

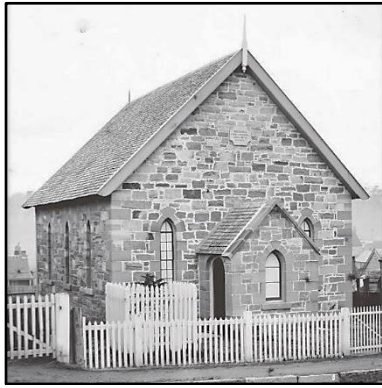
LAMBTON MECHANICS' and MINERS' INSTITUTE



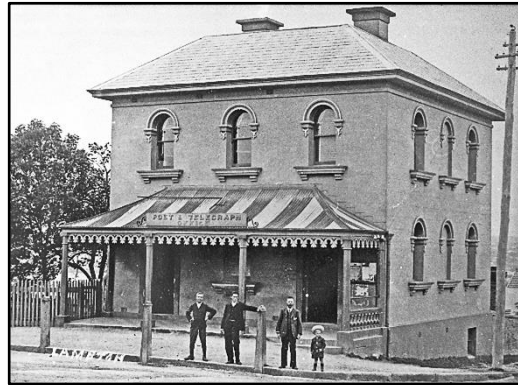
Photo – Ken Shilling NFHS

Name: Lambton Mechanics Institute
Address: 68 Elder Street, Lambton

In June 2021 Lambton celebrated 150 years since it was gazetted a town. Great celebrations were planned to mark the occasion unfortunately with the advent of COVID 19 only a small number of celebrations were held. Some of the beautiful old buildings of the suburb could be viewed including the Lambton Library formerly the Lambton Council Chambers (1887), Bethel Chapel (1868), Post Office (1880) and standing proud amongst them was Lambton Mechanics Institute the subject of this essay.



Bethel Chapel



Post Office

History:



The Awabakal people are the Traditional Custodians of the land the suburb of Lambton is built upon. Lambton Park, which before development was a swamp with water flowing into it from surrounding areas, provided water and a food source for the Awabakal people. Their proud tradition of caring for the land continues today. Birabahn, an Awabakal leader, worked with Rev Lancelot Threlkeld to record the indigenous language of the area, a source still constantly referred to today. The Eaglehawk is the Awabakal totem and it is said it looks like an Aboriginal man but in flight resembles an eaglehawk.

The magnificent statue of an eaglehawk in flight (featured in the above photograph taken by the author in 2021) is to be found at the Sanctuary, Minmi Road, Fletcher.

Most suburbs in Newcastle were founded on coal extraction and Lambton is no exception.

The Scottish Australian Mining Company (SAMC), with a nominal capital of £160,000, was established in 1858 by the Scottish Australian Investment Company to mine coal and other minerals and to this end the company leased approximately 502 hectares from the Crown at Lambton. Robert Archibald Morehead, who was the manager of both companies began with a coal mine close to the Great Northern Railway. The man he selected to oversee the operation was Thomas Croudace, a mining engineer from County Durham a rich coal mining district in Northumbria. The suburb was named by Thomas Croudace in honour of his family's association with John George Lambton, Earl of Durham.

Initially most Lambton miners came from England but before long local miners joined the company. A very profitable company, in its first full year of production 5,900 tons of coal were mined and it did not take long before shops, hotels and houses were built on the allotments released. By 1865 Lambton had 400 permanent residents, a National school opened in that September.

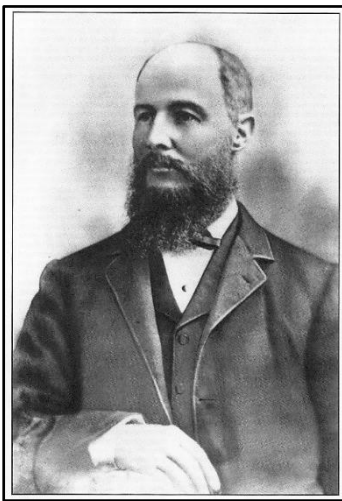
The first soccer game in Newcastle was played on Lambton Park in 1885 and the event commemorated by a plaque in the Park.

Lambton was incorporated as a town on June 24, 1871, *Government Gazette* 26 June, and remained a town until 2 April 1938 when The Greater Newcastle Act of 1937 joined the city of Newcastle with 11 smaller towns to form what is now known as the City of Newcastle.

Lambton had the honour of being the first town in the Newcastle area to have electricity. On September 9, 1890 the Mayoress, Mrs W Dent, threw the switch “*that illuminated in a brilliant manner by the simultaneous lighting of 160 street lights, hotels, homes and stores*”¹. The debt incurred by the Council in setting up the electric system resulted in the council going into receivership for some time and three of its aldermen briefly jailed for contempt of court.

During the 1890s and early 1900s there was a downturn in mining and it was estimated that the Newcastle area lost some ten thousand families, mostly coal miners. Many moved onto the South Maitland coalfields. During this decade the percentage of the Newcastle workforce engaged in mining fell from over fifty percent to only nineteen percent. The changing industrial structure of Newcastle with the establishment of Broken Hill Proprietary Company resulted in seventeen thousand new inhabitants settling in the district. Mainly working class families they settled in the inner suburbs such as Lambton.

In 1955 the SAMC finished its association with Lambton but retained some land throughout the Newcastle District and gave the council first offer on the land at “bargain prices”.



THOMAS CROUDACE, (pictured left) who features strongly throughout this narrative, is bound to the history of Lambton and the Mechanics’ & Miners’ Institute.

