



# OATLANDS TAS



The Town Hall and War Memorial (Suzanne Lester 2014)

**Name: The Oatlands Institute**  
(sometimes also: The Mechanics' Institute)

**Address: High Street, Oatlands, Tasmania**

## **The Town:**

Just under half way between Hobart and Launceston is the charming historical town of Oatlands, known for its Georgian stone buildings. Eighty-four kilometres from Hobart, the town was named in 1821 by Governor Macquarie and was intended to be an interior capital. Central to the administration of the colony of Van Diemen's Land was a military detachment which was stationed at Oatlands and the necessary buildings were built.

Today the main industries continue to be wool growing and agriculture, but the population of the area is declining. On sale days in the 1950s and early 60s it was very hard to find a car space in the main street of Oatlands. Today the Health Centre and the school are the biggest employers. Visitors are attracted to the town by the restored Callington Flour Mill with its enormous wooden sails, the Old Court House, the Gaol, and the 180 sandstone churches and cottages.



## The Oatlands Institute -

The Town Hall; The Old Court House

### Establishment:

The first Mechanics' Institute in Tasmania was the Van Diemen's Land Mechanics' Institute, also the first established in the British colony that was to become Australia. It began in 1827. The aim of these Institutes was to make available for a small subscription, the opportunity for self-improvement for skilled workers and others. Classes and lectures were to be given on science and 'useful knowledge'. Customarily, there was a library; and sometimes also a museum.<sup>1</sup>

Tasmania then was a penal colony and 'the moral enlightenment' encouraged by Governor Arthur was combined in the Victorian period with growing social awareness.

Books have always been seen as a door to self-education for the literate. Like some other small towns in Tasmania, Oatlands had a Literary Association and library in the 1860s and play readings and concerts were held in 1869. But by the late 1870s its book stock was 'dilapidated and obsolete' and ladies objected to the smell of smoke in the books.

The establishment of the Oatlands Institute can largely be told from the newspapers and the Oatlands Council Minutes -

*Mercury* 5 November 1879

A correspondent pointed out that the Island's biggest inland town had no large hall or Mechanics' Institute.

*Mercury* 7 July 1881

*Some months ago by the persevering assiduity of a few gentlemen, the nucleus of a library and reading room was established to meet a long-felt want. A place of resort, where after a day's labour was completed, all might meet for recreation and amusement combined with instruction and improvement more especially as regards the young.*

*The young men are drawn to the billiard room or the bar parlor, which to the young especially, are only the prelude to dissipation, wastefulness of their means, and in many cases a temptation to do wrong. Three well disposed gentlemen have had great success. The Reading Rooms in the old Military Barracks have been improved by those gentlemen until the rooms promised in the new Town Hall are ready.*

One of these gentlemen was Henry Fisher who had moved to Oatlands from Ross, set up a blacksmith and coach building business, and become a landholder. He was secretary of the Oatlands Library and Institute for over 30 years.<sup>2</sup>

*Mercury* 2 August 1881

*The Oatlands Institute, with its library, has proved a great boon to the district, there are plenty of periodicals but more books are needed such as Thackeray and Dickens.*



A year after the opening of the new Town Hall an understanding had been made with the Secretary of the Institute about the use and occupation of certain rooms in the Town Hall.

Oatlands Council Minutes 4 March 1882<sup>3</sup>

*The Institute has 126 members and is governed by a committee of seven gentlemen from members of the Institute. Twenty pounds per annum will be allowed for the purpose of aiding in supplying papers and magazines to be placed in the front room on the left-hand side of the Town Hall, to be open to the Public, and the Council will also supply a caretaker and the Institute can have the use of the back room for reading and other amusements; smoking to be permitted after 6 o'clock. The backroom is to be closed when the Hall is let out.*

The Oatlands Council refused to comply with a ratepayer request to discontinue the supply of the 'Weekly Freeman' on the grounds that a range of papers including Irish ones should be available.<sup>4</sup> This paper was the unofficial organ of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster and had satirical cartoons of prominent political figures.

