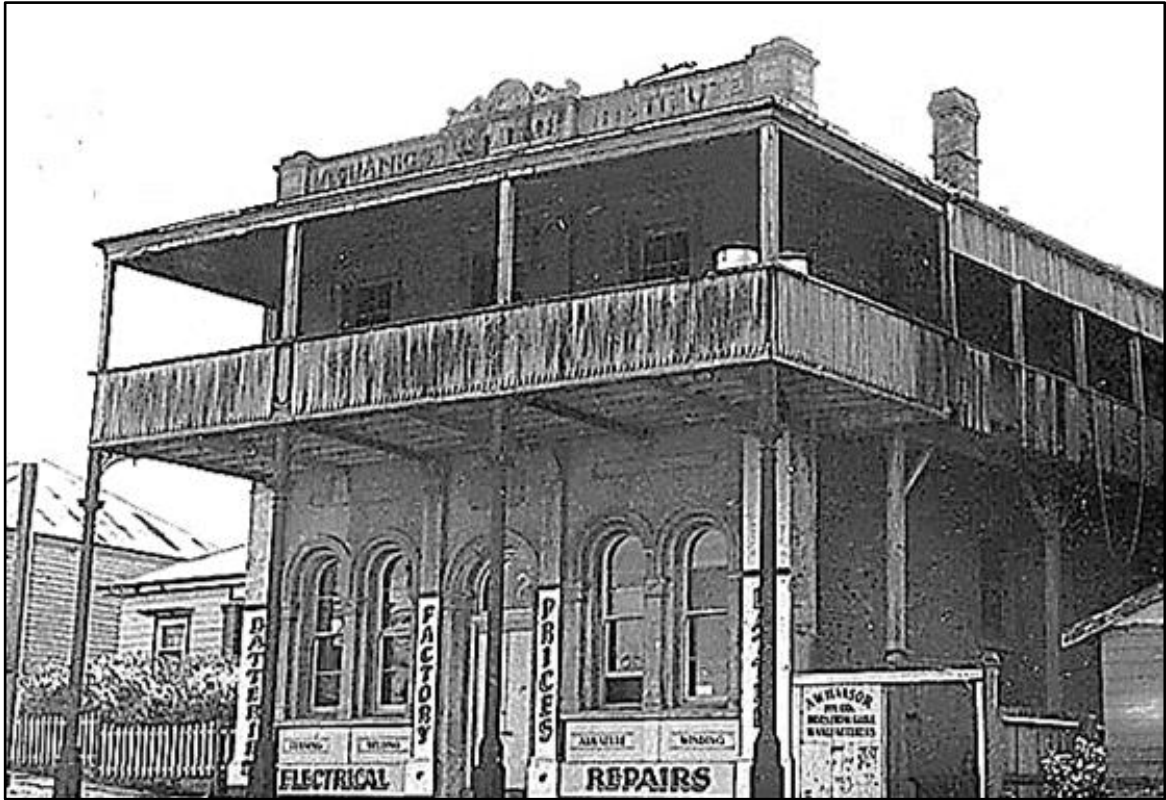


PLATTSBURG



University of Newcastle, Special Collections

Name: Plattsburg Mechanics' Institute

Address: 52 Mary Street, Plattsburg

History:

Many books have been written recording the history of Plattsburg and Wallsend and some are noted in the Bibliography. To record the history of Plattsburg and Wallsend for this project, as with the Wallsend School of Arts project, a potted history is written.

The Awabakal people were the original inhabitants of Plattsburg/Wallsend, the area they called Nikkinba meaning The Place of Coals. The Awabakal people consisted of four clans, Pambalong, Ash Island, Kurungbong and Lake Macquarie. Most knowledge of the early occupiers of this area comes from the writings of Rev L E Threlkeld, he also recorded much of their language which has proved invaluable to researchers. Because there was an abundance of food the area supported more Aborigines than further inland but numbers reduced drastically after 1837 as a result of European diseases which “*made sad havoc amongst the Aboriginal Tribes*”.

A little to the north is the Hunter River. The swamp land, known today as the Hunter Wetlands National Park a wild life sanctuary open to the public, had the effect of stopping development of the town in that direction – it was referred to as the Delta of the Hunter and in early times known as Barraheebbin

After Henry Dangar had surveyed the area in the early 1820s land was first taken up by men who were to become well known for their development of the district. The Newcastle Wallsend Coal Company acquired land by purchase in 1861, 1863 and 1864. Lemongrove Estate, originally owned by George Brooks, was later subdivided and now forms the shopping centre of Wallsend. Before the advent of the coal mines the area was primarily used for agriculture and cattle grazing.

In 1861 the first general strike of miners took place and the miners voted to set up a co-operative mine. They found a coalfield in what is now Devon Street, Wallsend (Plattsburg back then) and named it the New South Wales Co-operative Coal Mining Company with a capital of £30,000 made up of 6,000 shares of £5 each - James Fletcher was chairman. Callaghan College Wallsend Campus now stands on the site of the surface buildings of the mine. The Co-operative was always low on capital and miners came from around the district to assist by giving a day's work. Shareholders gave their labour in lieu of subscriptions and some of the miners invested their life's savings. Unfortunately in 1869 the mortgagee foreclosed and William Laidley was able to purchase the mine. Laidley had the finances necessary to develop the mine which went on to be one of the best pits in the district. The opening of this mine brought into being the town known as Plattsburg.

