

**Casterton and District
Historical Society Inc
Newsletter
May 2012**

Items in our newsletter:

The Story of the Mechanics
Institutes by Jim Kent
National Library E-News

NEXT MEETING

Next meeting May 16th, RSL
clubrooms 2pm



Casterton Mechanics Insitute, 1891



Mechanics Institute, Casterton, 1876

Historical Happenings



Casterton Community Museum

The Story of the Mechanics Institutes by Jim Kent

Did you ever wonder about the origins of the Mechanics Institute? The name could be observed proudly displayed on the front of halls of varying architectural beauty all over the once British Empire and the USA.

In Australia after the very first Mechanics Institute was built in 1839 and after the gold rushes of the 1850s, there were on register no less than 2,500 Institutes with 1,050 of them located in the state of Victoria, and approximately 10,000 throughout the world.

To go back to my opening query, the actual word *mechanic*, as used today and in recent times, conjures up the image of tradesmen who deal with the manufacture, repair and service of automobiles and machinery. The English language is notorious for single words which can have double or more meanings. The term *mechanic* in the 17th and 18th century meant that the person bearing the title was an artisan, tradesman or working man - and from the end of the 18th century unto the present day it means one who works on machinery.

The term *institute* is used to describe a society for the promoting of some public objective or to establish or set going a movement of custom, law and learning for the public. So there is meaning of the title.

To go back to the time of the advent of these halls we go back to 1799 when Dr George Birbeck conducted a series of free lectures for the working men of Glasgow, Scotland. This type of movement occurred around the period from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution when workers became more familiar with the use and maintenance of machinery, probably causing the term mechanic to be associated with all classes of machinery products.



Casterton's first post office and Henty Street above - from Vern McCallum collection



Cottage hospital



New Cemetery Mapping Project



It quickly spread throughout the British Empire and its colonies as well as to America. The movement began in Victoria in 1839 and the halls were the focal point for communities, offering reading rooms for the purpose of self-education, together with lectures, meeting rooms, libraries, museums, concerts and the playing of various games.

The Institute's library was of a free-lending type and the variety and content largely governed by the finances of the Institute's committee which offered this facility. The contents of the library were regularly changed by use of the railway system, should it be situated within reach of such. The Institute was governed by a committee who were dedicated to the enhancement of the cultural, educational and social life of the inhabitants of their local communities

As with all movements time alters factors, just as did Medicare when it came into being saw the demise of the various Societies who in the past tendered to the medical and funeral wants of its members. So also did the decline in the use of Mechanics Institutes come about with the advent of the current day TAFEs and technical colleges, and accelerating after World War II.

On a much smaller scale there are still operating some 500 Institutes offering services such as a lending library and as a public hall for other purposes. Other Institute halls have fallen victim to the ravages of time and some are in private ownership. Believe it is not, two of these hallowed halls of the past are now in use as shearing sheds - where once was taught Mathematics, English, languages, sciences, building, cooking and architecture, amongst other subjects.

On the local scene, on the site of our present town hall in Casterton stood the Mechanics Institute which was erected in 1876 as a single storey building. In 1891 a second storey was added and contained the library, tea rooms and office, while the ground floor had a stage and a large floor area. The Institute was demolished in the 1930s to make way for the current town hall.

South to Sandford, we have in Burke Street a splendid restored Mechanics Institute built around the 1880s after a concerned group of inhabitants petitioned the then Minister for Land and Works. Whilst the library attached to the rear has succumbed to various destructive factors and has been demolished, the hall itself is in a remarkably good state of repair.

Further away at Merino we see yet another Institute which started its life in 1870. Since then considerable additions have been made and.



Casterton Community Museum



Casterton in flood, 1946

Interesting to note:

Museum visits this year are already up 150 percent on all visits made during 2011.

Visits have come from NSW Richardson family members, an SA member of the McEachern family, the Community Centre adult education group, Harrow Historical Society and others.

We're on the Web - visit us at:

[Our Address www.swvic.org/castertonhistoricalsociety.htm](http://www.swvic.org/castertonhistoricalsociety.htm)

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an excellent public hall is still in use by this community. Coleraine has its Mechanics Institute in Winter Street and it is a very respectable public hall. Possibly the most elaborate of all local Institutes still exists in Hamilton at the western end of Gray Street, a magnificent building now the home of the Hamilton Historical Society.

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To contribute to this newsletter, contact Jan Lier at the Casterton Visitor Information Centre on 5581 2070 or by e-mail jlier3@activ8.net.au or Ros at roscov48@bigpond.com