

MENDOORAN NSW



Name: Mechanics Institute Hall

Address: Bandulla Street, Mendooran, New South Wales 2842

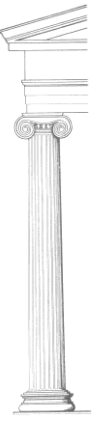
The Town:

Mendooran is a small town on the Castlereagh River 348 kilometres west of Sydney in the Central West of New South Wales. The population at the 2011 census was 302. The town of Mendooran is located in the Parish of Mendooran in the County of Napier.

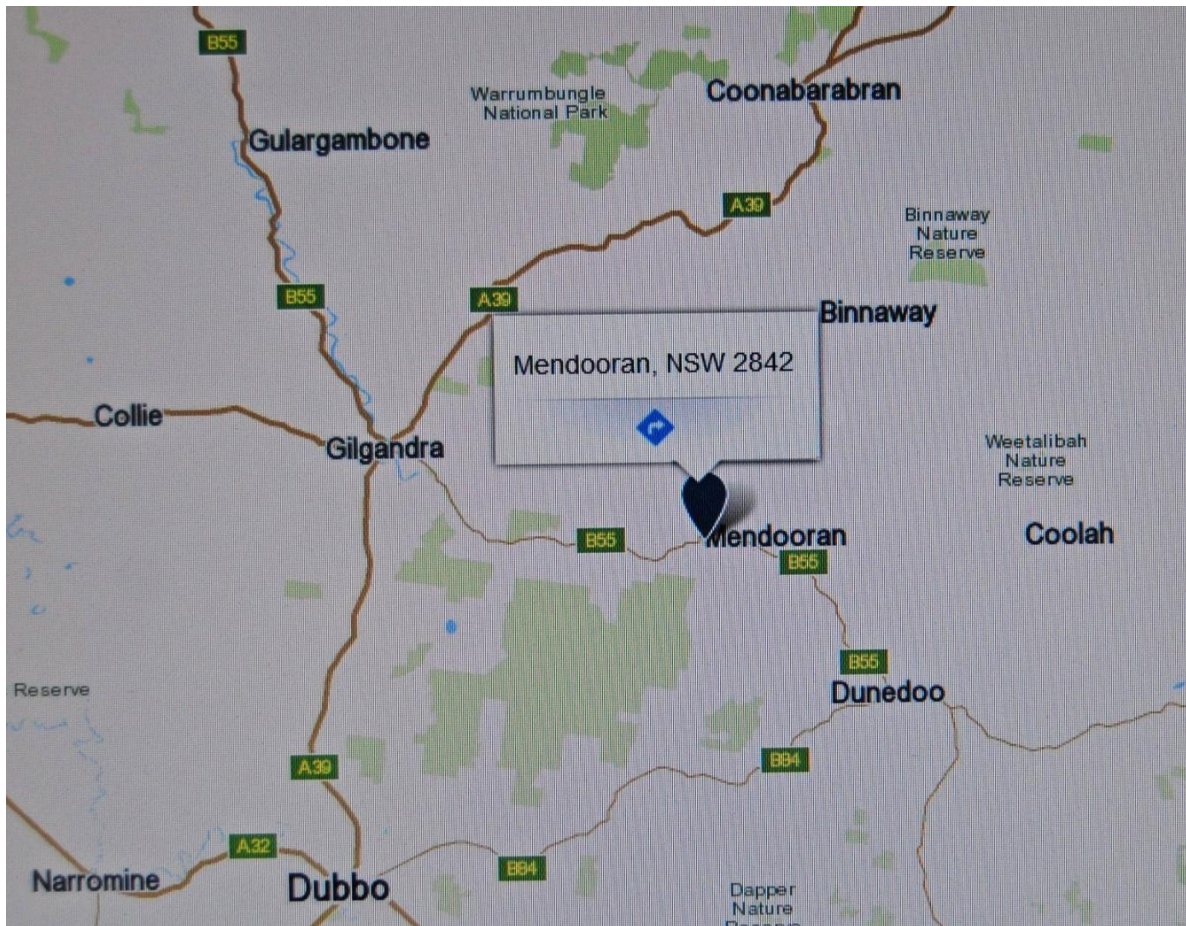
The town is located on the Castlereagh Highway and is now part of the Warrumbungle Shire; previously, it was part of the Coolah Shire, and before that Cobbora Shire. Mendooran is situated 71 kilometres south-east of Coonabarabran, the administrative centre of Warrumbungle Shire; the largest adjacent town is Dubbo, 75 kilometres to the south-west.

Mendooran is part of indigenous Wiradjuri territory and surveyor John Evans was the first European visitor to the district in 1815, while surveyor John Oxley passed through in 1817. The name is believed to originate from an Aboriginal tribal leader called "Mundo(o)"; a common early variant of the name of Mendooran is Mendooran, which was in use until about 1918.

A village was established in the 1860s near a crossing on the Castlereagh River where a bridge was built in 1869.



The town was laid out in 1881 with a school, police station and courthouse being built. Land in the district was initially taken up by large squatting runs for sheep and cattle. The district remains agricultural today: grazing (sheep and cattle) and cropping.