The town of Plattsburg was laid out in 1861, the same time as Wallsend township was surveyed by Alexander Brown. The land was originally a grant to Mary Stephen Cowper, "*a marriage portion from the Crown*", she became the wife of Dr George Brooks. When her daughter married William Hampden Platt, a son of the late Lieutenant J L Platt, all this land was given to her as a dowry.

Messrs Kenrick and Brooks have also laid out a township in close proximity to the present one, which will be only divided from the new Cowper Pit by a railway line of the Wallsend Company. The site is at present bush, but we may expect in the course of a few months to see the place covered with comfortable dwellings.¹

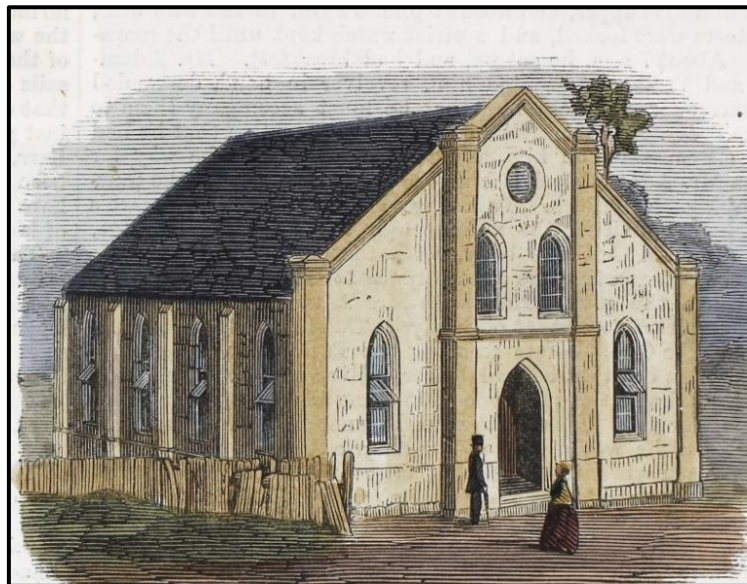
The first section subdivided was adjacent to the co-operative mine and here the first settlement was formed. The town grew quickly and Devon Street became the principal business street and the present *Newcastle Herald* first saw the light of day under the title of *Miners' Advocate and Northumberland Recorder* on February 21, 1875 in Plattsburg.



Early 20th century Postcard showing Ironbark Creek and boatsheds

Between Wallsend and Plattsburg there was an area of vacant land, a large portion of it being swamp and used originally for sport. Eventually a street was built through the swamp and named Nelson Street and both mining settlements used this shopping precinct. Iron Bark Creek, a tributary of the Hunter, runs through present day Wallsend. It was much deeper than it is today and, before the railway to Newcastle was developed, coal was transported to King's Wharf by boat along its course. The swamp was a plentiful source of food for the miners, especially during strikes. There was fish and birds in abundance to be caught to feed the miners' families. Along the banks of Iron Bark Creek were boatsheds and many owned small boats. The Ironbark Creek Railway Bridge, built to replace the old wooden bridge, suffered when the miners found the nuts from the bolts would make great sinkers for fishing, and relieved the bridge of them.

In 1872 John Mitchell called a public meeting for the purpose of assembling a petition to have Wallsend-Plattsburg declared a Municipality. It was not until 27 February 1874 that the town was gazetted after years of planning. That April an election was held and the first aldermen of the Borough elected with James Fletcher its first Mayor.



Primitive Methodist Church – Devon Street
Taken from a coloured copper engraving courtesy R Watson

The Borough of Wallsend did not bring a smooth running for the Council with residents in both areas not at all happy about the way things were progressing. The council meetings became a battle between the two sections of the township. After many disagreements it was decided to divide the Borough of Wallsend into three wards, giving Wallsend two wards and Plattsburg one ward. Naturally Plattsburg residents would not agree to this and so the trouble went on until agreement was finally reached to have two separate Boroughs.

Plattsburg's boundaries ran west from the Wallsend Coal Company railway and included the old Lemongrove Estate, and importantly for its income, also the commercial centre of Nelson Street. The area developed quickly and by 1875 Wallsend-Plattsburg had a population of 6,000.

Two more years of disagreements resulted in Plattsburg eventually becoming a separate municipality and proclaimed such by His Excellency Sir Hercules George Robert Robinson, Governor of New South Wales, on 27th December 1876.