Born into a mining family in 1838 in County Durham, his father and uncle were both mining engineers and two of his brothers also worked in the mining industry. After serving his apprenticeship as a mining engineer he was offered, and accepted at age 23, a job with the Scottish Australian Mining Company to establish and manage their interests in Newcastle and so commenced his association with the town he named Lambton. He had arrived in Australia on 3 January 1862 with his wife, Christina (née Shelly). The voyage on the *Tiptree* was far from pleasant with serious illness among the passengers and crew during the three month voyage.²

As an astute mining engineer he was generally the first to be seen at the site of any mine disaster in the district from the Dudley mine 1898, the horrific Stockton disaster in 1896 and many more. It was said he often went beyond the call of duty. When danger threatened in any mine, not just his own, he was always among the first men called for assistance and advice. He acted as consulting engineer for several companies and in the 1880s was called upon by the Government to act as sole arbitrator in the railway land resumption cases. He was always deeply involved in community affairs and used his position to help almost all ventures in Lambton. In 1863 he built a large home, *Croudace House*, at New Lambton Heights. The home was purchased by the Newcastle Royal Hospital in the 1920s and stands in the grounds of John Hunter Hospital.

In October 1887 he was presented with an illuminated address by the townsfolk as a way of thanking him for all he had done for the town:

The address is a beautiful specimen of the printer's art. It is on satin, and has a massive border of chocolate and scarletine, and the letterpress is in 14 other colours, forming altogether one of the best pieces of work ever turned out of the office of the Herald and Advocate. The address is surrounded by a deep and handsome gilt frame.³

Thomas Croudace and SAMC made a number of donations to the Mechanics Institute over the years. These included donations of land, building materials, coal, fencing materials, books and paying for the painting of buildings. Thomas Croudace was president of the Institute from its inception until January 1902. After his death, in 1906, his son Frank took over as patron and held the position between 1906 and 1923. He was followed by Matthew Charlton, an ex-miner and politician.

It cannot be denied that if it had not been for Thomas Croudace the advancement of Lambton would not have been so swift. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Lambton School, the Mechanics' and Miners' Institute, rail connection to Newcastle and much more.

Thomas Croudace did more for Lambton than oversee its early physical development. He left the mining township a legacy of community heritage and belonging that has survived for more than 120 years.

ROBERT ARCHIBALD MOREHEAD was the Manager of the Scottish Australian Mining Company (SAMC) and was responsible for the initial leasing of land on which Lambton was built. He was the first Patron of the Mechanics' and Miners' Institute and, as manager of the SAMC, it was he who signed off on most of the support given to the Institution possibly on Thomas Croudace's recommendation.

He was exceedingly loyal to the Company and was known to fight for the company sometimes to the detriment of his personal wellbeing. He strongly supported all those who worked for the Company and spoke very highly of Thomas Croudace and credited him for the success of Lambton colliery and the town itself.

Establishment:

There is anecdotal evidence of meetings in 1865 held in the local public school to form a Mechanics' and Miners' Institute. As mentioned, the first Patron of the Institute was Robert Morehead, and the first President was Thomas Croudace. The first secretary was R W Thompson.

In the Lambton column of the *Newcastle Chronicle* of 17 November 1866 the Lambton correspondent wrote, after noting the town was rather dull having nothing in the shape of amusements:

I think also that the number of inhabitants here is sufficiently large to justify the attempt to form a School of Arts in our midst, as the major part of our people have not the time or inclination to go the distance to Waratah in wet weather and dark nights. It is to be hoped that steps will shortly be taken for the accomplishment of so desirable an object.

The same correspondent wrote the following week on the 21st, once again in *The Newcastle Chronicle*, mentioning the rivalry between Newcastle and Lambton:

We intend immediately to take steps for the formation of a School of Arts here. This will be another feather out of the cap of you, Newcastle people.

Work started in earnest to fund raise and the first Mechanics' and Miners' Institute building was opened on December 18, 1867 on land in Howe Street donated by the Scottish Australian Mining Company. £320 had been subscribed by the community and it took just eight weeks to build the weatherboard structure at a cost of £125. The event was of such importance for the community that a half day holiday was declared and all businesses were closed. A large marquee was erected next to the building and it was estimated over 900 people attended the function and partook of the tea that was provided and many stayed on for the concert that wound up the day's activities at 1 am.

In the first year after opening the Institute was well patronised. There were a series of choral and musical concerts held for the benefit of the Institute. They proved very popular as the cost was kept low to encourage a bigger attendance. There was also a public ball held on Monday April 20 with dancing commencing at 8 o'clock and refreshments available.

The Institute held their maiden lecture on 7th February 1868⁴. Charles Cleveland's address on elocution and his readings were thoroughly enjoyed by all.

A more suitable subject could not have been chosen for our maiden lecture – our Mechanics Institute is flourishing and well patronized.

Cleveland proved so popular that he was asked for a return performance in April and this time the hall was packed as word had spread about his recitations. He featured a number of Shakespeare's soliloquies and once again gave his time for the benefit of the Institution.

The Colonial Secretary, The Hon. H. Parkes visited the district in February 1868. The committee for the Mechanics Institute had invited him to visit the institute and at the appointed time on Wednesday 19th February he did so. The institute:

“seemed to give great satisfaction, particularly since the building was entirely free from debt. Mr Parkes said there would be no difficulty in obtaining the usual Government grant, and hoped the Institution would continue to be successful”⁵

Unfortunately the Institute did not receive Government funding in the estimates that year and it wasn't until July the following year that the first grant came through. Part of the grant was used to build a wing onto the original building as space had become a premium.

In June 1868 an earthquake shook Newcastle at around midnight on the 18th. Luckily there was very little damage done to buildings in the district, the exception being *Tomago House* where Mrs Windeyer reported that the home had sustained damage to a wall when it cracked from top to bottom.⁶

The first general half yearly meeting of the Institute was held on Saturday 18 July with a “fair attendance”. A full report appeared in the *Newcastle Chronicle* the following Saturday. In the Secretary's report he emphasised the success so far of the Institute and thanked the miners and

public who, through their response, enabled this “*large and commodious building* ” to be built and debt free upon opening. The Scottish and Australian Mining Company came in for special mention:

“they who so nobly came forward with a donation of 50 pounds and presented the plot of ground on which this building is erected”.

