



LAUNCESTON TAS



View of the Mechanics Institute, Launceston, Tasmania, 13th December 1968.¹

Name: Mechanics' Institute

Address: Cnr St John and Cameron Streets (demolished 1971)

The City:

Launceston is a major service centre of approximately 65,000 people (100,000 in greater Launceston), in northern Tasmania. It was first settled by Europeans in 1806, making it one of Australia's oldest cities. At that time, it was part of Van Diemen's Land which was the second of Australia's penal colonies. The city was established on the confluence of several rivers and developed a thriving harbour. The early town's main economic *raison d'être* was as an export centre for the region's agricultural industries. In the 21st century the agricultural focus is still important with viticulture replacing wool and Launceston is now a major tourism hub. Until the late 1970s, Launceston was a major rail hub; the defunct railway yards have been redeveloped as a thriving cultural and sporting complex.

We are extremely lucky to have a wealth of publications available about our Mechanics' Institute and its now-demolished building. The following has largely been taken from Stefan Petrow's *Going to the Mechanics*; not all page references have been included. I would like to express my thanks that this book has been available.

¹ Photo held by Queen Victoria Museum and Gallery, Launceston Tasmania. Accessed 5 December 2012 <http://147.109.236.45/mercury/?ID=7316&type+Image>



Establishment:

In the early 1840s Launceston had several energetic and civic-minded leaders. James Aikenhead established *The Examiner* newspaper, which has been continuously published since 1842, and the Mechanics' Institute was mentioned in the first edition of the newspaper. The first editor of the paper was the Reverend John West. Prior to the first edition of the *Examiner*, in 1840, John West and W S Button met to discuss the formation of a mechanics' institute. This group became the Launceston Book Society (Petrow p.11), the precursor of the Mechanics' Institute. A meeting was held 8 March 1842, attended by prominent citizens (including several who had been positively associated with mechanics' institutes in England) as well as many 'mechanics'. This meeting supported the establishment of a committee, which worked quickly to start the organization. The first lecture, free to the public, was held at the end of April 1842. Later events incurred a 1/- charge for adults and 6d for children. Subscription was one dollar per quarter. The governing body was formed in May 1842, and Sir John Franklin (then Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land) consented to be patron. The reading room, stocked at first with donations, a practice which continued to 1914, was open 3 nights each week from 6pm until 9pm and the library was open, the same evenings, 7-9pm. The aim was that "lectures should be delivered twice a month, yet not so as to interfere with the meetings of the Teetotal Society". The government was not willing, in the early days, to support the Institute financially because this society had so recently been formed.

The population of Launceston in the 1840s was dominated by convicts or ex-convicts. In 1848, there were 10,100 people living in the city (7854 free [many of whom were ex-convicts] and 2246 convicts). For this population there were 61 pubs, so the temperance movement was strongly supported. The 'mechanics', as defined by the movement in England, found their employment opportunities limited by the large number of convict workers available. In the 1861 census, only 58% of the population could read and write; 14% could read only and 31% couldn't do either.

Early support for the Institute was not universal, and the *Cornwall Chronicle*, (published 1835-1880), was at first vociferous in its opposition. Criticism included the perception that not enough 'mechanics' were involved and that the committee was not representative of the wider community. However by 1869, the *Chronicle's* opposition had disappeared.

The Cameron Street school room, the usual venue, was not always viewed as suitable. By 1849 it had become 'dilapidated' and the audience was sometimes unable to see the experiments presented as part of the education program. The December 1842 meeting records the first suggestion that a suitable building should be acquired but the motion was rejected.

Later, meetings moved to the Elizabeth Street school room. Throughout the 1840s the venue changed as rooms stopped being available for certain times, and also depending on the views of the board. Other rooms used were the Temperance Hall (£10 per annum up to 1856) and the Cornwall Assembly rooms.

By early in January 1844 there was enough interest for the reading room to be open daily. Alexander Kidd proposed building a reading room adjacent to his cabinet manufactory



and it became a place of retreat for the working man. This further reduced the appeal of the Mechanics' Institute. Relatively little was done to attract junior members and in 1902 there were only 18 junior subscribers.

By 1929 the Institute had become the Public Library, with the journal and book collection being used as its core, prior to the development of the state-wide library service which exists today. The Mechanics' Institute's excellent nineteenth century fiction collection is now housed in the Phil Leonard Room of the LINC building. The paintings and scientific collections which were part of the Mechanics' Institute were transferred to become the core collections of what is now the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery. This Institution, funded solely by the Launceston City Council, opened its doors in 1891.