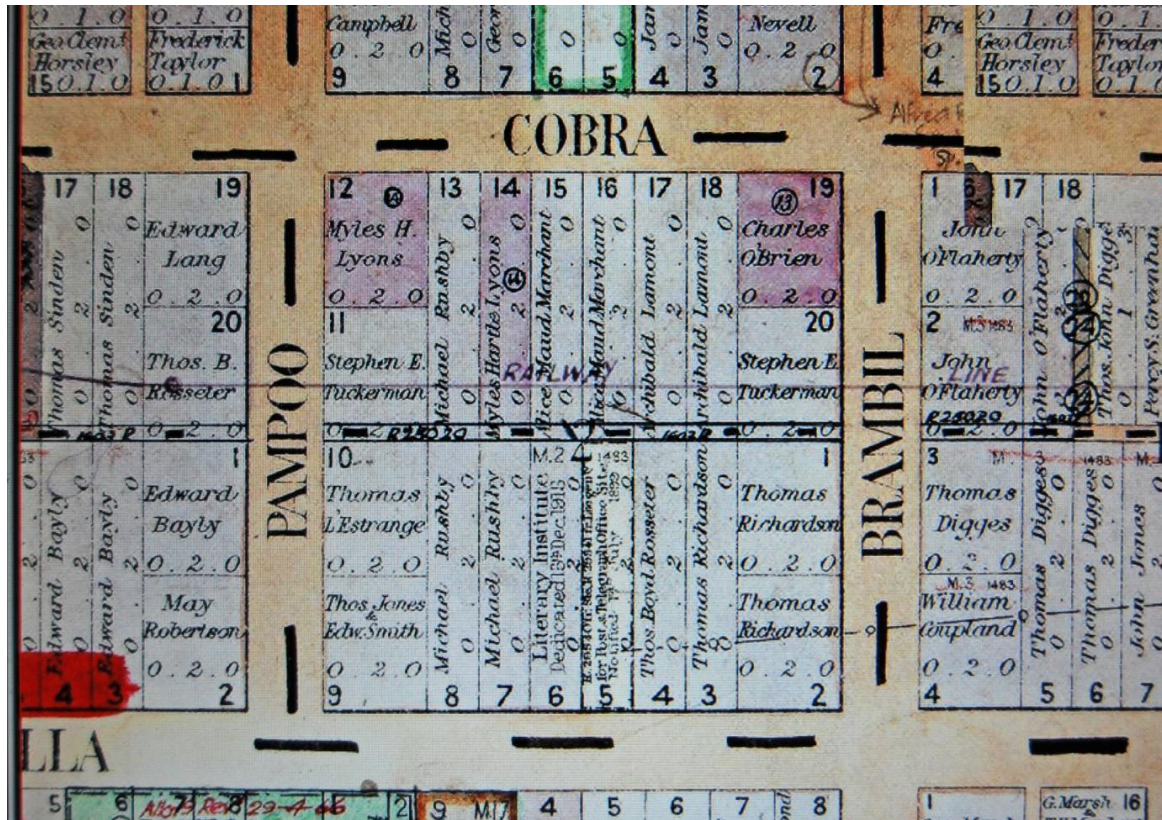
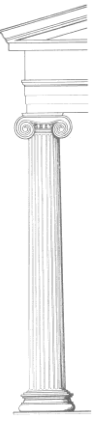
Mendooran district showing the location of the town in relation to nearby towns
(Google Maps)

Establishment:

The current Mechanics Institute Hall, which dates from 1935, is the second of these buildings on the site, so it is important to refer also to its predecessor.

A meeting was held at Mendooran in mid September 1899 with the intent of establishing a Mechanics Institute in the town. An enthusiastic response led to the formation of a committee and fundraising commenced. (*Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative*, Friday, 22nd September 1899, p. 7). At some stage a block of land was acquired or gifted for the purpose of a “Literary Institute”: Allotment 6 of Section 2 of the village of Mendooran, adjacent to the Post Office (now identified as **DP 758668**).

Several months later, J. A. Keating, secretary of the Mendooran Mechanics’ Institute, called for tenders for the erection of a new building from plans and specifications prepared by Harold Hardwick, architect, of Mudgee. Tenders closed at the end of June 1900. (*Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative*, Friday, 18th May 1900, p. 7).



Portion of a map of the village of Mendooran

The site of the Mechanics Institute Hall is Allotment 6 of Section 2 in Bandulla Street.
The block is endorsed "Dedicated 13th Dec.1915" and is designated for a 'Literary Institute'.

A few months later, trustees were appointed for the intended site of the Mechanics Institute.
(*Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday, 27th August 1900, p. 5).

However, it took another eighteen months after tenders were first called for the building to be completed:

"The Mendooran Mechanics' Institute is to be opened on Friday 14th March, when the occasion will be celebrated by a ball and supper. Dancing will commence at 8.30 p.m., and the committee and Mr. F. Pericles Manus, the honorary secretary, are determined to leave no stone unturned to make the function a great success.

The price of tickets is 5s single, 7s 6d. double."

(*Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative*, Thursday, 20th February 1902, p. 13).

Subsequently, the building became a well-used and integral part of the Mendooran district's community life, being used for educational purposes but also for screening of films, property auctions, balls, dances, fundraisers, and meetings. It was constructed of weatherboard with an iron roof (Rufus and Paskin, p. 17).

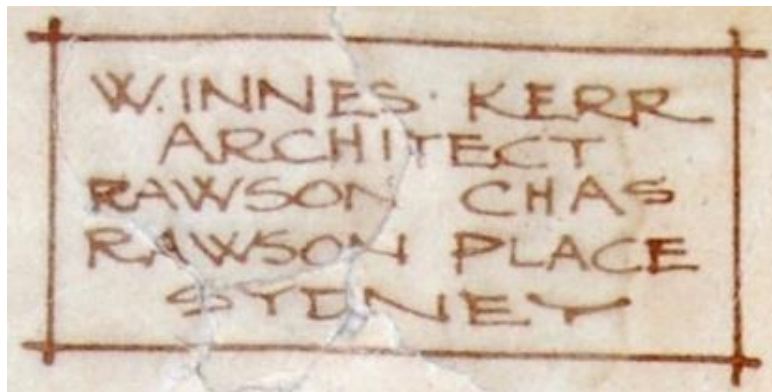


By 1928 local concern was expressed at the derelict condition of the building, described by some as an ‘eyesore’. Some time previously the trustees had decided to undertake renovations but this had not happened. Plans were also afoot for a new privately-owned hall in the town, but it is believed that this did not eventuate, probably due to the onset of the Great Depression. (*Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative*, Monday, 29th October 1928, p. 20).