The success of the Reading Room was mentioned as well as the disturbing fact of newspapers being pilfered. Later in the meeting the Committee were empowered to pay a reward of 10s for information leading to the recovery of any newspapers. This appears to be an ongoing problem with most Institutes. At the time of the meeting eighty members and six half members had paid their subscriptions and a balance on the books of £10.11s.11d, considered a tidy sum.

To celebrate the first anniversary of the opening a *Soiree & Musical Entertainment* evening was held on Christmas Eve. There were games, and the Waratah Brass Band provided music for dancing and entertainment. The large marquee was once again erected adjoining the institute where tea was on the tables at four o'clock. ⁷



Hunter Photo Bank 056 000234

A later photograph of the Waratah Brass Band which played at most events in the Lambton District.

In early 1869 the committee decided on yet another way of raising some much needed funds by hiring out their marquee, the one that was so successfully used at the time of the opening of the Institute and their Christmas Soiree.⁸ The cost of hiring was not mentioned in the advertisement in the *Newcastle Chronicle* on 20 March.

The reporter for Lambton, who was always most supportive of the Institute, noted in the *Newcastle Chronicle* of 6 July 1869:

We are pleased to learn that Mr Croudace has received the sum of £200 from the government being the amount voted by the Legislature towards the Lambton Mechanics Institute.

He went on to report more news a week later:

The liberal grant from the Government, secured through the means of the Lambton manager, T. Croudace Esq. has placed the institute on a permanent and prosperous basis when it is considered that it was, before that, existing in a satisfactory state.

I am also informed, on good authority, that the School of Arts Committee contemplate enlarging the present building, with some of the £200 recently received from the Government – a use, in my opinion, that will well repay the trouble and expense, because the institute, if sufficiently large, is sure to be taken for entertainments in preference to any place attached to a public house.⁹

This last comment was probably directed to an earlier report concerning Mr Stoker, of the Goldminer's Hotel, who was building a large concert-room, forty feet by twenty four feet, with a stage. Mr Stoker's hall was indeed to prove a very successful venture as it was used for many large gatherings and concerts in Lambton in the coming years. (Over the years there has been at least six different names for the hotel so it became commonly known as Stoker's Hotel)

In 1870 an additional space of 15 feet was made to the building this being necessary to accommodate the increased membership. The room was used mainly for chess and bagatelle, also a room for the librarian or custodian was included. In 1877 further improvements were made by the Scottish and Australian Mining Company, who lined and plastered the building - the company continued to paint and renovate the building for several years.

The Municipal District of Lambton was proclaimed by the Governor on 24 June 1871 and published in the *NSW Government Gazette* on Monday 26 June 1871 p1409. Then the process of electing a Mayor and Aldermen was started with the Mechanics Institute being the chosen venue for meet the candidates on 2 August¹⁰ and a few days later on 7 August for the election.¹¹ The Mechanics Institute was again chosen for the declaration of the polls on 10th August followed by the first meeting of the Council.

The Council rented rooms at six different locations before finally in March 1887, at a special meeting, it was voted to build a Council Chambers on the corner of Elder and Morehead Streets. Bennett and Yeoman were the selected architects. Bennett was, some four years later, to design the new Mechanics Institute. The Council Chambers now serves as the Lambton Library.

At the second Council meeting for September 1871 a report from the Improvement Committee recommended the adoption, as an emblem for a corporate seal for the Borough, a pick, maul and wedge in the centre with the words Lambton Municipal District NSW in the margin.¹²

In 1880 Lambton had a population of 4000 and 140 residents were members of the institute.

The increasing popularity of the facility led to the construction of another weatherboard building at the cost of £173.10s which was opened in 1887. The weatherboard building, 30 feet by 20 feet, was to be the billiard room. A grand ball "with refreshments" was held in the Institute on 23 May to celebrate the opening and the reading room was cleared for those wishing to dance.¹³ This venture was not a success with some members withdrawing their membership and even going so far as to vote at Council to withdraw the rate subsidy that applied to the Mechanics Institute. The billiard table was sold in 1891 and the room converted into a reading room and library the following year.



This etching of Lambton done c1880 by an unknown artist shows the original Mechanics Institute in Howe Street - circled.

University of Newcastle, Special Collections.

By early 1892 the weatherboard buildings in Howe Street were a concern because of their poor condition and a new building was very much needed. Having made the decision to commit to a new building the committee started planning for a new, more substantial Institute:

On Monday evening a special meeting of the members of the Mechanics Institute was held for the purpose of confirming the minute passed at the previous general meeting to the effect that the old building be sold. There was a fair attendance, Mr J McEwen presiding. After confirming the minutes it was decided that tenders be invited for the purchase and removal of the old building.¹⁴

Once the decision was made to divest themselves of the original building the committee moved very quickly and the following advertisement appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* just five days later and by July the hall was demolished. The timber building adjoining the Institute, that was used for billiards, was to become the temporary home for the use of members.

TENDERS are invited for the purchase and Removal of the old building, Mechanics Institute, Lambton to close 7 pm May 28
Tenders to be endorsed
C. Noble Secretary.

At the Council Meeting on 5th July 1892 item 2 from the Improvement Committee states:

That the committee of the Mechanics Institute be offered half the council's allotment for their new building site, giving an equal frontage to Elder and De Vitre Roads, subject, however, to the approval of the Minister for Lands.¹⁵

A letter was received from Mr C. Noble, secretary of the Mechanics Institute, intimating that the committee had gratefully accepted the offer of the council of the half block of land dedicated as a site for town hall, subject to the approval of the Minister for Lands.

With the permission of the Minister for Lands the Council sub-divided the large block in Elder Street that had been allotted for a Town Hall to allow the new Mechanics Institute to be built on half of block 856. In the re-dedication the Mechanics Institute block received the number 330. The Council was not in a position to build a Town Hall as they were still greatly in debt from the electricity installation. This seemed to be the best for both parties.