Mercury 7 March 1882

*The Institute has been doing good and useful work and has succeeded in drawing the young from the most questionable places of resort. The Institute is making strenuous efforts to furnish them with both amusement and instruction. Some eighteen or twenty young fellows are enjoying social games or reading in the Town Hall instead of the makeshift arrangements. There are plenty of periodicals and papers.*

Mercury 6 September 1886

*The Institute had been accommodated in the Drill Room of the Old Barracks until two rooms were allocated in the Town Hall. The books from the library of twenty years previously had been dilapidated and obsolete but with the new shelves provided by the Council, the Library has 500 to 600 books comprising the best literature available and are widely read. Last month 230 volumes were loaned.*

Extract from Walch's Tasmanian Almanac 1887

*Oatlands - Population 3,373*

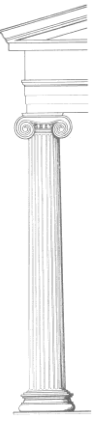
- *Oatlands Institute (established 2 February 1880)*
- *Reading room open 10 am – 10 pm Monday to Saturday, 2 pm – 6 pm Sunday*
- *A custodian will be in attendance for the issue of books:*  

*10 am – 12 noon, 2 pm – 6 pm, 7 pm – 8 pm*
- *Annual subscription 10 shillings, entitles a member to free use of the Library (1,200 volumes)*

*Council Minutes 1 August 1891*

*A billiard table has been installed in the back room, the supper/reading room, in the Town Hall.*

For the next 10 years or so the Institute also used the Old Court House.



## The Building:

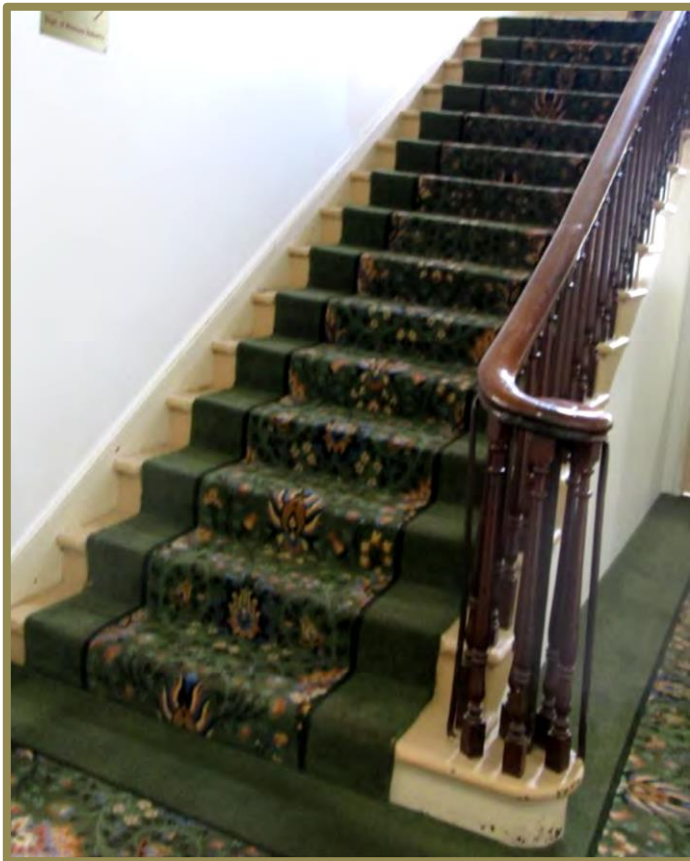
### First - Oatlands Town Hall 1881 - 1891

Standing on a rise set back from the street frontage, the Oatlands Town Hall is a major landmark in High Street. The War Memorial stands on the open space in front of the Town Hall and defines the civic centre of the town.

The Oatlands Town Hall is a two-storied, sandstone Victorian Georgian building which was designed by William Henry Lord.