The Mechanics' Institute installed a Brindley organ in the main hall in 1861. The installation was celebrated in *The Examiner* (Launceston) 25 June 1861, p.5. This excellent instrument was transferred to the Launceston Albert Hall after the latter's completion in 1891.

The Building:

The government had given a grant of land (80 feet by 150 feet) on the corner of St John Street and Cameron Street, in 1843. In 1857 a tender for £5370 was accepted: £3000 coming from the government and £8896 from fund-raising largely by the exertions of the Reverend Robert Kirkwood Ewing during his 5-year tenure as President of the Mechanics' Institute. The foundation stone was laid in 1857 and the new hall was opened in April 1860.

According to Petrow, the building contained a reading room, library, classroom (each of these was 18 feet by 22 feet), a museum (30 feet by 22 feet), a second classroom or lecture room (45 feet by 22 feet) and keeper's apartments. On the first floor was a laboratory and lecture hall (66 feet by 46 feet) which was nearly one third larger than the previously used Cornwall Assembly Rooms and able to seat 700 people. It was 25 feet high. All walls were rounded and had "no projections from the face of the wall" (Petrow p. 37).



View of the Mechanics' Institute, Launceston, Tasmania, looking south-west at corner of Cameron Street and St John Street.

Possibly taken in the 1870s (?)

² Photo held by Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, accessed 5 December 2012
<http://147.109.236.45/mercury/?ID=4196&type=Image>



Celebration Certificate of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute
 (See text, below) *Held by LINC*

**THE MECHANICS' INSTITUTE
 LAUNCESTON TASMANIA**

**This building has been erected at an expense of
 £8000**

The ground and the sum of £3000 having been liberally donated by the colonial government and the remainder freely subscribed by the inhabitants of Launceston.

The foundation stone was laid on the 24th June 1857 by the then President of the Institute

The Reverend Robert Kirkwood Ewing

Right Worshipful Grand Master of the Masonic Fraternity of Tasmania.

The building was opened on the 9th day of April by

His Excellency Sir Henry Edward Fox Young, Kt.

Governor in Chief of Tasmania.

Cornelius G Casey Esq, M.D. President. James Robertson Esq, Treasurer. Mr A.J. Green, Secretary

W.H. Clayton Esq, Architect. Mr G.R. Russell, Builder.



For the rest of the building's life, there were constant modifications and upgrades. In the 1880s the function of the Mechanics Institute was extended to include a museum and a school of mines.

1890 saw the Mechanics' Institute take over the then defunct Launceston Public Library and its collection of 2000 volumes on condition that the public could access them. (Petrow p. 48).

In 1899 electric lighting was added to the building. The small lecture room became the new reading room.



View of the Mechanics' Institute, corner of St John Street and Cameron Street.