This move was formalised in the *New South Wales Government Gazette* of Tuesday 16 January 1894 under the heading:

**PROPOSED RESUMPTION OF TOWN HALL SITE AT LAMBTON
AND RE-DEDICATION FOR MECHANICS' INSTITUTE AND TOWN HALL SITES.**

The original Town Hall site was 1 rood 30½ perches. Of that site the Mechanics' Institute received 35¼ perches and dedicated portion 330. There followed a very detailed description of the land.

The block had a frontage of 50 feet and a depth of 180 feet. Lot 330 could not have been bettered anywhere in Lambton. Opposite the park and just up from the main shopping centre, the block is slightly rising from Elder Street and facing the park from the north.



Lot 330

The well known architect, Peter Bennett was engaged to design the new building – he and Yeoman had designed the Rotunda in the park and the weatherboard Council Chambers which was built in 1887.

At yet another Special Meeting of the members of the Institute held on 29 December 1893 to discuss tenders for a new building it was mentioned that four plans had been submitted for consideration but the meeting decided that any one of them would be far too costly and:

moreover they considered the designs unsuitable for the requirements of the members.¹⁶ The committee instructed Mr F Croudace to see the architect, Peter Bennett, who prepared the specifications and invite separate tenders (1) for the whole building and (2) for the front part only containing an entrance hall 6ft wide and 30ft long; two game rooms, 15ft 1½ by 13ft 9in; library 26ft 7½ins by 13ft 9ins on the ground floor; while the reading room would

be overhead, 35ft by 41ft. The whole to be built of brick and properly finished. Eight tenders were received. Sanders Bros being the lowest as follows: For the whole building, £ 1152 and for the front portion only £573. The money in hand, with a promised subsidy on such by the Government, would be £600. The committee accepted the quote for £573 for the front portion. They had all a desire to erect the whole building and had invited tenders for a loan without any response.

At the end of 1893 the committee had taken the unusual step of advertising in the local media for a cash loan of £750 for 5 to 7 years at an interest not to exceed 7 per cent. It would appear that they had no success in response to the advertisement as the Institute was built without the hall which was to cost another £500.¹⁷

The Architect: Peter Bennett, an Englishman from Brighton, came to Newcastle in 1875 after first having tried mining in Queensland. Initially he went back to working as a builder. He was also clerk of works for Newcastle Council before opening his own architectural practice. Bennett practised in Newcastle from 1881 to 1921. For eight years, 1884 to 1892, he was in partnership with Ernest Yeoman. The energies and ideas of the younger Yeoman pushed the practice forward but after the dissolution of the partnership in 1892 Bennett went back to the more standard approach he had to buildings before Yeoman came on the scene.

Bennett was an alderman on Wickham Council and for a few years its mayor. He favoured a Victorian Free Classic style and was responsible for the design of many prominent structures in Newcastle including the Wickham School of Arts, Wickham Council Chambers and the rotundas in Lambton Park, Wallsend and King Edward Park.

At the half yearly meeting of the Institute at the beginning of January 1894 it was noted there were 65 financial members, the library was being well used and the tender from Messrs Sanders Bros for the erection of the new building had been accepted for £573 and the contract signed.

The committee were of the opinion that members should be Trustees of the new property instead of the council as originally intended and they appointed Messrs Dent, Ward, Buckley, Evans and Sample to supervise the erection of the building.¹⁸ It was also decided to invite the Minister for Education to lay the foundation stone.

Just a month later the foundation stone was laid but before introducing Mr Suttor to those present the Mayor spoke at length about the earlier building and the educational advantages of the Institute and urged every resident to join.

The ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the Lambton Mechanics Institute new building took place on Saturday at 3p.m. in the presence of fully 600 spectators, and everything passed off in a successful manner. The ceremony was performed by Mr F B Suttor, Minister for Education, who was accompanied by the members of the country and several well-known gentlemen. The Minister and Mr N. Melville arrived by the 12.46 p.m. train from Sydney at Adamstown, and were met at the station by the Mayor and president (Alderman T. Croudace), Mr Edden, M.P., Aldermen W.T. Dent, S. Williams (vice presidents) T.S. Jones, Messrs J. Morgan (secretary) and G. Buckley.



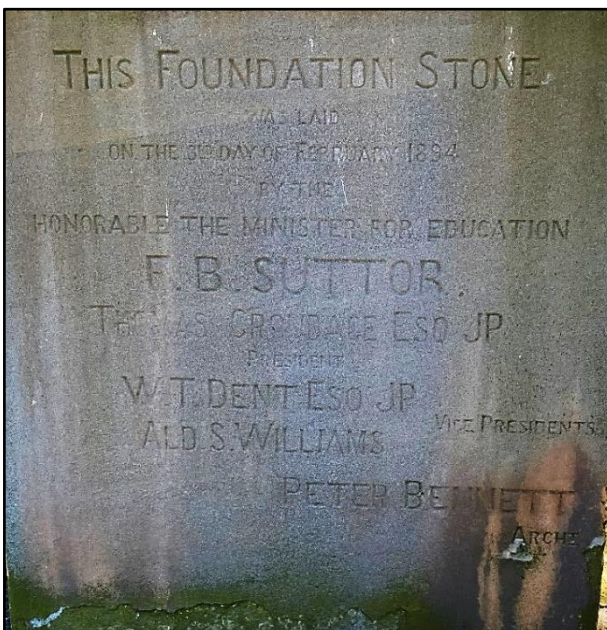
Francis Bathurst Suttor MLA

They were honoured that day by the presence of a Minister of the Crown who, he felt sure his department, which had control of all educational institutions in the colony, would do everything possible in assisting to develop their local institution, more especially when he saw the people assisting themselves. He had much pleasure in introducing Mr F.B. Suttor, Minister for Education.

Mr Croudace then presented the Minister with a beautiful silver trowel and mallet, suitably inscribed, with which to lay the foundation stone, in which was encased a copy of the Newcastle Morning Herald of that day and a few current coins. Mr Suttor performed the ceremony satisfactorily, and declared the stone well and truly laid.¹⁹

Mr Suttor, much to the surprise of those gathered, went on to announce that a technical college would be erected between Lambton and Newcastle and that tenders were now being invited for the erection of the building.