The building has a symmetrical five bay facade with a central entry of double-hung doors with transom light. It has a prominent string course and above in the centre, a clock. The hipped roof is made of corrugated iron with boxed eaves and there are five simple chimneys. At the rear are two additions, a two-storey one and a single-storey. There is a grand central hallway and on the right-hand side is a large room which functions as the local Council Chambers. Previously it had also been the regional Lower Court and still contains the Magistrates' Bench and Dock for the accused.

When opened in 1881, the Town Hall also housed the Council Clerk's Offices, a Police Office, and the Library and Reading Room run by the Oatlands Institute. A Public Room, with newspapers and journals supplied by the Council, was on the left-hand side of the front door. At the back, the Supper Room where the billiard table was later installed, became known as the Institute Room.<sup>5</sup>

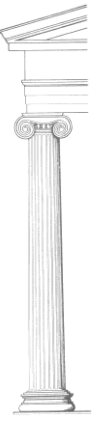


Upstairs, spanning the width of the building, is a large Function Room with a stage, change rooms and toilets.<sup>6</sup> This Function Room was used for official events, plays, balls, speech nights, political meetings and picture shows. Unfortunately it can no longer be used for these purposes because wheelchair access is too difficult to install. There is an outside steel fire escape.

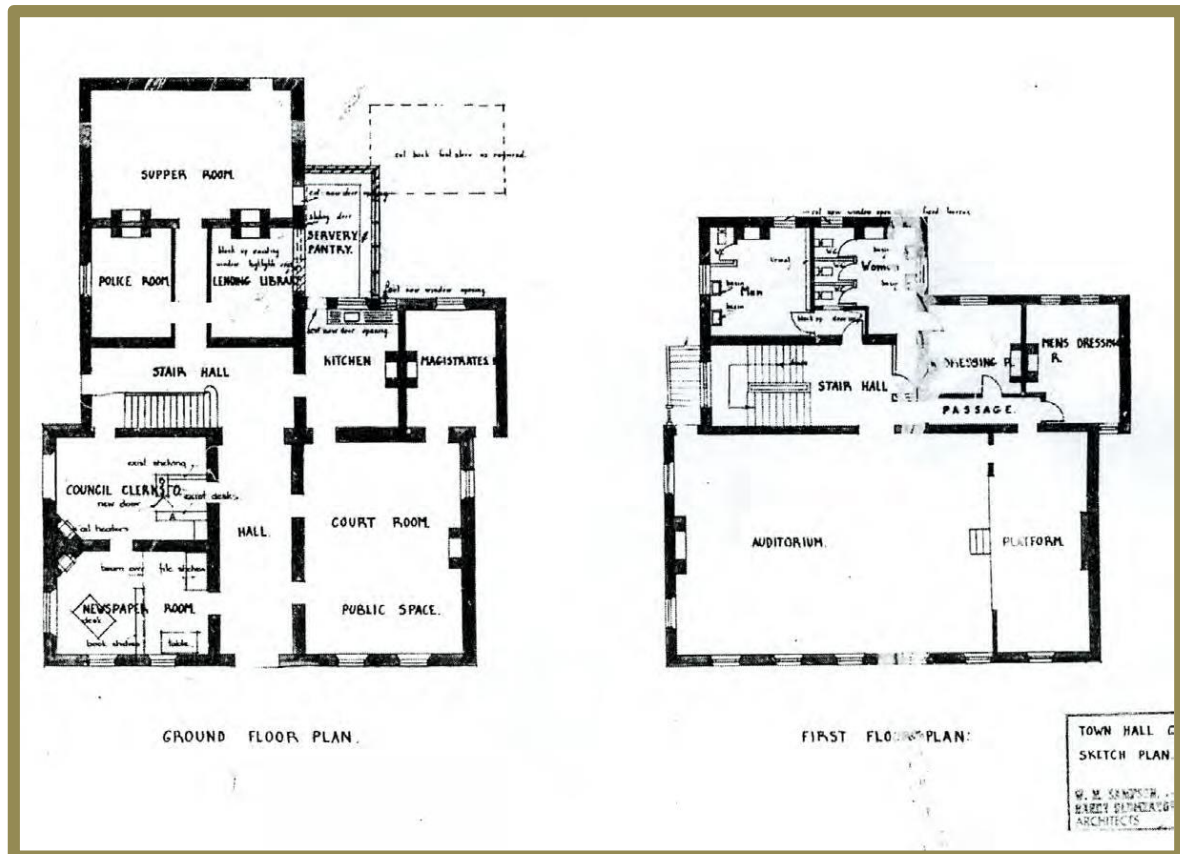
Built for a cost of £1200 in 1881, use of the Town Hall by the community began soon after the opening. A Bazaar in aid of St Brigid's Church, Tunnack, was held on 24 September 1881 and the Oatlands Brass Band played.<sup>7</sup>