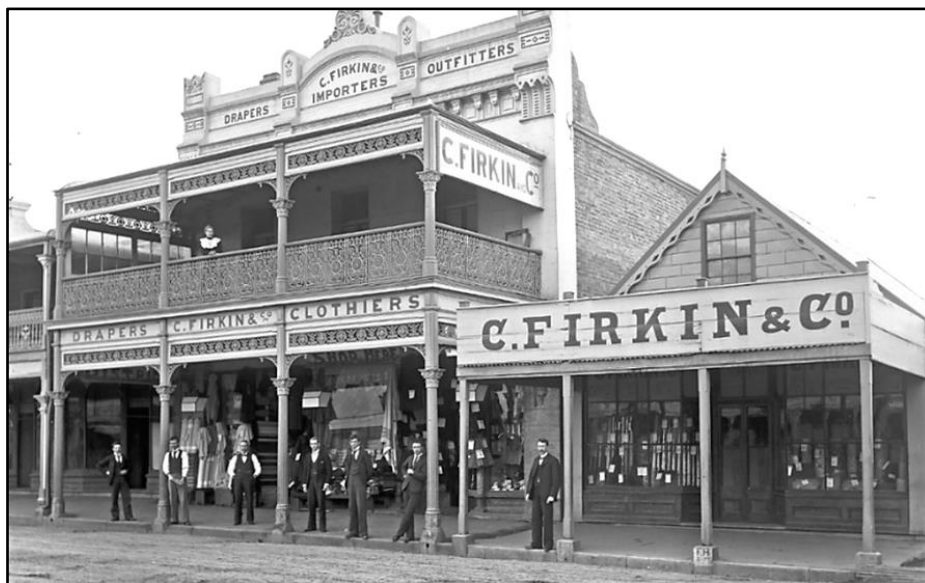
The first election took place in the Protestant Hall in Plattsburg on 6th February, 1877 with James Birrell being elected the first Mayor of Plattsburg.² The Protestant Hall was to feature largely in this narrative some three years later.

From the establishment of the Municipalities, Wallsend and Plattsburg at once entered into improvement of the areas. Bridges were built, roads were formed and gravelled, footpaths constructed. The streets of Plattsburg were lit by gas lamps at the latter end of 1885 when 20 lamps were erected by the Wallsend and Plattsburg Gas Company. Wallsend followed with gas lighting some six months later. In 1922 electricity came to the area.

For over thirty years, as a result of local jealousy, two separate Councils governed this small municipality. Eventually, in 1915, the divide was once again joined when it was realised that, for economical and social reasons and the effects of World War 1 on the population, it would be best to make one town out of two. The battle was not easily won with supporters on both sides of the argument becoming, in some cases, very vitriolic. The newspapers of the day fuelled the fire somewhat but eventually by *Gazette Notice* on 20 October 1915 the two towns were united under the title of Municipality of Wallsend.

As evidenced by photographs of the day Plattsburg was indeed the centre of commercial life in the district with many fine shops filled to capacity with merchandise to satisfy any request. As with all mining towns of the times hotels were numerous and there were up to forty hotels in the two towns by the time *The Plattsburg Trade and Business Directory of 1880* was printed. The Mechanics Institute was also mentioned “*There is also a large and commodious Mechanics Institute lately erected and is one of the best outside the Metropolis*”.

As an indication of the importance of Plattsburg to the district the public buildings were grouped together on the block fronted by Harris, Charles and Tyrell Streets. The Plattsburg Court and Watch House built in 1878, the Post and Telegraph Office opened in 1882, Police Offices 1883. The town of Plattsburg no longer exists having been absorbed into the suburb of Wallsend. Wallsend is situated approximately 11 kilometres from Newcastle city centre and the port of Newcastle and, since April 1938, is part of the City of Newcastle local government area.



Firkin's Store, Nelson Street, Plattsburg, 1899. *University of Newcastle, Special Collections*

Establishment:

In May 1878 three men, James Fletcher, James Richardson (at the time an Alderman on Plattsburg Council) and Thomas Abel (Town Clerk), met at the *White Swan Hotel* in Plattsburg (cnr of Mary & Devon Streets, later demolished and a cottage built on the site) to discuss forming a Mechanics Institute in the town. All three men had been miners and were very much involved with the public schools movement.³

Mechanics Institute - At a meeting held at Mr B Wells' on Tuesday it was decided to call a meeting on an early date (due notice of which will be given by advertisement) for the purpose of forming a Mechanics' Institute and judging from the earnestness of the meeting something will come of it.

Just six days later, on 29 May 1878, the following advertisement appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*.

School of Arts, Plattsburg

To the Members of the Literary Society and
other Gentlemen signing the Requisition.

GENTLEMEN – In compliance with your
Requisition I hereby convene a Public
Meeting of the inhabitants of the Borough of
Plattsburg for the purpose of taking into con-
sideration the advisability of establishing a
School of Arts or Mechanics Insitute within
The Borough.

To be holden at the Protestant Hall, Mary
Street, on THURSDAY EVENING, May the
30th, at 7 pm

JAMES BIRRELL
Mayor

The main aim of the committee was self-improvement for those who had little formal education by providing a place of learning and recreation. The following month on 10 June the name Plattsburg Mechanics Institute was chosen at a meeting held in Rev William Chaucer's school room in Devon Street. Chaucer's School continued to be the meeting room for almost three years.

*That the institution take the title of the Mechanics Institute, and that in order to prove to the young men that it was not inaugurated to benefit the older portion of the community only, it was decided that no initiation fees were necessary in order to become a member, but that the fees would be one shilling per month.*⁴

The enthusiasm for the establishment of the institute was such that it was only a month before a reading room was sectioned off and a supply of newspapers and periodicals, along with 80 or so books, were installed. 58 men had already put their names on the roll. Chaucer's school was centrally located in Devon Street and it did not take long for the residents to appreciate the institute with the reading room in demand from the start.⁵

Rev William Chaucer is a man of much mystery appearing in various guises throughout his lifetime. Firstly he was listed as a shoemaker on arrival in the Colony in 1839 on board the *Lady McNaughton*, a Reverend with the Free Presbyterian Church by 1853, he tried Homeopathic remedies, he added the title Dr to his name but no one has been able to find any reference at a University he might have attended, he was also jailed for illegal practices as a Reverend⁶. The list goes on. An interesting life.