Following a custom that had evolved some years ago the Mayor invited subscriptions to be placed on the stone which amounted to £78.8s 6d. Whilst the residents were doing this, Thomas Croudace, never one to let an opportunity pass, put forward the case for the Technical College to be built at Lambton. No one heard the reply from the Minister and, as we know, the Technical College was built in 1895 and opened in February the following year - in Newcastle.



THIS FOUNDATION STONE
WAS LAID
ON THE 3RD DAY OF FEBRUARY 1894

BY THE
HONORABLE THE MINISTER FOR
EDUCATION
F B SUTTOR

THOMAS CROUDACE ESQ JP
PRESIDENT
W.T. DENT ESQ JP
ALD S. WILLIAMS, VICE PRESIDENTS

PETER BENNETT
ARCHITECT

The foundation stone can be seen on the front/southern side of the building and the builders, A & D SANDERS, acknowledged on the eastern wall.

The local media in April reported that the building was roofed and looking splendid and the committee had every reason to feel confident about the success of the new building. The committee had also put in a request to Council to kerb and gutter in front of the building with the Institute offering to pay half the cost.

The welcome receipt of £280.18s 7d endowment from the Government, along with funds in hand, took the worry out of the venture and it enabled the Committee to meet all dues and demands in connection with the building.²⁰

The reporter for the *Newcastle Morning Herald* reported on 12 May that:

The new building of the Mechanics Institute is now nearing completion, and presents an appearance in the town which reflects credit upon all concerned in the movement. The substantial walls and handsome front, in fact every feature connected with the structure calls forth general complimentary comment.

At the Council meeting on 22 May the matter of lighting in the new building was addressed. The Mechanics Institute ordered nine lights and it was recommended by the Council that the pole and light opposite the institution be removed to the corner of the new building which would better light the entrance.²¹

The council went further:

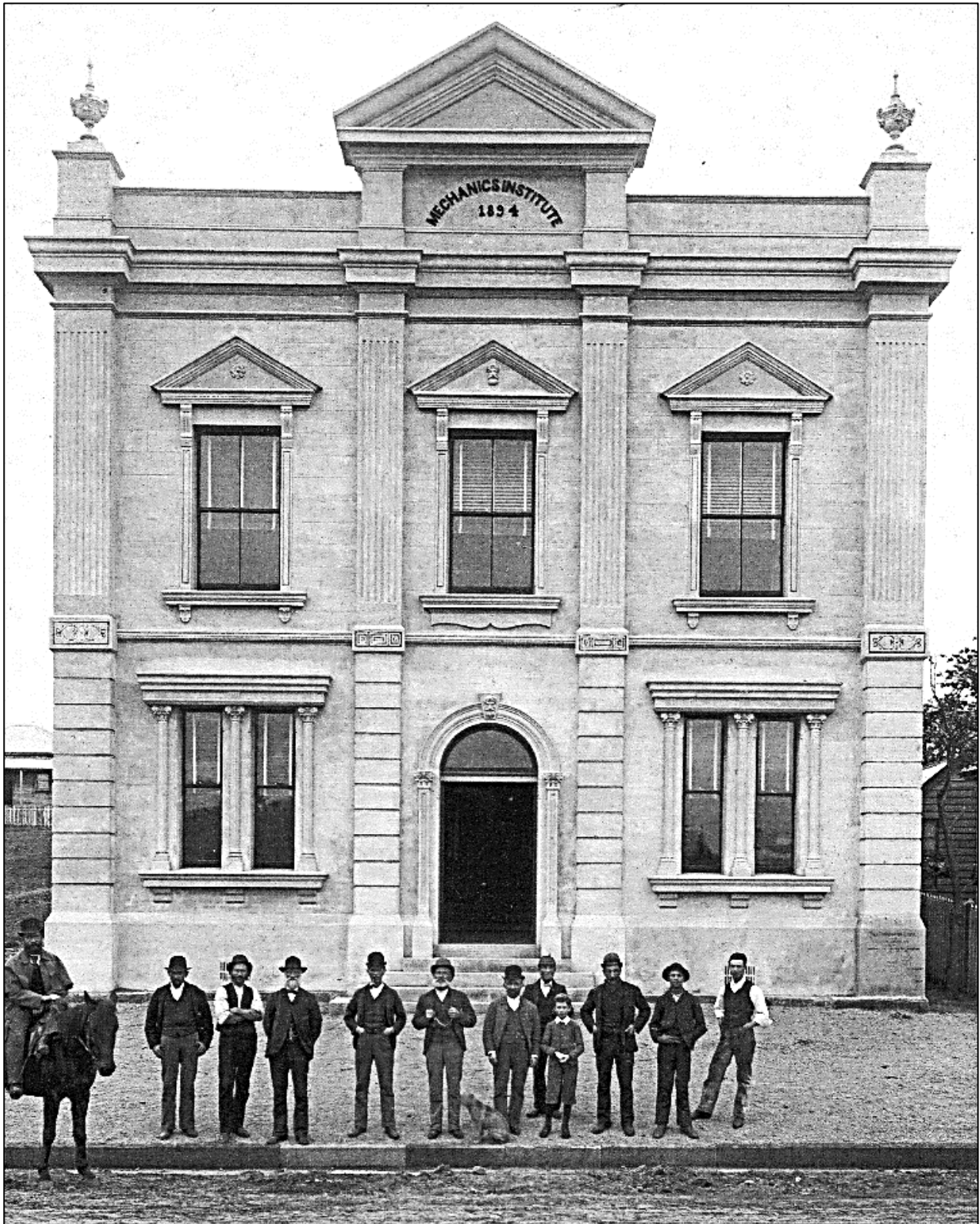
That the whole of the poles on the south side of Elder Road be removed to the north side, and the nine lights installed in the Mechanics' Institute.