The Mechanics Institute survived during the financial chaos of the 1930s and by 1935 the community had miraculously come up with the funds to build a very substantial structure which would have been the envy of towns much larger than Mendooran, no mean feat considering the financial hardships of the times. Tenders were called in June 1935 for the relocation of the old hall to the rear of the current site, and the construction of a new hall on the front of the site. The old hall was apparently moved by placing large logs underneath and gradually rolling the structure towards the rear of the site by a constant shuffling of logs. (Rufus and Paskin, p. 17). The old Mechanics Institute, set back 10 feet from the current building, was intended to serve as a supper room.

(*Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh*, Thursday, 12th September, 1935, p. 1).

The architect in charge was Walter Innes-Kerr from Sydney (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 1st June, 1935). According to Rufus and Paskin (p. 41), Innes-Kerr was active as an architect from 1923 to 1943. He practised briefly in Wagga Wagga in the late 1920s, then returned to Sydney where his office was in Rawson Chambers in the city. He is known to have done residential and commercial briefs. The building was to be constructed in locally-made bricks (Rufus and Paskin, p. 23), in what is termed “the inter war Spanish Mission style”. Remarkably, the original plans have survived and remain in the building.



Portion from Walter Innes-Kerr’s plans for the Mendooran Mechanics Institute

A report on the laying of the foundation stone for the building appeared in the *Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh* of Thursday, 3rd October 1935, p. 40:

MENDOORAN'S MEMORIAL HALL

“The foundation stone of the new hall at Mendooran was laid yesterday afternoon by Major Shand, in the presence of some 400 residents. Mr. A. W. Yeo, M.L.A. and Mr. W. Innes-Kerr (architect) were among those present. Mr. W. F. Dunn, M.L.A., was unable to attend owing



to ill health. At the ceremony £100 was collected, and afterwards an adjournment was made to the old hall, where tea was served. At night £40 was cleared at the dance conducted by the ladies' committee on behalf of the Farmers and Settlers' Queen, Mrs. P. J. Hartley being the chief organiser. Owing to pressure of important business, Major Shand and Mr. Yeo were compelled to depart by the 5 p.m. train from Merrygoen."



The foundation stone laid on 2nd October 1935

The opening ceremony was planned for 18th December 1935, with a state government minister, Major Shand, being asked back to perform the honours. A celebration ball was to be held after the ceremony, at a cost of 12/6d per double. Mr. F. G. Jones, who had taken a lease of the building, was to enter into possession after the opening ceremony, when the first screening of talkie films would be shown.

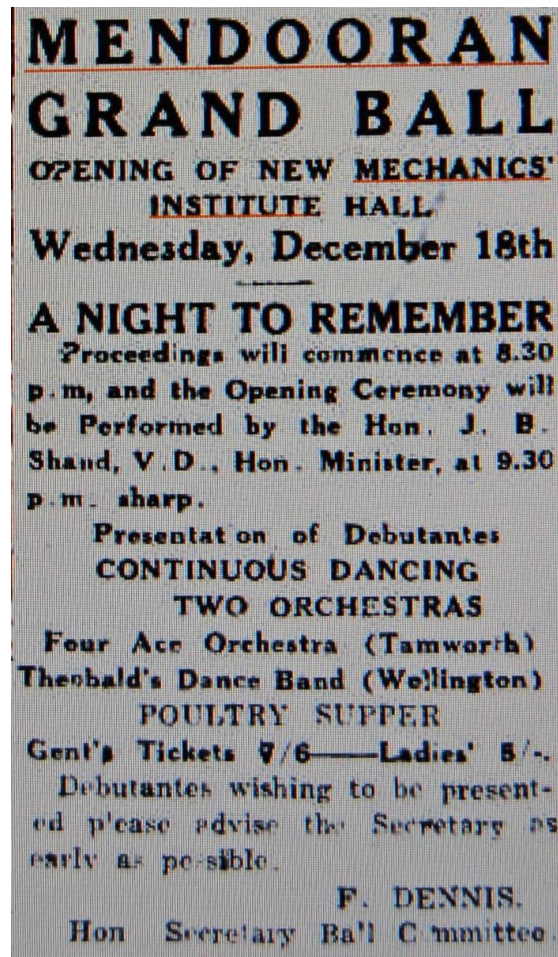
(*Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh*, Thursday, 5th December, 1935, p. 10).

The reporter from the *Mudgee Guardian* enthused about the building and the associated town development which was symbolic of progress:

"The building is an ultra-modern structure with a special tallow-wood dancing floor, at once a credit to the people of Mendooran district and the architect. The latter was Mr. Innes-Kerr, a prominent city architect who is also responsible for the mighty Plaza Hotel now in course of erection over Wynyard station. The builders were E. J. and W. J. Grainger of West Ryde who, incidentally, during their visit have been given the job of erecting a new grandstand on the Mendooran racecourse, another instance of the initiative of that go-ahead little town."

(*Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative*, Monday 9th December, 1935, p. 2).

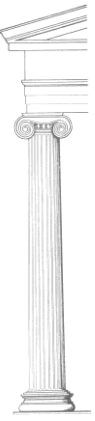
The opening ceremony and ball were a grand affair for Mendooran, and were no doubt a great tonic for a rural community emerging from the Great Depression.