Fortnightly debates were established almost immediately and, as with the Wallsend School of Arts, proved one of the most popular events. The first debate was held on Friday 16th August the subject being *Which is the best means of developing the mineral resources of the Colony*⁷ Debates were held every alternate Friday evening and readings every alternate Thursday evening of the opposite week.

Two debates in July and August 1878 were *Protection versus Free Trade* and *Is a Republic or a Monarchical Government most Beneficial to a Nation*. Questions still debated today. Reading and elocution class were being offered along with drafts and chess. Reports on the debates held were, for many years, published in the local press.

It was not long before the Committee circularised for donations and were extremely successful in the attempt, receiving many volumes of books and several donations in cash. All looked well for the future of the Plattsburg Mechanics Institute and plans were in hand for a function to celebrate the inauguration of the institution.⁸

With the aim in mind to build their own hall, interest over the following three years increased and with local support for all fund raising activities, including the monster Art Union in 1878⁹ and benefit concerts, the money necessary was steadily raised.

An Art Union was organised with £1000 first prize, an enormous sum for the times, all monies going towards the building of their own institute as Chaucer's place already proved too small for the growing demands of the residents. 9,000 tickets at 10 shillings each all prizes were to be paintings "*If preferred the Committee guarantee to find purchasers for the Pictures at the full amount placed opposite each prize*"¹⁰ it was stated the number of tickets to be issued being greatly in excess of the number ever offered by any Art Union in the colonies.

A grand concert on Saturday 12 October 1878 at the Protestant Hall in Mary Street was advertised¹¹ widely and held in conjunction with the sale of Art Union tickets. Some of the advertising published in the local press for the Art Union caught the imagination of the public.

Art Unions were immensely popular at this time with various towns Ballarat, Narrabri, the Riverina to name a few, being among those raising money for worthy causes by organising Art Unions.

When the opportunity presented itself to purchase the old Protestant Hall in Mary Street (now Nelson Street) in 1880 and with a grant of £1000¹² from the Government, the Committee didn't hesitate.

Mary Street was gazetted Friday 8th August 1879 as item 18 on the Schedule: *18. Mary Street, from Hill Street to Bunn Street*. Nelson Street now runs from the railway gates at Cowper Street through to Hill Street.

The Wallsend and Plattsburg Protestant Hall Company held an extraordinary Special Meeting of shareholders on 5 January, reported in the *New South Wales Government Gazette* of 30 January 1880:

It was decided by an unanimous vote of the shareholders present to wind up the company and sell the property to the trustees of the Plattsburg Mechanics' Institute.

The notice that appeared in the paper pre-empted the approval of the Government – the committee must have thought they were on very solid ground. If approval had not been granted to use the £1000 for the Protestant Hall the Committee of the Mechanics Institute would have been struggling to purchase a block of land, central to the town, and build an appropriate hall.

The £1,000 had been granted to the Committee to be used to build a new Institute. When the Committee decided to purchase the Protestant Hall, which they had used for several functions, a deputation travelled to Sydney to gain permission to use the money for the old hall. Their petition was favourably received, although they did have to come home and put it in writing.¹³ The endowment was at the rate of ten shillings in the pound.



State Library of NSW

*A deputation today had an interview with Mr Suttor (left), Minister of Justice and Public Instruction, in reference to the Plattsburg School of Arts, with the object of seeing whether the Government would have any objection to make a grant in the event of the trustee purchasing a building already erected, viz. the Protestant Hall, instead of erecting a special building with the money voted. Mr Suttor did not see much objection to it. They had better make him a special application in writing, and he would give it his best attention.*¹⁴

The Building:

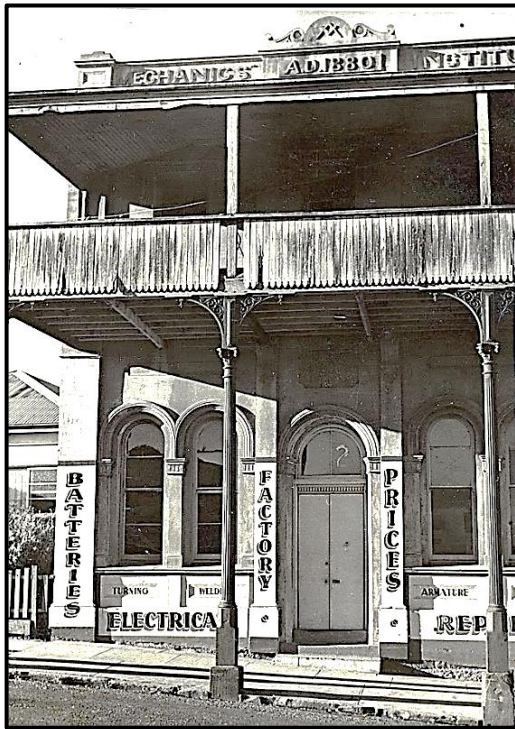
It did not take long after moving for the committee to realise the building was lacking in many facilities especially as regards to a reading and recreation room and so a programme of extensions was approved.¹⁵ Tenders were called almost immediately. By the end of June Mr George Froome's tender was accepted for the sum of £1,222.¹⁶

Although we don't have the plans or a photograph of the early Plattsburg Mechanics Institute we do have some wonderful descriptions of the building in the local media. One in particular appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate* of 23 June 1880 prior to the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone.

