was put to close the Hobart Mechanics’ Institute. In December 1871 Dr Byfield asked the Wesley Trustees if they would rent the Mechanics’ Institute to him for a school.

The Hobart Mechanics’ Institute finally finished with the building in May 1872; the gas fittings and many other effects were open to offer from the Trustees to pay for arrears in rent and repairs.

The Building:
Today all signs of the Hobart Mechanics’ Institute have been erased from the Wesley Hall at 58 Melville Street, Hobart. Australia’s very first Mechanics’ Institute used the Wesley Hall for some years and added the front rooms to the Hall. We are very fortunate in Hobart to have this building still standing.
Methodism in Tasmania began in 1821 with the holding of services in a private house in Collins Street and later in a carpenter’s workshop in Argyle Street. The congregation gamely persevered with their songs of praise, despite ‘the inhabitants pelting the building with stones, bricks and dead dogs and serpents’.

This was described by the Reverend Nathaniel Turner, on his way to New Zealand but marooned here by the Maori Wars. However by September 1822, the Committee for the Erection of a Wesleyan Chapel in Hobart Town was ready to commence the walls of their proposed new chapel. An advertisement was placed in the Hobart Town Gazette calling for tenders for the supply of 10,000 bricks.

In 1823 Horton and Mansfield were able to report that ‘[w]e have at length finished the walls of our chapel in this town. They enclose an oblong square (sic) 60 feet by 37 and 24 feet high.’ As observed by Robin Boyd in Australia’s Home, ‘with Tasmania’s milder sun in summer and penetrating cold in winter there was no call to cast the roof out in wide eaves or to build verandahs to shelter the walls. Plain walls were exposed in the face of the sun and there were no exterior shutters.’

The arrival of Colonel George Arthur as Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen’s Land was instrumental in the further progress of the building. Until his arrival progress had faltered for some time due to debt and lack of funds. Arthur as Governor had wider powers than the previous Governor Sorell and in financial matters he was to have the power of largely acting at his own discretion, being responsible to London, rather than the Governor-in-Chief in Sydney.

With Arthur’s promise of all possible assistance in the pursuit of moral enlightenment for the colony, cedar was ordered from Sydney to furnish the Chapel, and timber was ordered for the roof. This timber being at last available ‘it was found that the Government was unable to provide a boat to bring it to town’, so a boat was hired by the Wesley Trustees to go to Birch’s Bay where the timber was awaiting transport.
The Hobart Town Chapel trustees learned in 1825 that 30,000 shingles for the roof were ready at the D’Entrecasteaux Channel but that they would have to arrange for the hire of the boat to bring them to town. This they did, paying freight at the rate of 2/3d per 1,000 shingles.

The vouchers for expenditure are still extant. It is pleasing to note in the rendering of this account the meticulous attention to detail – even the dog’s dinner is taken into account.  

The Hobart environs showing the extent of the boat trips made to collect materials for building the Wesley Chapel.  

(Margaret Blow 2014)
The building measured 60 feet by 40 feet outside and ‘being stuccoed really it ranks among the ornamental buildings of the town.’ On each side are four double hung windows with twenty panes, the top half is fixed and the lower one, fixed at the bottom, tilts in. Corrugated iron now has replaced the shingled roof. The hall has three openings, two doors either side of the stage and at the rear the main entrance has access from the two storey section built by the Mechanics’ Institute. The Melville Street Chapel flourished but by 1836 had become too small for the congregation. The trustees decided to build the new large handsome Wesley Church resembling the Wesley Chapel in City Road London. This new church was used for the first time in 1840.

The first Public Library in Australia which had been in the old Argyle Street Chapel, was later housed in what became known as the Wesley Hall. Books and a bookcase from that period are in the Wesley Museum upstairs at the back of the beautiful Wesley Church. The Mechanics’ Institute was formed in 1827 and the Colonial Times reported that ‘it desired to meet and talk about topics of interest in surroundings appropriate to sober discussion and debate.’ Meetings were held in various places and even in the Court of Requests.

Finally after years of using temporary accommodation, in 1841 the Mechanics’ Institute Committee secured a lease of the old Wesleyan Chapel at a rent of £50 per annum. The expense of raising funds for their own building was beyond their uncertain means and in 1845 the Committee decided to take out a 21-year lease on the Wesleyan Chapel which had a well-adapted hall and to spend £519/6/7 on an addition on the end of the original Chapel.