The *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* carried a report of the great occasion in the edition of Monday, 30th December, 1935, p. 7:

GRAND OPENING BALL

“The largest crowd to attend any ball yet held filled the new Mechanics’ Hall to capacity on Wednesday 18th December, on the occasion of the grand opening ball. The ballroom was brilliantly lighted and together with the interior decorations of cream and gold, made a wonderful setting for such an event. About two hundred couples were present, and the door-takings amounted to £120. Visitors were present from Gilgandra, Dunedoo, Coonabarabran, Mudgee, Wellington, Coonamble, Neilrex, Melbourne and Wargunya. The Hon. Mr. Shand, Hon. Minister, who was present to perform the opening ceremony, was introduced by Mr. H. Greenhalgh, president of the Hall Committee. He spoke of the enterprise of the Hall Committee and of the wonderful work that had been accomplished in the past 11 weeks. This, he said, was a great credit both to the building contractor (Mr. Grange *[sic]*), and the architect, (Mr. Innes-Kerr). The building displayed the great confidence of the committee in the future of this little town. He spoke of the unfailing work of the women of the town and district and of the success of the Queen Competition, which realised £250. He then declared the Hall open for public use. Mr. A. Yeo, M.L.A., on behalf of the committee, presented Mr. F. Manus with a plate erected on the wall in recognition of the wonderful work done by him as secretary. Mr. Shand



was presented with a set of gold links and studs in recognition of his two visits to Mendooran, to lay the foundation stone and to open one of the finest halls in the west. Major Shand and Mr. F. Manusu suitably responded. Mr. Innes-Kerr was also made a presentation as a token for his services. The presentation of the four debutantes followed and comprised Misses G. Richardson, M. Whitton, E. Althofer and N. Jones, headed by Miss B. Hanson. They were received by Mrs. F. Hartly (matron of honor) and presented to Major Shand. Dawn Dawson and Pat Greenhalgh acted as flower girls. After the debutantes' waltz, dancing was resumed. Supper was served at 11.30 and, although severely taxed by the large crowd, the arrangements were indeed a credit to the committee of ladies headed by Mrs. P. Hartly. Excellent music continuously supplied by two orchestras, viz., Theobalds (Wellington), Four Ace (Tamworth) kept the lovers of the terpsichorean art in gleeful mood until 4.30 a.m., when the happy throng dispersed, all voting it the most enjoyable function yet held in Mendooran."

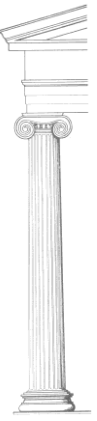
The Mechanics Institute Hall ultimately came under the control of a local government authority, initially the Coolah Shire in 1997, and currently the Warrumbungle Shire Council manages its community use. The Coolah Shire had the old hall demolished when it took over, as its condition had declined, repairs were considered too costly, and the building was regarded as a fire risk (Rufus and Paskin, p.18). Although the 1902 hall has disappeared, the 1935 hall is well-maintained and appears to be well regarded as a community asset. A conservation management plan for the building was carried out by Ian Rufus and Rosanne Paskin in 2008.

The Building: Exterior

The Front Façade

The south facing front façade is in brick which has been rendered and painted an apricot pink. The central entrance porch projects slightly from the building and is segmented by three curved arches, capped by *Art Deco* style rendered and painted keystones highlighted in three striking colours. The projecting bay is layered in three steps, with the top and bottom steps covered in terracotta tiles. At the centre of the top of the projecting bay is a small window which services the projection room above the front section of the building. A curved shelf projects from under the window and is supported by an Art Deco corbel; both the shelf and corbel are highlighted in the same colours as the keystones below. "MECHANICS INSTITUTE HALL" is featured in relief in large sans serif script above the projecting bay. Centrally placed above the central window is a narrow louvred vent. While the arcade of arches and the terracotta tiles give a Spanish/Californian air to the building, the stepped and curved gable is more Dutch in style.

On either side of the arcade is a small lantern, possibly original. Either side of the projecting bay is a six paned double hung sash window capped by a curved arch featuring small colourful tiles, possibly original. Visible through the window on the left is the stair leading up to the projection room. Underneath the window on the right is the framed granite foundation stone laid by Major Shand on 2nd October 1935.



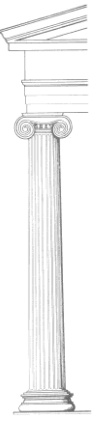
The original plans reveal that the front façade was constructed much as was specified.

► Original architect's plan for the front façade



► Front façade as built





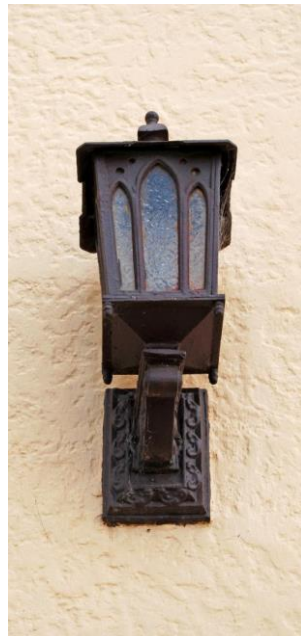
Major decorative features of the front façade:



▲ Decoration of the entry colonnade

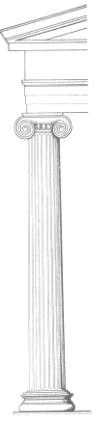


Window on front façade



Lantern on front façade

- ▲ These features are placed symmetrically on either side of the main entrance. The entry colonnade sits between them with the entry porch recessed.