The journalist had obviously studied very carefully the plans submitted for the tender process and wrote:

the new building, when completed, will be commodious and admirably suited for the purpose for which it is intended. It is to be a two storied structure; the front will be extended to the front building line.

He then gives a lengthy description of the interior of the proposed building with sizes of the rooms carefully noted:



In the preparation of the plans, it is evident that interior comfort has been studied more than exterior show, the front elevation having no pretensions to architectural display, although over the main entrance will be erected a light and neat balcony, egress to which will be obtained by French light from the corridor. Its elevation will make it admirably adapted for public speaking in the open air.

He concludes with:

When completed the inhabitants of Plattsburg will possess an institution that they may well be proud of, and in which, it is sincerely to be hoped the rising youth of our town will seek that mental culture so necessary to fit them to take their turn in the stern realities of life.

As can be seen from the photograph of the building taken about 1955 the writer was correct about the

external appearance although it is recorded that cast iron lace work, long since gone, surrounded the balcony.

By July it was reported that Mr Froome was making rapid headway with the alterations and additions. The whole of the roof was on and the walls ready for the bricklayers to start with the second story and the massive stones for the foundation of the new front portion of the building where on site.

Successful fund raising over two years enabled the institute to start work on the premises almost immediately and a month later on Saturday 24 July 1880 a foundation stone was laid. The full proceedings of the event were recorded in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* on Tuesday 27 July 1880. At the end of proceedings the sum of £481. 6s had been laid on the foundation stone.¹⁷

In part the description read:

The building stands half way up the main street, and promises, when completed to be a very substantial and handsome structure.

The building will be built of 14inch brick walls; 82 feet in height from base course; plastered and cemented; slate roof. The ground floor will be subdivided as follows: Secretary's office, 12ft x 9ft 4inches; hall 41ft 10inches x 80 ft; stage 20ft x 80 ft. two ante rooms 12ft x 9ft 10inches each.

1st Floor: Reading room 28ft 6inches x 12ft 6 inches; library 18ft 6inches x 12ft 6inches; lecture room 18ft 8inches x 12ft 6inches; class room 18ft 6inches x 12ft 6 inches; two ante rooms 8ft 6inches x 12ft 6in each; lodge room 80ft x 20ft.

The main hall has a wide and well adjusted stage and proscenium at one end and a semi-circular or horse shoe elevated gallery at the other. Both the stage and gallery are supported and relieved in appearance by tastefully painted iron uprights the whole

of the hall being amply ventilated by side windows and roof gratings. The proscenium itself is mainly noticeable by a capitally painted drop scene, the work of Mr E.L. Williams, scenic artist, of Newcastle, and representing a picnic party on the Bay of Bosporous at Constantinople.



George Froome, of Plattsburg, was an ironmonger and furniture merchant and was both the architect and contractor of the project. He was responsible for many fine buildings in the area and the Rotunda in Plattsburg Park, designed by Bennett and Yeomans, still stands as testimony to his skill as a craftsman. Built 1888 and restored by Council 1996.

A very large gathering of people, both local and distant, assembled at the Institute site and James Fletcher, President of the Institute, did the honours. Being a great supporter of such institutes, he addressed the assembled about the benefits to be derived from being a member.

Mr Fletcher made a lengthy but nonetheless interesting speech about the history of the institutes here and abroad. As had become the custom a bottle was laid under the stone containing the names of councillors and politicians of the day and a copy of the *Newcastle Morning Herald*.¹⁸ Instead of the usual custom of presenting a mallet and trowel the useful and ornamental were combined by presenting Fletcher with a magnificent case of silver mathematical instruments made by Flavelle Bros of Sydney, inscribed on the top with the occasion. Flavelle Brothers with Roberts were possibly the leading scientific instrument makers in Australia at that time.

At night a banquet was held at the *Great Northern Hotel* (not to be confused with the hotel of the same name in Newcastle). This hotel was owned by Edward Lorey and seemed to be always referred to as Lorey's Great Northern it was re-named *The Fire Station Hotel* in 1980 and extensive alterations made.

It took less than five months for the building to be finished. A grand opening was held on 11 December with James Fletcher again doing the honours. The cost came to £4,250 of which £3850 had been raised locally.¹⁹ Mr Fletcher recalled such institutions were first introduced 59 years ago to provide educational facilities that would end mass ignorance among the working classes. Their development was a great tribute to Dr George Birkbeck who, in 1821, founded the Mechanics Institute movement.

The expected influx of visitors to Plattsburg for the event was such that:

*Arrangements have been kindly made by Mr Higgs, traffic manager, so that the passenger train from Wallsend to Newcastle will be delayed until 11.20 p.m., which will enable visitors from Newcastle to attend the entertainment and return by train at night.*²⁰

Mr Abel, the Honorary Secretary of the Institute, was recognised for all his work on bringing to fruition the Institute with the presentation at the opening of a "*splendidly illuminated address, together with a massive gold watch and chain*".²¹

It was not long after the members had settled into the Institute than they opened their doors to the Plattsburg School. Under-mining caused cracks to appear in the school in Hill Street and as a consequence in July 1881 the pupils were “temporarily” rehoused in the Mechanics Institute,²² until the new school, on the corner of Clarke and Ranclaud Streets, was opened in 1884. The damaged school was demolished in September 1881. Social Harmony Meetings at the Institute were discontinued for the duration of the leased period. These meetings were usually run along the lines of readings and sing-a-longs.