◀ The staircase inside the Town Hall leading to the upper floor.

(Suzanne Lester 2014)



The Council employed a caretaker and his wife who were responsible for keeping the whole of the Town Hall and precincts clean and tidy. The caretaker also had to provide support for the Oatlands Institute. His responsibilities included assisting the librarian in giving out books, attending to the Public Reading Room, lighting lamps and fires as required, attending to the Institute's gas plant, and finally, keeping the Institute's firewood separate from the Council's own stock of wood.<sup>8</sup>



Oatlands Town Hall - Floor Plan

(Tasmanian Archives Hobart Office)

This plan notes the accommodation for the Institute functions:  
 Newspaper Room at the front and Lending Library towards the rear of the Ground Floor.  
 The Supper Room at the back of the Hall became known as the Institute Room.

The Oatlands Councillors were concerned for the future of the old buildings, including the Court House, in what is referred to as the 'military precinct'. In 1891 they sold the Old Court House, which had been used as the Municipal Office, to the Lands Department for £150.<sup>9</sup>

The Institute had the use of the Court House from 1891 until about 1909.<sup>10</sup>





The Old Court House (Suzanne Lester 2014)

## And then – The Old Court House: 1891 - c. 1909



The original British Coat of Arms in the Oatlands Supreme Court.

(Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, Tasmania)

Because Oatlands was central to the administration of Van Diemen's Land, a military detachment was stationed on the site of the town to supervise convicts and to maintain law and order. A military barracks, commissariat, gaol, and officers' quarters were commissioned and also needed was a building to function as a chapel and justice room.<sup>11</sup>

Magistrate Anstey wrote in a letter to the Colonial Secretary on 29 September 1829

*I think the size of the building is 32 feet by 20 feet, it is constructed of solid masonry and shingled, and I believe it will be found to be the cheapest work of the kind ever performed by the Government, it having been erected and covered by two men wearing their irons the whole time, who would otherwise have been employed during three or four months breaking stones on the road.*