By the end of May the committee had removed the furniture and effects from the earlier building into the new building which was fitted throughout with electric lights and venetian blinds.²²

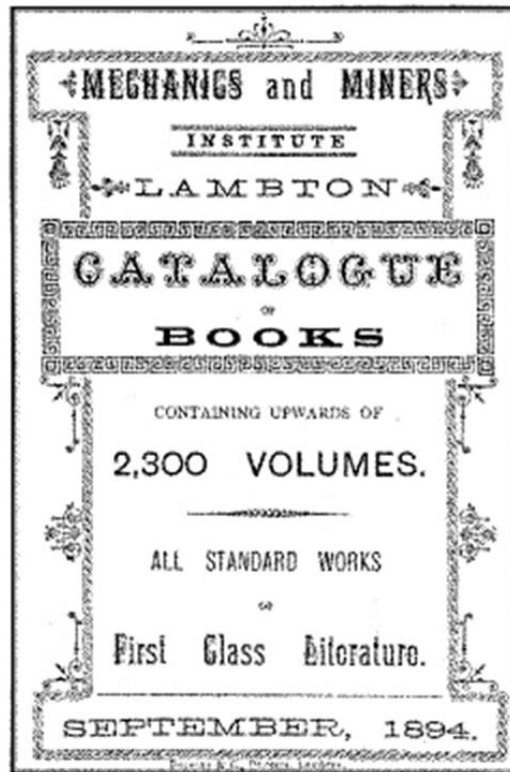
The Institute was officially opened on 31 May 1894 at a grand vocal concert. The local reporter recorded the occasion in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* the following Saturday.²³

The opening of the new Mechanics Institute building at Lambton was celebrated on Thursday evening, when an excellent vocal and instrumental concert was held in the Music Hall. During the evening members of the Waratah and Lambton brass bands combined, under the conductorship of Mr W. Gibbs, paraded the principal streets of the town playing several selections. At the hour for the commencement there was a fairly large attendance. Mr T. Croudace presided, and opened the proceeding by expressing his pleasure at seeing such a number present, although he regretted that owing to the dull times, and the fact of several entertainments having taken place during the past few weeks, the hall was not as crowded as it otherwise would probably have been in view of the laudable object for which they had gathered.

He could only follow the example of Mr F B Suttor, Minister for Education, when laying the foundation stone of the handsome new building just complete, and urged upon the townspeople to rally round the committee in making the institution a thorough success. He felt certain the benefits derived would far exceed the value of the small fee charged for membership. The committee had worked hard to secure the result, and richly deserved the thanks of the community for their laudable efforts. No one but themselves knew the trouble involved, and he heartily and sincerely tendered his thanks to the committee, who had succeeded in having erected one of the finest buildings of its kind in the Newcastle district. He announced the building as being "now open" and urged to all to become members as speedily as possible.



Lambton Mechanics Institute about the time of opening.
Photograph by Ralph Snowball 1894
University of Newcastle Special Collection



John Price Collection

By the end of the year the Librarian, assisted by members, produced a catalogue of books held By the Institute. It can be seen that there were at least 2,300 books available for members to borrow. All the popular writers of the day were represented as well as many non-fiction books.

Technical education was provided at most such institutes in mining, shorthand and ambulance classes although the committee at Lambton did not seem to be as keen on introducing them as other institutes. Debating evenings also did not last and yet they were the backbone of many institutions.

In the 1800s women were usually the mainstay of fund raising activities for most organisations, a job they did particularly well at Lambton, providing those long never-ending suppers. The all male committee at Lambton recognised their value and allowed women to use the library and ping-pong tables - as long as there was a male committee member in the premises at the time. The male members began to see the value of ladies as members and by 1880 a tenth of the members were women and by 1900 a quarter of the membership was female.

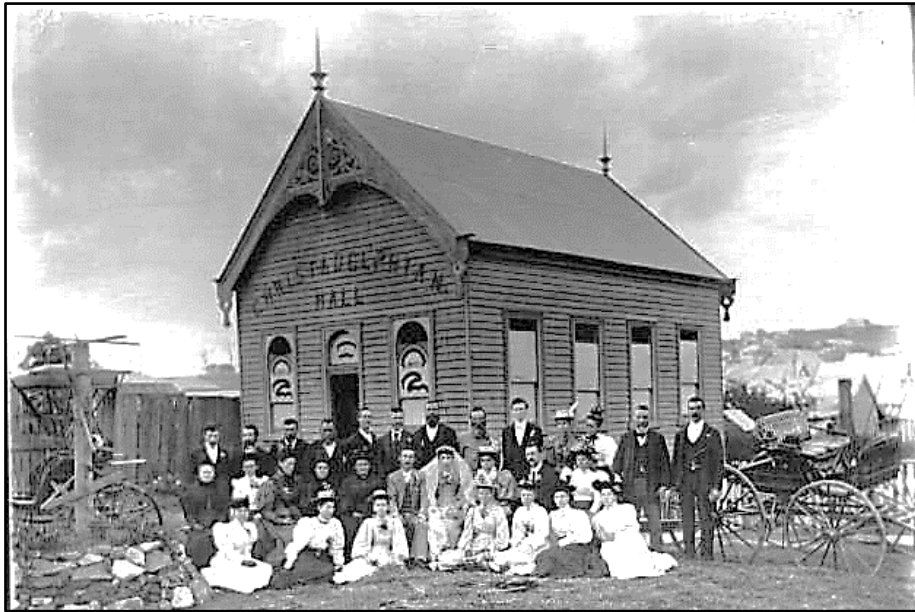
Two years after opening it was noted in the minutes of the half yearly meeting that the membership had not increased as had been hoped and lending at the library was down although over 40 books had been purchased.

The Lambton committee had two representatives attending the Union of Institutes meetings. The Union gave support to various institutes, and were of a great help to those institutes located a distance from Sydney. An example for Lambton was the lending of a Magic Lantern to members which could be used for a fund raising events.