Plattsburg Public School.

THE Primary Department of the Plattsburg Public School will RE-OPEN in the Mechanics' Institute on the 18th July; the Infant's Department and Evening School on the 11th July, in the Infant Schoolroom.

R. YOULL,
Teacher.

4481

What arrangements were made with the Department of Public Instruction for recompense is not known although mention is made in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* of 17 February 1883 that the Department owed the Mechanics Institute £52 for rent. It does not mention the period of time this sum covered. The Mechanics Institute maintained an interest and support of Plattsburg School and when it came time to close the Institute the members voted to give the school part of the proceeds. The Minister for Education vetoed this and the money had to go to the Wallsend School of Arts. The primary school was, however, the recipient of books and specimens.

In 1889 it was successfully moved that the library and reading room would open on Sundays as most of the men worked a six day week. This proved one of the better decisions made for the institute and was applauded by the members.

In March 1895 the first of a series of cricket matches between Wallsend School of Arts and Plattsburg Mechanics Institute was played, Wallsend won the first match. The photograph below, taken 18 March 1895 by Ralph Snowball, shows the two teams. *Hunter Photo Bank collection at the Newcastle City Library No. 0010011737.*



By 1902 committee members, Messrs Moran and Reed, were appointed as delegates to represent the Institute at the Union of Institutes. Office bearers from the Union would travel to attend Annual General Meetings of local Institutes to. It was reported that year that the recreation hall so far had been a success and table tennis added to the activities.

At the Annual Meeting in July 1902, in compliance with the wish of the members, a first-class billiard table had been purchased which had not only proved a financial success but had also tended to materially increase the membership. The library by now contained 3566 books and the membership had increased by 149 making a total of 340 members at the end of the Financial Year. The report concluded with well merited praise to Mr and Mrs Calvert for the care bestowed and the exceptional cleanliness of every part of the institution. Improvements to the building and surrounds continued over the years with Mr Calvert as librarian, treasurer, caretaker as well as seeing to the day to day running of the institution.



COOKING CLASS AT PLATTSBURG

This class under the auspices of the Board of Education, was established in the Mechanics' Institute in July 1904 and is available free to girl pupils from all Public Schools of the surrounding district.

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser Wednesday 20 June 1906 page 1624

The classes were held in the Lodge Room on the first floor. A gas stove and tables were installed in the large room which was still used for Lodge meetings at night. The Institute charged the Board of Education 2shillings and 6pence per week for cleaning.

In 1909 tragedy struck the institute with the death of Edwin Calvert. He was found dead on the first landing of the staircase on Saturday 9 October. A social was held in the hall on the Friday night and Mr Calvert was seen in the building at half past eleven o'clock. It was assumed that he went upstairs to lie down until the end of the festivities it being his custom to do so on such occasions. His wife and daughter found him and the police concluded he fell whilst descending the stairs. He was 45 years old.²³ The coroner gave a report of death by accident.

Mrs Calvert continued on with the cleaning duties of the institute for many years, she was paid £1 per week. A few months later the committee of the Mechanics Institute resolved to

appoint Mrs Calvert as caretaker at £1/5/- per week. This was reduced to 20s per week the following January as a result of employing a caretaker/librarian, Mr Wells.²⁴



It can be seen from this photograph, taken from the balcony of the Plattsburg Mechanics Institute by Ralph Snowball on 9 April 1906, looking down Nelson Street towards the railway crossing, that Plattsburg was indeed a very successful town. *University of Newcastle Special Collections*

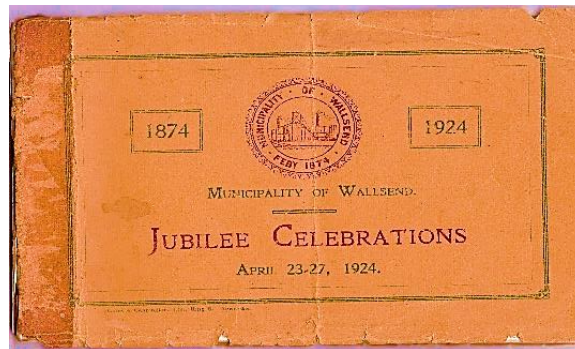
By 1910 many educational facilities were being offered elsewhere and the institute became more recreational than educational becoming primarily a social club and library. With improvements in transport, reforms in education in the public school system, which now included technical and commercial courses, there seemed no future for institutes such as that at Plattsburg. Membership reached a peak of 300 but, despite these numbers, the Institute was getting deeper in debt and at the time of closure the debt amounted to £395/8/2.

Lectures on geological subjects were being given around this time and these proved very popular in all coalmining areas. Miners, through their work came across fossils, especially plant fossils, in the coal bearing strata. These lectures always proved of great interest.²⁵

Phelan's Picture House opened at 88 Nelson Street, Plattsburg about 1912 and prior to that Phelan had travelling Picture Shows. The Wallsend School of Arts was the venue of choice to screen the movies before he opened his own theatre. It was not long before Garaty's Picture Palace opened in 1913. The Empire Theatre opened in 1924 which really sounded the death knell for the Institute.