This extension is two-storied and measures 44 feet by 24 feet. The front of the building, now rendered, is constructed of smooth-tooled ashlar with quoins (corners) made of lighter
smooth-tooled ashlar and the side walls were rendered, probably over rubble walls. The front was designed with three bays and windows of nine panes with sandstone lintels and sills. The central upper window and the doorway have wider sandstone double lintels with scrolled pediments on each side. The transom has been filled in with timber. The door is double panelled and a third panel forms part of the doorway. A low parapet carries the text of the name, and the hipped roof is corrugated iron with two low chimneys at each end. Two rooms open off the entrance hall, the central steps open into the lecture hall and the stairway leads to the upper floor. Originally a single room, the Reading Room has been divided in two and reinforcing rods cross the area. The anchors for the strengthening rods, two cross pieces of iron, can be seen on the external front wall. These alterations provided members with ‘a commodious and well adapted Hall for lecturing and for housing the scientific apparatus, the museum collection and the Library room.’ A reading room was also established.  

**Hobart Town, Van Diemen’s Land : a family arriving at the old wharf**  
George Frankland, watercolour, c.1827  
(Allport Library)

It would seem that there was considerable wrangling over the years between the trustees of the Chapel and the committee of the Mechanics’ Institute.

*Monday evening 6 September 1847 ‘with reference to the application of the Mechanics’ Institute for permission to erect a certain necessary convenience adjoining their Lecture Hall – the Trustees are desirous of accommodating the committee provided they can do so without its being in any way a nuisance to the Mission House or the Old Vestry.*  

Today all signs of the Mechanics’ Institute and the Workers’ meetings have been erased from the building. It is clear from photographs that MECHANICS’ INSTITUTE, the original text on the parapet, has been replaced with WESLEY HALL.
The plaque on the side of the building mentions only the religious use of the building. In the interests of historical record there should also be a plaque to reflect the occupation of the building by the Mechanics’ Institute and the tradition of knowledge, in one form or another.

◄ Front view of the Mechanics’ Institute’s addition to the Wesley Hall. Behind is the ‘brutal’ architecture of a car park. The sandstone lintel of the central upper window with scrolled pediments; and the cross pieces of the anchors for the strengthening rods are clearly visible. Note that the name on the parapet has been changed to WESLEY HALL.

(Suzanne Lester 2014)

Social History:
The Van Diemen’s Land Mechanics’ Institute had a major problem: the management was in the hands of the ‘upper classes’ and its intermittent lack of money made it reliant on those people for lectures; the ‘mechanic’ members were a minority. In 11 June 1841 the Courier described it as ‘not a Mechanics’ Institute but a society for the promotion of the literary and scientific tastes of the Public without reference to the other classes’. Many lectures were given gratis, and naturally on the subjects with which the lecturers were most familiar. Often the lecturers were gentlemen from a nonconformist background who valued education and who had done well on arrival in Van Diemen’s Land. While some topics were of little practical interest to ‘mechanics’ the lectures contributed to the 1840s and 1850s culture of Hobart which was the most extensive in Australia.

‘The importance of the fine arts to the right development of the colony’ was the theme used by Benjamin Duterrau when he lectured at the Van Diemen’s Land Mechanics’ Institute. This was the first lecture on fine art given in the Australian colonies.
Duterrau had exhibited portraits at the Royal Academy London prior to his migration with his daughter to Van Diemen’s Land in 1832 and he presented one, Joseph Priestley, to the Van Diemen’s Land Mechanics’ Institute. By the end of 1833 Duterrau was working on a series of portraits of Tasmanian Aboriginals and he is considered the first artist to portray them accurately.

At a lecture on 21 July 1835, Duterrau expanded on the theme of cultivating good taste and raising the tone of society in this remote corner of the world through the fine arts. The Courier editor, Dr James Ross, promoted the civilising influence of science and announced he would lecture on ‘the effects of the atmosphere on climate and vegetation, winds, tides, etc and the leading principles of mechanics, the inertia of matter, motion, centripetal and centrifugal forces, momentum, etc.’ Duterrau presented to the Institute a bas-relief plaster cast of ‘Timmy’, a Tasmanian Aboriginal, which is now in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. In September 1837 a brief report of Duterrau’s lecture on painting and sculpture was illustrated with recent examples of painting and engraving in England. The new Governor, Sir John and Lady Franklin were present.