Launceston Tasmania

1911

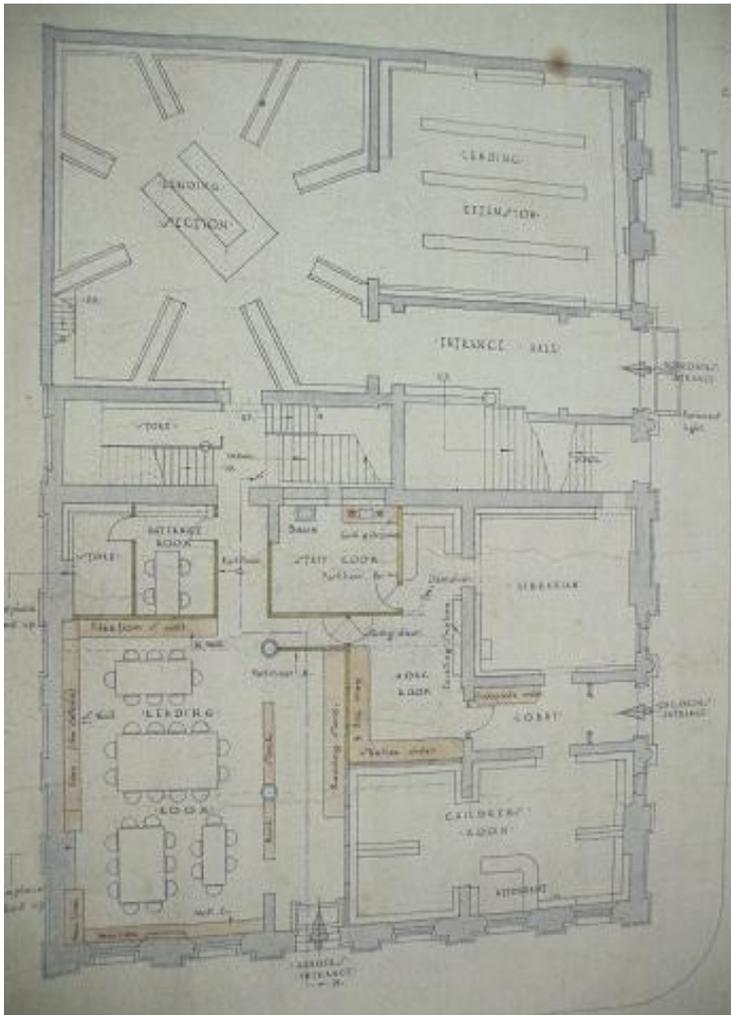
3

The Mechanics' Institute building was demolished in 1971 to make way for the current State Library building (now named LINC) and the Civic Square development. LINC has photographs of the interior of the demolished building taken just before the event happened.

LINC is the term used for the combined services of the State Library of Tasmania, the Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office (TAHO), Adult Education and online access centres.

Definition taken from the LINC website

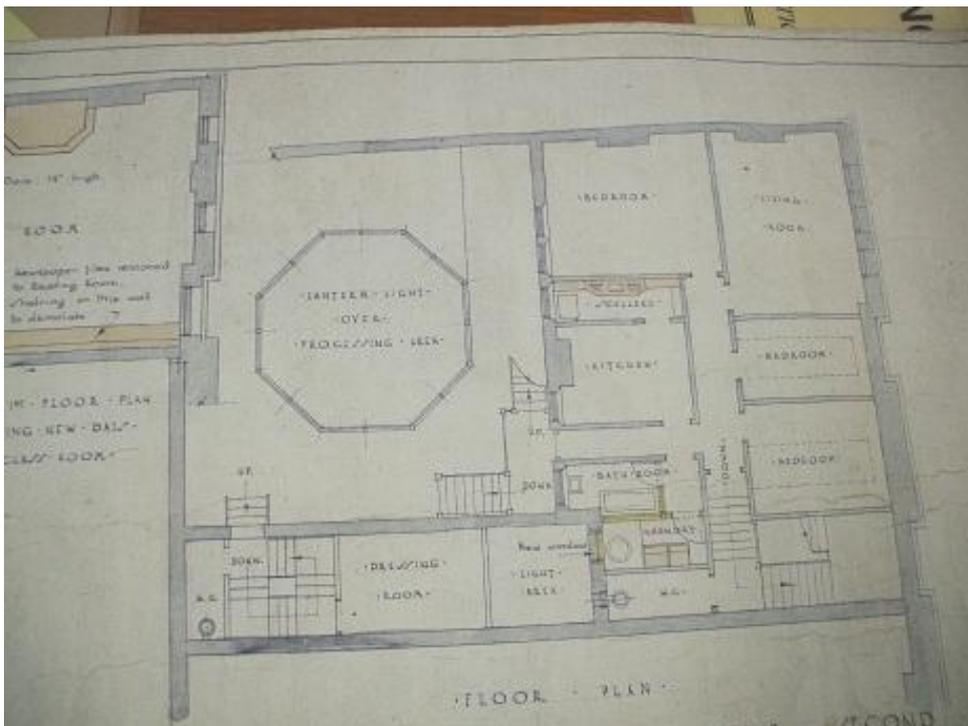
³ Photo held by the Queen Victoria Museum and Gallery, Launceston Tasmania. Accessed 5 December 2012 <http://147.109.236.45/mercury/default.asp?ID=4142&type=Image&searchterm+mechanics%20institute>



A full set of plans for the 1945 renovations of the Mechanics' Institute building is held by the LINC

At left:
Plans for ground floor renovation.

Below:
Part of the first floor plan for new works.





References:

Petrow, Stefan. *Going to the mechanics : a history of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute 1842-1914* Launceston : Historical Survey of Northern Tasmania, 1998.

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Quilliam, Damien. *Art and artefact?: colonial portraiture and the development of an institutional collection, the Launceston Mechanics' Institute, 1842-1918*.

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Whitfield, Ernest. *History of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute and Public Library*. [Launceston, Tas. : The Institute, (Launceston : Examiner Print) 1910]

Also available online at http://digital.slv.vic.gov.au/dtl_publish/pdf/marc/23/825540.html

Australian Dictionary of Biography:

Petrow, Stefan: Entry for Robert Kirkwood Ewing.

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ewing-robert-kirkwood-12908>

Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office Launceston Local Studies Collection : Photographs, plans and ephemera.

Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery: Photographic collection.

NLA Trove

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