By the early 1920s the Institute was struggling. There was a slow decline in membership and a debt that the committee could not seem to overcome. With other entertainment, such as movie houses, being offered and with better transport it became easier for residents to travel to venues out of the town for their entertainment.

There was no hint of the dire circumstances the Mechanics Institute was in at the time of the Wallsend Jubilee, celebrated in April 1924. In a booklet published at the time it was stated that the School of Arts and Mechanic's Institute maintain well equipped libraries. The Institute was the venue for a number of functions during the Jubilee Celebrations.



It is noted that in 1923 the Institute held an overdraft of £198 the following year it had risen to £304. With the falling membership, the increase in cost of reading material and possibly the need for repairs to the building the Institute found it impossible to service the overdraft.

By July of that same year it was becoming obvious that something had to be done. A Special General Meeting of members, to be held on 21st July 1924 to vote on the closure of the institute, was well advertised in the local press.²⁶

PLATTSBURG MECHANICS' INSTITUTE

NOTICE is hereby given that a Special General Meeting of Members of the Plattsburg Mechanics Institute will be held in the reading room of the Institute on MONDAY EVENING JULY 21 1924 at 7.30 o'clock pm to consider a proposal to empower the Trustees to close the Institute, to sell the whole Property of the Institute (land, buildings, and other assets) situated in Mary Street, Wallsend and to wind up the affairs of the Plattsburg Mechanics' Institute. A full attendance of members (ladies and gentlemen) is requested.

GEORGE STONE Hon. Secretary

The second meeting of members was fully advertised in the local press,²⁷ held on Monday 25 August 1924 to confirm the following resolutions which were carried unanimously at the special General Meeting held on the evening of Monday July 21 1924.

- A. That this meeting empower the trustees to close the Institute, to sell the whole of the property of the institute (land, buildings and other assets) situated in Mary Street, Wallsend and to wind up the affairs of the Plattsburg Mechanics' Institute.
 - B. That the trustees be empowered to hand over to the Plattsburg Superior Public School, the reference library, all the mineral specimens, all the wood specimens, the photo of the late Mr Thomas Abel, and the photo of the committee.
 - C. That any balance over and above our liabilities be divided between the Plattsburg Superior School and the Wallsend School of Arts, for the purpose of fostering education.
- GEORGE STONE** - Hon Secretary

The next day *The Newcastle Morning Herald* carried a full report of the meeting where it was reported that only about a dozen people turned up. Mr W Buxton presided and Mr John Bower, who had been connected to the Institute from the beginning, presented the financial position. All speakers were appalled that the institute had to close but indebtedness caused by lack of interest on the part of the public had been responsible. This can be no better illustrated than in the fact that only a dozen people attended the Special Meeting to deal with the closure of the Institute. Mr Bower, stated the Institute had done a vast amount of good in the community and the closing was a calamity.

Membership started to fall some time before and the conclusion was taken that Amusements such as horse racing and picture shows took up the spare time of the people and newspapers were easily obtained. The reading room and newspapers were a mainstay of School of Arts and Mechanics Institutes for many years. If any person had the notion of advancing himself educationally there were now better facilities for getting to and from Newcastle. Mr J Sutton the custodian said at the present time there were about 110 members. Mr J Estell, MLC, deplored the fact that an institute, which had done such good, had to close. He joined some forty years ago and had spent many happy hours in it and received instruction there.



This photograph taken on the occasion of the opening of the Mary Street bridge, clearly shows the Mechanics Institute on the right. It is the building with the balcony over the footpath where the Mayor, political figures and others addressed the residents.
Newcastle City Library – Photo Bank

At the annual meeting of the Wallsend School of Arts in July 1924 it was noted the Plattsburg Mechanics Institute proposed closure and the hope was expressed that should the proposal reach finality the School of Arts would benefit.²⁸

Eight months later notices appeared in the local press advising of its closure. This was the first definite notice the local residents had of the troubles the Mechanics Institute was facing. The first advertisements appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* on 28 March 1925 when it was announced that the Reading Room, Library and Billiards Rooms would be closed absolutely on 31 March. An appeal was made for the return of any outstanding books and any subscriptions overdue to be paid.

Then followed a **SALE BY TENDER** notice:

The Reading Room, Library and Billiard Room will be closed absolutely after Tuesday March 31st 1925. All books belonging to the Institute must be returned by that date and all subscriptions due to December 31, 1924 are requested to be paid.

FOR SALE BY TENDER

One Victor Piano, in good order, on view at Dance Hall, two Billiard Tables, with requisites and one set of Snooker Balls, on view at Billiard Room, for spot cash. Tenders close with the undersigned on Tuesday March 31st 1925.

By order of the Trustees

GEO STONE, Hon. Sec.

When the trustees of the Plattsburg Mechanics Institute were granted permission to dispose of the building and fittings by the Minister of Public Instruction, Wallsend Council received first offer. The matter was allowed to stand over pending an inspection. The Mayor (Alderman Neal) reported to the council that the buildings with furniture and fittings could be procured for £300 less the amount received from the sale of the two billiards tables and a piano. To allow the aldermen to make an inspection the matter was left in abeyance.

15 June 1925²⁹ saw the end of the Plattsburg Mechanics Institute. An Auction was held on that day commencing at 4 pm for the sale of the building. The kitchen equipment was included. The billiard table, piano and other larger items were sold separately.

WALLSEND. WALLSEND.