◀ Entrance doors

The high-waisted three-panelled entrance doors in the recessed entry porch. These are typical of design of the 1920s and 1930s.

Eastern and Western Façades

Both of these façades are in unrendered brick in stretcher bond, with the length of the façade broken by plain projecting brick pillars for added strength. It is presumed that these two façades were originally identical, but at some stage a small skillion addition was made to the centre of the eastern façade in ill-matching bricks. On each façade several tall double hung sash windows allow for light and ventilation in the hall, while a small single-pane sash window services the projection room level. Both façades feature double exit doors, while the skillion addition, which contains a food preparation room, is only accessed from a door on its southern side; the skillion was added in 1998 (Rufus and Paskin, p. 51).



▲ View down eastern (side) façade, showing skillion addition

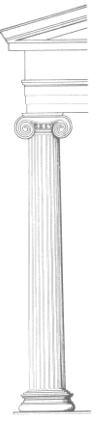


▲ Original architect's plan for the western elevation



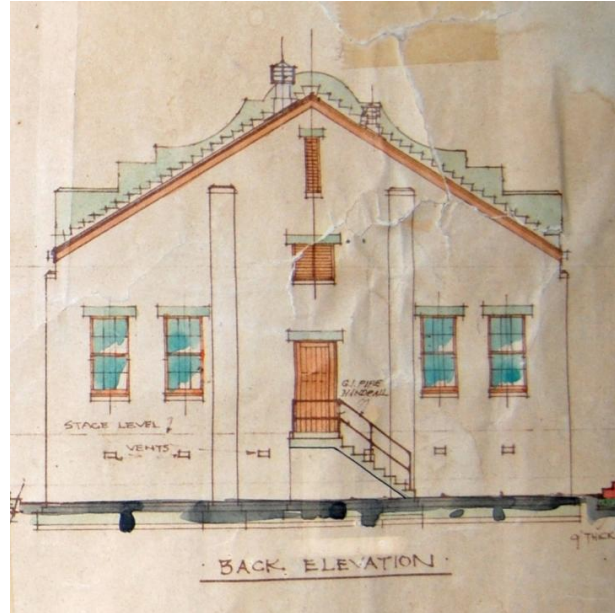
▲ View down western (side) façade, built to follow the plan as drawn.

The structure of the staircase to the upper floor can be seen through the window in the front façade. The small high window in the western wall provides light and ventilation for the store room on the first floor.



Rear Façade

The austere rear façade is also in unrendered brick in stretcher bond and features two plain brick projecting buttresses on either side of the slightly off-centre rear exit door, above which a small louvred ventilator is located. A set of concrete steps leads down from a landing adjacent to the rear exit door. A six-pane double hung sash window is located near each corner.



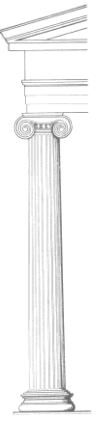
Original plan ►



As built ►

During construction a storm blew out sections of the rear wall and repairs account for the variation in the colour of the brickwork (Rufus and Paskin, p. 18). This may also account for the omission of two windows and a vent from the original architect's drawings, perhaps to strengthen the wall.

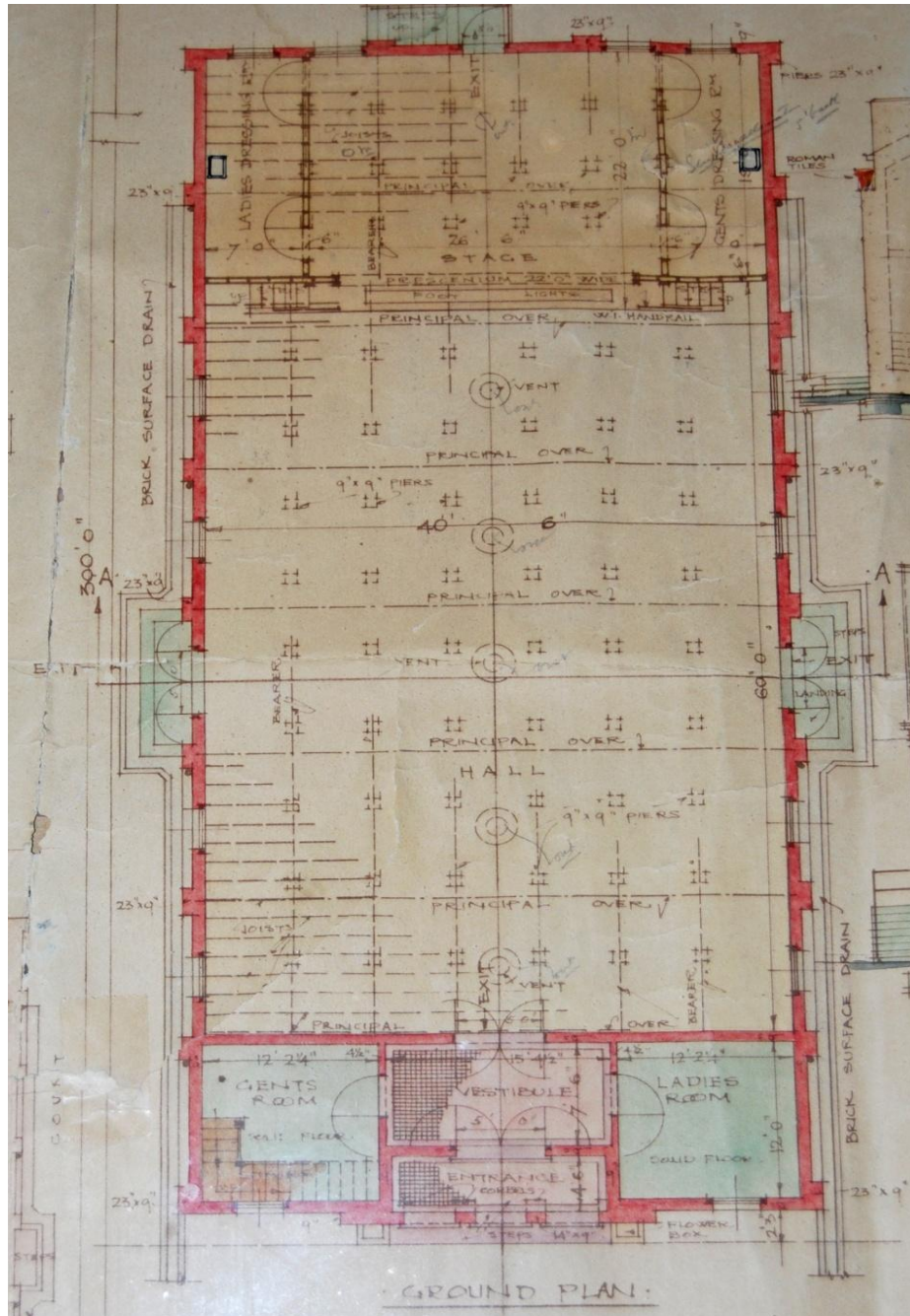
The wood-burning heater adjacent to the rear landing was used to heat the auditorium via a pipe. The heater is no longer functional, as reverse cycle air conditioning is now installed in the auditorium, but it remains in situ as part of the building's history (Rufus and Paskin p. 320).