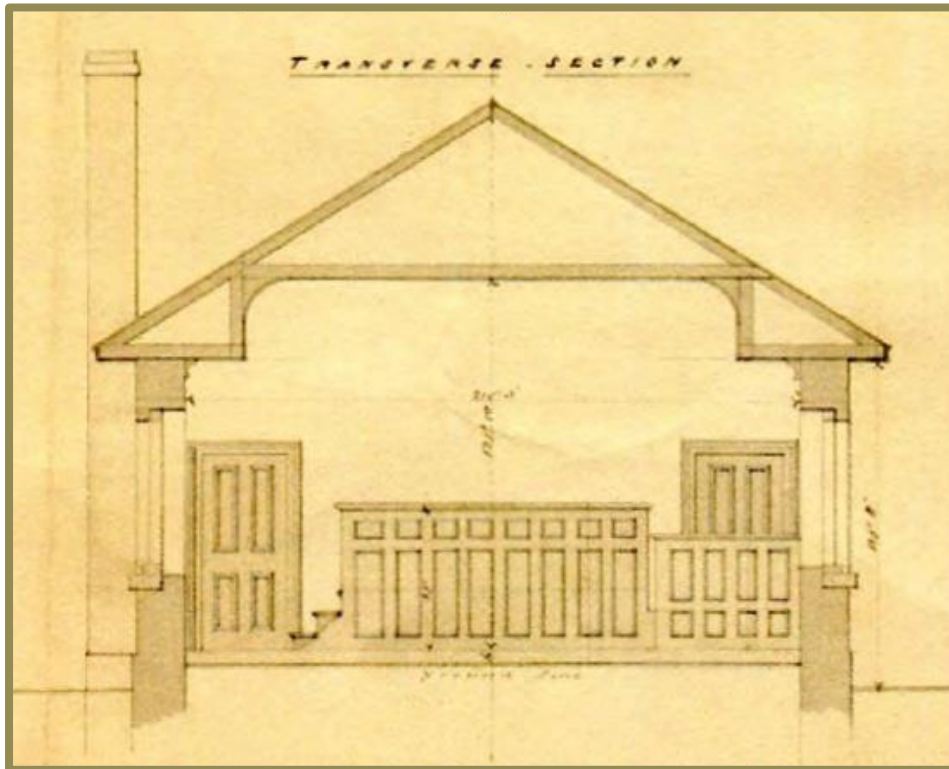
The two members of the gang were John Mackintosh, a stone mason, and George Wood. The other members of the gang quarried the local sandstone, carted lime and cut the timbers. They worked 10 hours a day except on Sundays, and finished the building in 3 months.<sup>12</sup>

By 1834 the building was no longer big enough for its judicial purpose and because accommodation for the police was required, front rooms were added which were designed by the Colonial Architect, John Lee Archer\*.

\*Architect of Tasmania's Parliament House and of St John's Church New Town, recorded by members of ADFAS Hobart



The exterior has ashlar stonework with decorative quoins and a beautifully proportioned doorcase. Inside the original chapel/justice room, decorative plaster cornices were installed and a raised circular platform for the judge's bench. The most striking Archer feature was the 'wagon-headed' ceiling. The existing roof structure of this room was cut in order to insert a mathematically complex, precision-built, timber frame which was covered with a lathe and plaster ceiling.



The cross section plan for the interior showing the wagon-headed ceiling of the roof structure.

Also shown are the panelled judge's bench and doors to the rooms at the rear of the building.

(Tasmanian Archives Office)



The existing roof showing the intricacy of the precisely-cut beams supporting the structure.

(Suzanne Lester 2014)





The delicately carved stone mantelpiece is thought to have been carved by convict stonemason Daniel Herbert, who famously carved the faces on the Ross Bridge. This room became a Supreme Court. Rooms were also built at the rear of the building to accommodate the judge and jury, and as well, two holding cells for prisoners.

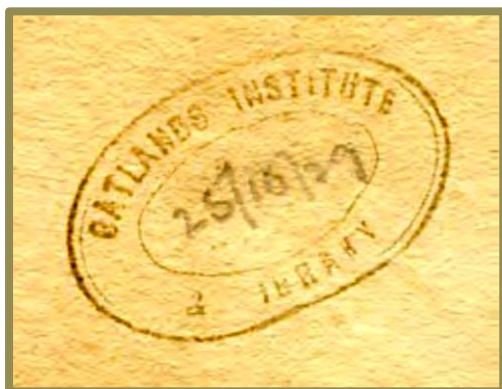
Many convicts were tried before a Magistrate in the Lower Court; punishments included flogging and solitary confinement. More serious cases were tried by a Supreme Court Judge when the maximum penalty was death. Although most death sentences were commuted to transportation to Norfolk Island or Port Arthur, between 1842 and 1855 (the end of transportation from England) eighteen men went to the scaffold at the Oatlands Gaol.<sup>13</sup>

In 1862 ownership of the Court House was transferred to the new Oatlands Municipality and it was used for Council Offices, Police Offices; the Council meetings, and the Lower Court cases. These functions were moved in 1881 to the new Town Hall.