Until 1837 lectures were held irregularly at the Van Diemen’s Land Mechanics’ Institute although from 1838 to 1862 the yearly average number of lectures was twenty-one. At the Annual General Meeting of the Van Diemen’s Land Mechanics’ Institute in March 1845, the Courier reported that the Depression had made it necessary to reduce the subscription rate and continued:

‘The Committee take the liberty of recording a prevalent anxious desire that a few talented gentlemen would, from pure patriotic feeling, kindly coalesce and voluntarily tender gratuitous lectures on popular and attractive subjects; such favours as these would unquestionably quickly advance the Institute, and promote the best interests of the colony.’
The newspaper continued with the list of the twenty-three topics offered in the previous year (1844) and the names of the lecturers.

Six Lectures: J.S. PROUT ‘On the cultivation of the Fine Arts with Practical Illustrations’
Born in England, Prout had moved to Hobart in 1844 after the Economic Depression reduced the work available in Sydney. In his lectures Prout sketched rapidly with the brush and explained as he proceeded. His lasting legacy is the many paintings and lithographs not only of Tasmania, Sydney and Melbourne but also of convict and emigrant life, bushrangers and aboriginals.33
(Louisa Meredith, author and artist, who had arrived in Van Diemen’s Land in 1840, was impressed that ‘a landscape and watercolour fever was raging in Hobart’.34 In 1845 the first Australian Art Exhibition was held in Hobart; another exhibition was held in 1858.)

Two Lectures: DR BEDFORD ‘On the study of Physical Sciences’
Dr Bedford was a medical doctor.35

Two Lectures: W.R. GIBLIN ‘On Astronomy’
Giblin conducted the New Town Academy for Boys but had previously been dismissed when in charge of the New Town Orphans’ School.36

Two Lectures: MR J.C. WALKER ‘On the Economy and Variety of Nature, illustrated by the hydro-oxygen microscope’
Mr J.C. Walker was a Scottish miller, brewer, merchant and landowner. He was energetic in various causes such as the Hobart Infant School and the Presbyterian Tract Society.37

One Lecture: REVD F MILLER ‘On the Progress of Civilisation as connected with the extension of Christianity’
Rev F. Miller, a Congregational minister who had arrived in 1830, built the first Congregational Church in Australia, set up the Bethel Union for seamen and a temperance society.38

Two Lectures: DR TURNBULL ‘On the Physiology of the Senses’
Dr Adam Turnbull, a medical doctor, held many government positions before ordination late in life in the Presbyterian Church. Turnbull was a vice-president of the Mechanics’ Institute Committee and the Anti-Transportation League.39

Five Lectures: REVD JOHN LILLIE
Three ‘On the free Inquiry in relation to the natural Sciences’ and
Two ‘On Vegetable Physiology’
Rev. John Lillie, the President, helped establish the Hobart High School and was a foundation Vice President of the Royal Society.40

One Lecture: REVD W.R. WADE ‘On Pneumatics’
Rev. W.R. Wade was a Baptist minister.41

Two Lectures: DR OFFICER ‘On Geology’
Dr Officer had arrived in 1822 in Hobart as a ship’s surgeon, and claimed a grant of land in the Bothwell district. In 1838 he became infected with the ‘mad Port Philip’ transactions (a speculative rush to Victoria for land) which did not succeed for him so he then became a health officer in Hobart. Later, Officer was a strong supporter of Revd John West and the Anti-Transportation League. In 1853 he was elected to the Legislative Council.42
Benjamin Duterrau lectured again at the Mechanics’ Institute in June and August 1847; the topic was ‘On Harmony and the Harmonious results of well-spent time, showing how effectively the Mechanics’ Institute tends to that end and the sister arts of painting and poetry’. Duterrau referred to historical painting and Stephen Scheding suggests in ‘The National Picture’ that Duterrau had that in mind when he painted ‘The Conciliation’. His final lecture was given 29 June 1849 when he was eighty-two years old. Duterrau considered ‘the scourge of transportation had in measure deprived society of harmony’.

In 1851 a Dramatic Reading by Mr Elliston from Othello at The Mechanics’ Institute Hall in Melville Street was attended by 500 persons. This had followed a series of four lectures on Elocution and Shakespearean Readings. The other lectures for 1851 were two lectures on the The Pleasure of Scientific Studies, two on Terrestrial Phenomena, two on Astronomy, two on Practical Humanity, two on Printing, one on Mechanics, and one on Political Economy and Statistics. Classes were offered in Mathematics, English Grammar, Writing, and Drawing. Alexander Hamilton, the local phrenologist,* in 1856 gave a lecture at the Mechanics’ Institute in aid of the Patriotic Fund for the Crimean War and raised over £5,000.