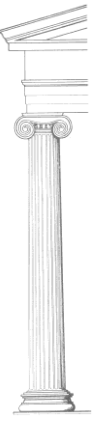
The Building: Interior

The Mechanics Institute Hall interior is in three sections:

- Central vestibule, and men's room (left) and ladies' room (right). A stair adjacent to the men's room leads up to a series of first floor rooms above, one of which is the projection room
- Auditorium and the proscenium arch
- Stage area, with dressing rooms on either side.



The original ground floor plan by Walter Innes-Kerr



The Central Vestibule

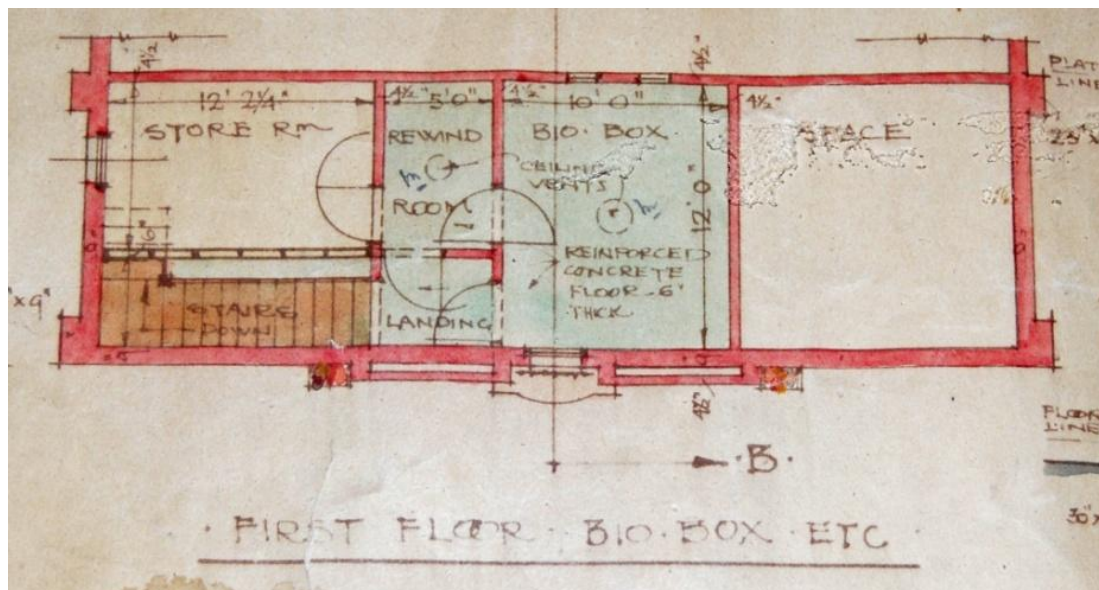
This tiled area gives access to the front porch to the south and to the auditorium to the north; and to the toilet facilities on either side. A diminutive ticket office with an iron grille window is situated in the north-western corner of the vestibule.



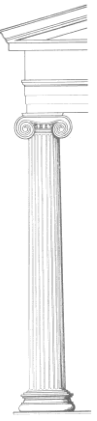
◀ Ticket office

First Floor

The first floor comprises a small landing at the top of the stair, a small room where films spools were rewound, a storeroom on the western end, and the projection room on the eastern side of the rewind room; and a void which remained unused.



Original architect's plan for the first floor



The projection room still houses two original carbon arc projectors which remained in use for some forty years (Rufus and Paskin, p. 49). The projectors were powered by a petrol driven 32 volt generator until mains power came to the town in 1953 (Rufus and Paskin, p. 32).



The original carbon arc projectors in situ in the first floor projection room

The Auditorium

The hall is five bays deep – two nine-paned sash windows with hopper windows above on either side of an exit door. The floor is tallowwood, as was the original floor which was badly damaged by floodwaters from the Castlereagh River in 1955 (Rufus and Paskin, p. 18).



The auditorium, looking north towards the stage.

The rake and structure of the ceiling reflect the form of the proscenium arch.

This allows also for clear projection (of films) from the first floor.



