

# THE ELONGATED DOG KENNEL

THE HISTORY OF THE  
MALMSBURY MECHANICS' INSTITUTE.



by

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on behalf of

Malmsbury Historical Society

2012

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## Introduction

Despite the publication of *If the Walls Could Speak* by Pam Baragwanath in 2000, the question of ‘what is a Mechanics’ Institute?’ is still asked. It is not the aim of this publication to duplicate the above work but for those who are new to the concept, the following explanation will be useful.

The Mechanics’ Institute movement began in 1799 when Professor George Birkbeck, ... a Quaker and Professor of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry at the University of Glasgow, conducted a series of lectures, free of charge, for the workingman of that city so that he might ‘agreeably occupy his mental vacancy in the evenings’. At that time the word ‘mechanic’ meant specifically a craftsman, or more loosely, a workingman who had been drawn from rural areas to tend the machines in the new factories springing up throughout England because of the industrial revolution. [1]

The movement quickly established in the early 1800s in Scotland and England and expanded to the USA and countries of the British Commonwealth. [2]

The first institute in Victoria, the Melbourne Athenaeum, was founded in 1839 and as the settlement of Victoria grew, more Mechanics’ Institutes were established. Some were also referred to as Free Libraries. Many were the fore-runners to the municipal libraries and, later, the major library corporations of today. These organisations were supported by the State Government with grants for libraries and buildings as well as grants of crown land on which Institutes could be built by trustees. In many rural towns the land was donated by a benefactor or was purchased with funds raised by the organisation. The organisations encompassed people from all religions, political persuasions, occupations and even genders and provided valuable social structure, networking, meeting spaces and self-improvement opportunities. It is estimated that more than 1000 Mechanics’ Institutes were established in Victoria by the 1940s. By the turn of the millennium, approximately 540 survived, of which 460 were still being used as community halls, but few retained their function as a library. [3]

Malmsbury Mechanics’ Institute (MMI) was established quite early (1862) when compared to many other towns. Of those institutes in the general district which survive, the Kyneton and Castlemaine institutes were established in 1855, Taradale and Daylesford in 1862, Trentham in 1881 and Drummond, a relative newcomer, was only established in 1920. The declaration of the township of Malmsbury itself in 1851 assisted this early start date and, considering Malmsbury did not have any formal local government until late 1861, the establishment of its Mechanics’ Institute in 1862 is quite an achievement. Unlike many institutes, however, the site of the present Malmsbury MI has an interesting history beyond that of a MI, with links to another well-known person who also wanted to see social improvement; Caroline Chisholm. The Malmsbury Town Hall has frequently been mistaken for the MMI and this history explains why this confusion prevails. This book also examines the history of the MMI site, the building(s) on it, and the people who made it all happen.

One minute book from the 1890s has survived, along with a library catalogue, borrowings book and receipt book from the same time period, this record draws on them and information gleaned from newspapers, council records, government records and gazettes and the biographies of people known to have been members.

Note: Throughout the book reference is made to the 'State Government'. Victoria did not officially become a state of Australia until federation in 1901. After separation from NSW in 1851, the *Colony* of Victoria had its own Government. The term *State Government*, in reference to Victoria, is used here for both the colony and the state.

1. Pam Baragwanath. *If the Walls Could Speak - A Social History of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria*. 2000 Publishing Solutions Pty Ltd. pp ix-xii and 6-29.
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*, p. 102, 125, 175, 264, 273.

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## NOTE:

Individual Mechanics Institutes are listed under “Mechanics’ Institute” rather than the town name (except Malmsbury) Where possible the exact names of people have been listed. In some cases the only detail is *Mr Smith* and unless stated otherwise, the references are for Malmsbury district residents. Where no other details are known, a date that relates to the entry is placed in brackets against the name i.e. *Smith, Mr (1866)*.

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