The Victorian gold rush adversely affected the Institute as it is estimated more than half the male population of Tasmania was infected with gold fever and sailed for Victoria. Some returned but many ex-convicts decided they would start a new life on the Mainland. Wives and children were often left behind.

In the next year, 1852, music classes and art classes were suspended because the lecturer moved away and there was difficulty obtaining teachers but there were a series of six Entertainments to keep up interest in the music class.

*Phrenology was a would-be science of mental faculties which was investigated by feeling the bumps on the outside of the head.
Topics for lectures were *Writings of Alfred Tennyson, The Commercial History of Great Britain, Organs of Respiration, Grecian Statues, On Logic, Periodical Literature, Art of Writing, Practical Phrenology, A Night with Burns with Phrenological Illustrations of his character, Woman, her Place and Power, and Britain, Chief of Nations.*

Some lectures were not well received:

*On Thursday last, Mr W.L. Horton gave a somewhat tedious lecture in the Institution on the writings of Poet Hood illustrating the ‘grotesque’ and a few of the eternal mechanisms of the poet’s versification by several quotations and readings. On the whole we think it quite a failure and highly presumptive of a person, unless properly qualified, to take upon himself a Lecture, at least in the Mechanics’ Institute.*

*Aborigines of Tasmania and John West, Agriculture, History of Chemistry, Structure of and Functions of the Human Voice, Ozone, Mental or Self-Culture* were the more scientific lectures of 1855. Finding suitable lecturers was a continuing problem in the 1860s and there was a demand for light and comic amusements which were attended by the young men and women. The *Electric Telegraph* lecture in 1860, was given by FA.Packer, who was involved with its installation across Bass Strait. He was also organist at St David’s Cathedral, a teacher and composer of music.

In 1863 a lecture given at the Mechanics’ Institute on *Mental Improvement with Special Reference to Discussion Classes* was received with general applause. The young men were aroused to the importance of cultivating the art of oratory, Debating Societies sprang up and drew supporters from the government officers, legal establishments and banks.

The withdrawal in 1864 of the Tasmanian Government grant to the Institute on the grounds that it was not carrying out its educational function, made it necessary to dispense with the office of a paid secretary. Some lectures were given, *Aborigines of Tasmania,* by the Clerk of the House of Assembly Hugh Hull; *The Empire of Japan,* was another. One of the last lectures, *Intemperance and Its Legislative Remedies* was given by the Rt Revd CH Bromby in May 1871. It was obvious that the Hobart Town Mechanics’ Institute had lost support and in November 1871, a meeting of members voted for its closure.
In England between the 1820s and 1848 the Mechanics’ Institutes were encouraging self-improvement and the Chartist movement was struggling for political reform. One of the Chartists’ leaders, William Cuffay ended up in Van Diemen’s Land and continued to protest politically at meetings. William Cuffay took a leading role at some political meetings, four of which were held in the Mechanics’ Institute. He was a good organizer and a humorous speaker. The son of a freed African slave who had come to London, the black tailor took part in the Tailors’ Trade Union strike in 1834 and a few years later was elected a leader of the Chartists who were struggling for universal suffrage. In 1848, the Year of Revolution in Europe, the Chartists marched in London. Based on the evidence of a spy, Cuffay, with fifteen others, was convicted of felonious treason and to transportation to Van Diemen’s Land. He quickly became involved in local issues prior to his pardon as a political prisoner in 1857, but he remained in Tasmania. Cuffay played an important role in the amendments to the Masters and Servants Act which was finally repealed in 1976.

Currently (2016):
The heritage-listed Mechanics’ Institute building — that addition to the original Wesley Hall — is today used for offices. The original large hall, which was leased from the Trustees of the Wesley Church by the Mechanics’ Institute, has continued to vibrate with a rich tapestry of community activities. Moving along from the club meetings of the Poultry Club which began meeting there in 1854, the old building today in 2016 maintains a vibrant existence as the venue for yoga classes, bush dances, dance classes, singing, Al Anon meetings, concerts and more …

Regrettably, there is no plaque or indication of any kind on the outside of the Melville Street building to record the significant part which the Mechanics’ Institute played in encouraging education and the arts in early Van Diemen’s Land.

“The past is all around us in Hobart, but our memory of the past is becoming increasingly fractured.”

47 Hobart Poultry Club
Certificate for First Prize 1932
The benefits of membership are set out, together with the program of lectures to be offered. Information is also provided on topics of instruction and times for the classes at the Institute.
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