Historical artifacts pertaining to the building and district also remain in the building:

- Sign of appreciation to Mr Pericles Manusu for his efforts in bringing the building to fruition: eastern wall of the auditorium
- Mendooran and Merrygoen District Honour Roll for WWI (1914-1918): western wall of the auditorium
- Framed plans of the 1935 building: eastern wall of the auditorium.

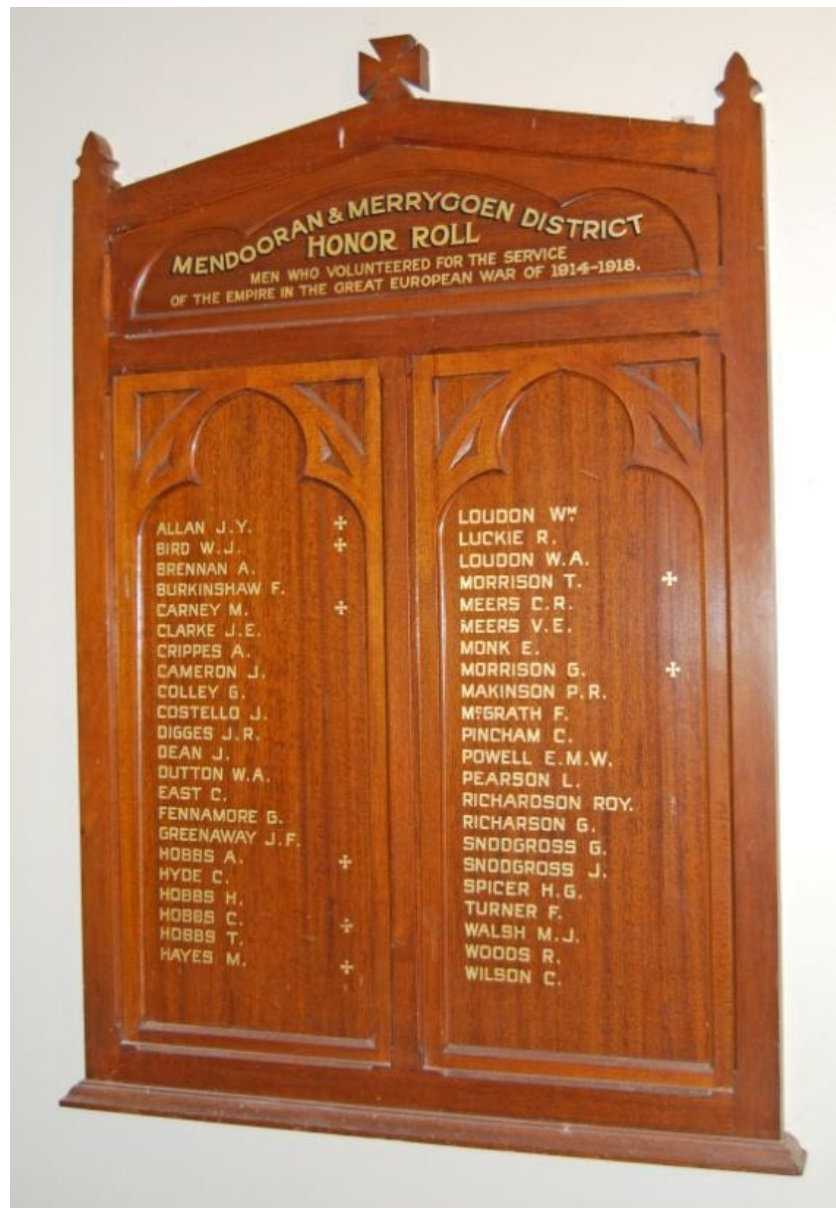
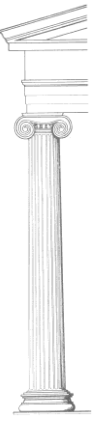
The ceiling of the main hall is lined with battened sheets of fibrous plaster or fibre cement; the mansard pitch allows for clearance for projection from the first floor projection room (Rufus and Paskin, p. 29). The hall, the walls of which are cement rendered and painted, is currently serviced by several wall-mounted reverse cycle air conditioners and ceiling fans and suspended neon lights. Wall-mounted vertical strip neon lights beneath Bakelite covers, presumably original, have been removed (Rufus and Paskin, p. 41).

The northern wall of the main hall is the decorative focal point of the hall. The arch follows the pitch of the ceiling and features a broad and elaborate Art Deco plaster architrave picked out in several colours. On either side of the arch is a substantial and ornate Art Deco plaster panel in relief surrounding a vertical neon light; the panels feature a heavy bowl-like base. The actual design for the light panel, however, does not match the original architect's plan. Steps on either side of the stage, lined with a simple iron railing, access the front stage area which projects into the main hall. The design for the railing is much more restrained than that shown in the original architect's plans.



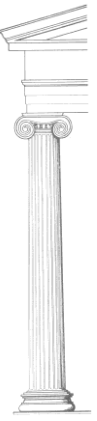
Plaque honouring F. Pericles Manusu

Mr Manusu, as Honorary Secretary of the Committee, was a driving force in constructing the Mechanics Institute Hall at Mendooran