Four years after opening the 60th half yearly report of the Institute in January 1898 reported a membership of just 81. The books showed a balance in the black but it still was not enough to

clear the debt owing on the building and the committee recommended that special effort should be made to clear that debt. The reading room/library was definitely the most popular of activities offered.²⁴

Pleasingly the Christadelphians had renewed their lease on the building and cottage in Howe Street which was in “a fair state of repair”. The rent was to stay the same at £16 pa. The committee’s hope that renting rooms in the Elder Street building would raise considerable income was not realised and fund raising became a constant struggle.



28 September 1896 Ralph Snowball - wedding party. Hunter Photobank. This is the building that was later moved to Elder Street. Unfortunately the fretwork and finials did not survive the trip.

Much the same as today, vandalism was a problem especially around public buildings, and at the same meeting it was recorded:²⁵

Mention was made of the damage done by children to the inscribed foundation stone and the cement facings, and a hope expressed that the long-promised picket fence would not be much longer delayed, otherwise a large sum of money would be required to repair the lower portion of the front of the building.

We can be grateful that cooler heads prevailed at a special meeting of members of the Institute on 17th February 1898 called to discuss “*That a colonnade be erected in front of the building fronting Elder Street*”. The proposed Colonnade was to be 12 feet wide and the full width of the building at a cost of £80. The object of the motion was to shelter the front door and hallway in bad weather. The motion was lost on the grounds that the ornamental façade would be covered and also the cost was too high when money was needed for other improvements.²⁶

Institute Hall: once again help was received from the President, Mr Frank Croudace, who had taken the reins on the retirement of his father in July the previous year. In August 1903 it was decided to move the remaining weatherboard building in Howe Street to a position behind the Elder Street building:

MECHANICS INSTITUTE - The large building formerly occupied by the Christadelphians in Howe Street as a place of worship, the property of the local Mechanics' Institute now occupies a piece of ground at the rear of the brick building in Elder Street, to be known as the Institute Hall for the use of members. The structure weighs about twenty tons, and was removed bodily by the contractor, M T Hoy, without any damage whatever, with the aid of a team of bullocks and wheels and tackle lent by the president, Mr F. Croudace, who also provided iron rods, etc for staying purposes. The wisdom of the committee in removing the building instead of selling it is now generally admitted, as the hall will not only prove of great convenience to the members, but also increase the value of their property in Elder Street by at least £200 It is intended to defray the cost of removal by a series of socials. The first one will be held tonight in Stoker's Hall.²⁷

By the end of 1903 the piano was fully paid for and the Institute was effectively debt free.

In February 1904 the committee recommended that the hall be extended by 18 feet at a cost of £130, the same meeting recommended £55 obtained by the sale of land in Howe street as a nucleus of a fund for the erection of a caretaker's residence.²⁸

Gas lighting was installed in 1905 and July saw the committee still debating the caretaker's cottage. Do they enlarge the hall or convert it to a caretakers cottage? A few months later it was decided that the latter suggestion was impracticable. A cottage at 59 de Vitre Street, Lambton was purchased for the caretaker in 1910 at a cost of £110/£114.²⁹ Being located adjoining the rear boundary of the institute it was ideally suited for a caretaker.

It was possibly an old miner's cottage with an earth floor kitchen under a skillion roof at the rear.

Because the cottage was tenanted through the Second World War the tenant was in a protected tenancy and was paying rent of only \$5.00 per week in 1998. With high maintenance costs associated with the very old building the Trust found there was a damaging drain on their limited resources.

The tenant was the widow of the last elected secretary of the Trust from way back and with the occupant refusing to pay a reasonable rent and the Trust not keen to have a tenant living in sub-standard conditions, protracted negotiations with the Housing Commission followed until a satisfactory alternate accommodation could be arranged.

Once vacant possession was achieved, the Trust determined to sell the property as soon as possible. Because the block was below the minimum size of a current residential block by Council regulation, the existing residential use right gave us a twelve-month opportunity in which to dispose of the property as it stood. This was achieved (miraculously) within the given timeframe.

Although the flu epidemic of 1919 hit the Hunter District hard, with a reported 494 lives lost, the Institute reported at the annual meeting on 21 July an increase in financial members to 1235. The library was very well patronized as was the billiard room.³⁰ Activities, such as concerts, in the Institute itself were mainly “*postponed due to the influenza restrictions*”.

From its inception Lambton has always received praise for the appearance of the suburb. In 1929 at the time of the opening of the Newcastle Town Hall, Lambton was described thus:

The new buildings are of neat designs, which, with well kept gardens, add to the beauty and attractiveness of the surroundings.

In 1937 the Institute was still going strong although many such institutes were struggling at this time. An article appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* on August 14 1937:

OVER 70 YEARS OLD. LAMBTON MECHANICS INSTITUTE.

To build and stock the institute an annual picnic and sports day was held. A committee was formed, and it was its job to see to it that every man working in the mines purchased a ticket for the picnic. A large sum of money was realised by the sports, which attracted athletes from every part of the district. There were fewer counter-attractions in those days. The miners' picnic was an event with its speedy pedestrians, its pole-vaulting, its quoits handicaps and its porridge eating contests.

Each colliery employee was compelled to purchase a ticket for the sports, and each member of the committee was given 20 tickets to sell. If he failed to dispose of them he was expected to buy the lot himself.

During the Second World War the top floor was rented to the Federal Government's Manpower Directorate. After the war various tenants including the Forestry Office, Postal Department, Department of Labour and Industry Forestry and the Newcastle Maritime Museum rented space in the building. During the 1950s mail was handled at the Lambton Mechanics' and Miners' Institute with the front room used for sorting of mail by five postmen.