PLATTSBURG MECHANICS' INSTITUTE,

MONDAY NEXT, JUNE 15th.

4 p.m. ON THE PREMISES 4 p.m.

TWO-STORY BRICK BUILDING, MASSIVELY BUILT, containing:—

GROUND FLOOR—Office 12 x 10, Billiard Room 25 x 30, Supper Room 37 x 30, Dance Room 58 x 32, 2 Dressing Rooms 15 x 12, and 12 x 12. Stairway, 4ft wide, to First Floor, containing Reading Room 30 x 12, Committee Room 13 x 12, Library 23 x 12, Lodge Room 20 x 31, 2 Auto Rooms each 8 x 12. Hallway 52 x 4. Colonnade 12ft, in front, with return on eastern side of 7ft, the whole being closed in with massive glass sliding frames. The building throughout is well ventilated and faithfully built. Dance Room Floor, constructed of 3 x 2 Tallowood, on edge. All catering equipment, Tables, Chairs, etc., in supper room. The building offers great inducement to purchasers, as I hold applications for leases of various portions, which show proof of good revenue. Gas and water service on both floors.

INSPECTION INVITED.

ROY BYRNES, Auctioneer,
WALLSEND AND SPEERS' POINT

Reports in the local media the following day indicated that, although the event attracted a large number of the public and bidding started at £500 pounds, it was not spirited. The auctioneer, Mr Roy Byrnes, struggling to engage the interest of those present. The Mechanics Institute was knocked down for £785 to Mr J Dean, a local butcher. It was generally conceded that he secured a bargain.

Mr Dean immediately started renovations to the Mechanics Institute building having the roofing and guttering repaired and electric light fittings installed. Not a month after the sale it was reported in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* of 4 July that Mr Dean privately sold the building to Mr C Murray.

Part of the proceeds from the sale was used to pay off any debts still outstanding amounting to approximately £340. £100 was to be invested for the purpose of endowing a prize at the Plattsburg School. The Minister for Education did not approve of the £100 endowment and directed the payment to Wallsend School of Arts of any surplus. The remainder of the money, books and furniture were also to go to the Wallsend School of Arts in accordance with conditions laid down. Plattsburg School obtained the reference library, volumes from the general library, specimens of minerals and Australian timbers and some photographs.³⁰

A final meeting of members of the institute took place on 13 January 1926 to receive the report of the Trustees (Messrs Estell, Stone and Bower). The final figures from the sale of property totalled £979.10s and liabilities were £556.7.2d. The Wallsend School of Arts gained £423.2.10.³¹

There were indications of progress at the Wallsend School of Arts which was to be expected after the Plattsburg Mechanics Institute closed. 689 books were donated to Wallsend School of Arts with the permission of the Minister for Education and they received a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the building. It was stated they intended to use the money to do some long-needed renovation work.

The Plattsburg Mechanics Institute building had many lives after the sale including a battery distributor and motor mechanics workshop and at one stage a glove factory, just to name two. For many years before demolition the building was empty.



Pride of Plattsburg Falls to Wreckers:

So read the headline in the *Newcastle Sun* when the demolition of the Plattsburg Mechanics Institute took place.

For many years it housed the Mechanics Institute and in more recent times it was a favourite with bill posters and playing children. After being vacant for several years the old building, which was a landmark of the district, finally came down in September 1969.³²

It began when that part of Nelson Street was part of the old Borough of Plattsburgh built as a Mechanic's Institute a friendly rival to the School of Arts at Wallsend. At the laying of the foundation stone £481/- was donated this was just six years after the Premier Sir Henry Parkes had laid the foundation stone for the Newcastle School of Arts. Launched when the temperance movement in the North, particularly in mining areas was at its peak and had a great influence, even in electing aldermen and members of Parliament. Fletcher believed it was possible to provide good entertainment for the workers without the temptation of drink.

At the time of demolition Mr Edwin Thomas, last Mayor of Wallsend, recalled that the building was a meeting place for friendly societies etc for many years. They held their socials and banquets there in the era when these functions were important events in the township. There was a special annex upstairs for lodge meetings.

The Town Clerk for the Plattsburg Council at the time, Mr Abel, had an office on the ground floor of the building.

Mr Ned Calvert, Librarian and caretaker for many years late one night fell down the stairs and died from injuries. Once the institute had a verandah leading from the reading room which provided an excellent view of the township. But Mr Bob Snowdon, erected a two storied building on the corner of Nelson and Clarke Streets and blocked out the view. A hotel once operated on the western side of the institute and developed a "blood and fire character". It was not uncommon during dancing intervals for the "strong brew" to get to work among the young bloods of the town and many a laneway fight developed. At one time it was claimed the institute had the best dance floor in the Newcastle district and residents came from all parts of Newcastle for an evening's dancing.

Unfortunately when roller skating became popular the sport was allowed in the hall and the beautiful floors were lost forever.

The Lake Macquarie Herald of 6 November 1969 contained a comprehensive coverage of the history of the Institute.

A family home now graces lot 52 Nelson Street, Wallsend and there is no longer any sign of the proud building that served the community so well for over forty years.



Looking up Nelson Street from the corner of Bunn Street in 2020.

The Fire Station Hotel, once the Great Northern, can just be seen at the top of the hill.

The Plattsburg Mechanics Institute was on the block on the right in front of the white fence.

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