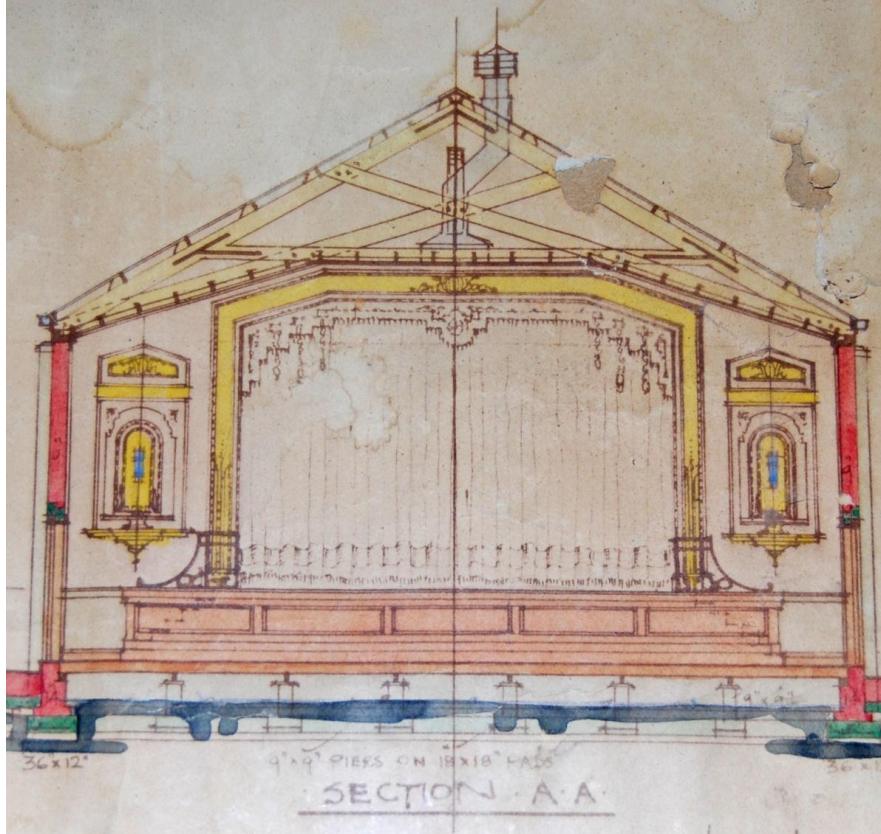
Mendooran and Merrygoen District Honour Roll on western wall

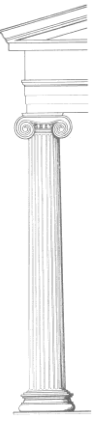
Note the unusual spelling for 'Honor'; also that this memorial refers to 'the Great European War of 1914-1918' rather than the more usual 'Great War'.



The Proscenium Arch

The original architect's plans for the proscenium arch reveal that the built arch is not a match, although it is certainly close in spirit. Particularly noteworthy is the layered and staggered arch trim for the stage curtain, a feature of which is the monogram "M" and "I" for Mechanics Institute.





▲ Middle section of fabric pelmet for stage curtain showing the Mechanics Institute monogram M I



▲ Corner detail of fabric pelmet
Photos also show detail of arch decoration

Detail of Art Deco features of the Proscenium Arch and Stage

▼ Metal grille either side of stage;
some detail of arch decoration behind

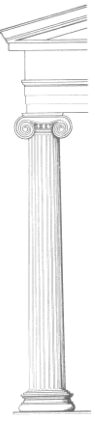


▼ Wall lighting either side of stage



The Stage

The elevated stage occupies the rear (northern) section of the building and slopes downwards towards the front. Dressing rooms are located behind on either side of the stage, while a screen, installed on an iron frame, is still behind the rear stage curtains. An exit door is located at the rear of the stage.

**Uses:**

The building is no longer used as a Mechanics Institute and it is not known either the manner or for how long it operated according to the principles of that movement. Nevertheless, the building has been, and continues to be, used for a variety of community purposes on a regular basis:

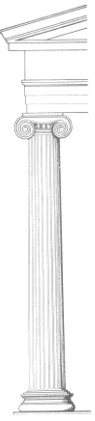
- ☐ Film screenings
- ☐ Country music festivals
- ☐ Flower shows (by the churches)
- ☐ Balls for the CWA and the churches
- ☐ Wedding receptions
- ☐ Concerts
- ☐ School presentation days
- ☐ School reunions
- ☐ Australia Day ceremonies
- ☐ Choir practice
- ☐ Craft shows
- ☐ Art exhibitions
- ☐ Youth discos
- ☐ Variety shows
- ☐ Dramatic performances

The Mendooran community was actively involved in fundraising by means of raffles and sporting competitions and a variety of entertainments for a number of years prior to the building of the Mechanics Institute Hall. Local legend also attributes a great deal of community physical labour in the construction process, particularly with brickmaking.

(Rufus and Paskin, p. 18).

The building is listed as a heritage item on the LEP of the Warrumbungle Shire Council. The local community values the building and a conservation management plan was compiled in 2008.

The building is generally well maintained, although it requires upgrading of lighting and improved kitchen and storage facilities. Conservation works on the proscenium arch were carried out in 2012.



Acknowledgements:

Thanks

- ☐ Warrumbungle Shire Council
- ☐ Jenny Lloyd, Mendooran Community Liaison officer, Warrumbungle Shire Council

References:

Plans

- ☐ Original building plans by the architect Walter Innes-Kerr are in the possession of Warrumbungle Shire Council.
Sections of the plans are reproduced in this account by kind permission of the Council.

Websites

- ☐ Website 1: <http://www.google.com.au/maps>
- ☐ Website 2: http://www.lpi.nsw.gov.au/mapping_and_imagery/parish_maps
Town plan - Mendooran Section 2
- ☐ Website 3: <http://www.trove.nla.gov.au>

Newspapers

- ☐ *Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh*
- ☐ *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative*
- ☐ *Sydney Morning Herald*

Printed Material

- ☐ Mendooran Mechanics Institute Conservation Management Program for Warrumbungle Shire Council, 2008 :
Ian Rufus and Rosanne Paskin:

Photos

- ☐ John Broadley © 2015

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