Ten years on, from 1891, the Institute took over the Old Court House. Later it was occupied by the Thomas family until sold to the National Trust in 1977. Now owned by the Southern Midlands Council, it is being conserved and is open to the Public for limited hours when manned by volunteers.

The Oatlands Library became a subscription library in 1895 and the Council continued to purchase the newspapers. In May 1941 the Oatlands Council, supported by the Institute, established a free library and later, in 1944, also began sending out boxes of books to depots at Tunbridge, Parattah, Woodsdale and Tunnack, thus extending the scope of the library service.

The Institute had handed over its books to the Council and the Council struck a halfpenny rate. In 1949 the Library came under the supervision of the State Library with a librarian appointed and paid for the Council<sup>14</sup>.



Book stamp of the Library of the  
Oatlands Institute

Dated 25/10/29.

Presumably the date of purchase or  
accession of the book

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Oatlands Institute and the Campbell Town Institute had competitions in bridge, snooker, billiards, draughts and crib which continued to the 1950s. Ladies were not members.





Extract from Walch's Tasmanian Almanac 1949

*Oatlands - Population 2,900*

- *Billiard Room open 9 am – 10 pm, Monday – Saturday*
- *Subscription 10 shillings; family tickets one pound*
- *Public Reading Room 10 am – 10 pm except Sunday*
- *Free Library 2,000 books*

The term Oatlands 'Mechanics' Institute' was little used, and only one mention has been found of the Technical Education Board asking for a date and topic for a lecture<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless the Institute had a Library and Reading Room for which it took responsibility from 1881 until 1941. The Institute Room games provided an alternative 'place of resort' for the young men and older ones too, where they used the rules of the games which make for social harmony. The Institute had good support from the Oatlands Council which provided rooms for its use, as well as the caretaker who issued books and cleaned. The Council also supplied newspapers for the general public as well as members of the Institute. With this assistance the Oatlands Institute can claim to have performed some of the functions of the original concept of a Mechanics' Institute.

### **Currently (2016):**

The Midlands Municipality has been extended to include the Green Ponds Municipality and part of Richmond Municipality. The Council meetings have been held since 1881 in the same room which was also used for Lower Court cases; these are now held in Hobart. The Police Offices are in the High Street, Oatlands; and the books from the War Memorial Library built in 1966 in High Street opposite the Town Hall, have been transferred to the Oatlands School Library. Council Offices occupy the Town Hall<sup>16</sup>.

The Old Court House (Oatlands Supreme Court) has been the subject of extensive investigation of its heritage values, with plans proposed for its preservation and use. Conservation work is in progress. It is open to visitors but hours are restricted to when voluntary staff are available to provide access<sup>17</sup>.

### **References:**

- <sup>1</sup> Petrow, Stefan. Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 40/9 *The Life and Death of the Hobart Town Mechanics' Institute 1827-1871*
- <sup>2</sup> *Cyclopedia of Tasmania*, Maitland & Krone Publishers, Hobart, 1900, p.453
- <sup>3</sup> Oatlands Council Minutes, Tasmanian Archives & Heritage Office, MCC24/1/1/11
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Mr M. Geard, interview, 2014
- <sup>6</sup> Tasmanian Heritage Register
- <sup>7</sup> *Mercury* 24 September 1881
- <sup>8</sup> Oatlands Council Minutes, ibid
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid
- <sup>10</sup> Brochure, Oatlands Supreme Court
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid
- <sup>12</sup> Weeding J.S., *A History of Oatlands*, Derwent Printery, New Norfolk, Tasmania. p10
- <sup>13</sup> Brochure, Oatlands Supreme Court
- <sup>14</sup> Weeding ibid
- <sup>15</sup> Oatlands Council Minutes ibid
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid
- <sup>17</sup> Website, Southern Midlands Council [www.southernmidlands.tas.gov.au](http://www.southernmidlands.tas.gov.au)



**Photographs (2014):** Suzanne Lester

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