In April 1946 we see the first signs of changes to the purposes of Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Arts when the Greater Newcastle Mayor, R. Norris, told the constituents of Newcastle that it was essential to have free public libraries throughout the Greater Newcastle area. The Schools of Arts and Mechanics Institutes held thousands of books which could not be bought today and they would form the nucleus of a good library.³¹

When the Newcastle Council started negotiating with School of Arts to make their libraries free under Council management, the committee of Lambton Mechanics Institute refused the idea although many institutes went along with the scheme including Wallsend School of Arts. Unfortunately for Lambton Mechanics Institute the Council set up their free library across the road in the old Council Chambers. This sounded the death knell for the Institute. At this time the planning for Newcastle's Memorial Cultural Centre was in motion and the idea was for suburban libraries to carry the load until such times as the Cultural Centre and Art Gallery were built. The foundation stone for the Cultural Centre was laid in 1949.

The Newcastle Maritime Society took over the first floor as a museum in 1973 just twelve months after the Society was formed. A fascinating display later in the year covered over half of the allotted space. At the same time a small display, in association with an industrial museum collection, was assembled on the ground floor.³²



Hunter Photo Bank. (163 000859)

The Newcastle Post of 19 May 1982 reported on the work the supporters of the Lambton District Girl Guides and Brownies had done, over almost twelve months, cleaning and restoring the building for use as their headquarters. The building had been neglected for some years and the accumulated debris made for a mammoth task. The troop of 70 girls had hoped for a permanent home after several attempts to establish in the suburb. Unfortunately this was not to be. After the 1989 earthquake the Girl Guides, concerned about the damage and safety of the Mechanics Institute, moved their base to Waratah.

The picket fence, that was the cause of much discussion in 1898, was not removed until 1987. It was said that being constructed of hardwood, and occasionally painted, the fence would last for over one hundred years.

The strict regulations concerning Trusts and the process of electing a new Trust was necessarily long and involved. The former Trust members were either elderly or had passed and as a result the Institute building had deteriorated through lack of money to repair and maintain the building.

In 1987 John Price was able to organise the dissolving of the previous Trust and the appointment of a new Trust under the Crown Lands Act. This gave the Trust the ability to be able to apply for the various grants that are available and pleasing to say they were successful on most occasions. *The New South Wales Government Gazette* of 20 March 1987 – page 1487 announced the newly appointed Trustees as - Mr J Price MLA, Alderman R Robinson, Mr Kevin Goodwin, Mr David Amos, Mrs Merlyn Tribe, Mrs Pam Ellen and Mrs Jennifer Mason.

The new Trust held their first meeting in April and immediately applied for a grant to repair the building and were fortunate to receive \$14,000 which enabled the Institute Hall to be refurbished and the exterior of the building to be restored. Credit was given to the Lambton District Girl Guides and Brownies who occupied part of the building and had been doing what they could to keep up with its maintenance.³³

Brian Suters, a noted local architect, was brought on board in an honorary capacity and it was due to his expertise in the restoration of historic buildings that the work was completed

At the same time, there was a growing need for a Meals on Wheels service in the district, the Trust gathered permission from the Minister for Lands to sell vacant land facing De Vitre Street to build a kitchen and after two years the Meals on Wheels Service was established and continues to service the community to this day.

Lambton's Bicentennial Committee assembled an exhibition which was displayed at the Institute for a week in May 1988. A number of discarded items found in the Institute were incorporated into the display.³⁴

The earthquake that struck Newcastle on 28 December 1989 did significant damage to the Institute and these issues had to be addressed before the building could be occupied again. Among the damage the finial on the left came down. Although not a structural matter it has left the building looking a little forlorn. The finial is still lying safely where it fell. The Lord Mayor's Earthquake Appeal enabled some work to be done and with the help of John Price a loan was obtained from the State Government to repay the Lord Mayor's loan and the balance was fully repaid by the Trust in 2016.



Monuments Australia

Plaque unveiled to commemorate the centenary and the completion of repairs after the 1989 earthquake.

The Newcastle Family History Society had many moves since its inception in 1983 and must have felt much relief to be able to lease the ground floor of the Institute from the Trustees in November 1991. The building had not had any attention for years and the massive cleaning project was again carried out by members. Due to the hard work by members the Society was able to open the library in February the following year.

When the Mechanics Institute closed left behind was a substantial part of their library, a few museum items and the billiard table. Approximately 640 books were accepted by the University of Newcastle in 1996 and two or three items from the old museum went to the Paterson Historical Society Museum. The billiard table was given on perpetual loan to International House at the University of Newcastle – the names of the Trustees at the time were attached to the table.

Mr Gionni DeGravio sent the following to the author in 2021:

Up until that time in 2001 we described the Lambton Mechanics Institute Library as: Lambton Mechanics Institute Library.

The University Library recently acquired part of this Institute Library, comprising some 640 volumes. The Institute was opened in 1867 and by 1893 had some 2,300 volumes.

The books acquired by us date from this period. A printed catalogue of the time reveals that these books are a representative sample of what was available for members to read and borrow for three shillings a quarter!

By 21 August 2003 I had collected the remainder of 20 boxes of books from the Lambton Mechanics Institute library. In October 2003 we had 150 of the more damaged ones rebound thanks to some library funding. Gionni DeGravio – Archivist University of Newcastle.

For a description of the present day Elder Street building one can go no further than Mrs Wendy Swan's description published in *The Story of Lambton* compiled by Maree Shilling for the Newcastle Family History Society and I quote directly with their permission:

The rendered building is of two storeys and erected on a bluestone foundation from the quarry of Mr Dawson of North Lambton. The façade is divided into three sections by pilasters (flat rectangular pillars decorating part of a wall from which they project) and the pilasters to the corners of the building exhibit quoin (cornerstone) detailing up to the first floor only.

The parapet surmounting the Lambton Mechanics Institute is broken by a triangular pediment (gable) and is flanked on each corner of the building by Victorian urns: (the urn on the western side is no longer in place). The roof, which is completely concealed from view behind the strong parapet, is punctuated by two chimneys, one on the eastern wall and one to the western wall. The windows are timber framed double hung sash. The ground floor windows are surmounted by horizontal ledges and are arranged in pairs to either side of the central entrance door. The first floor windows are surmounted by triangular pediments decorated with rosettes, with strong string courses above. One ground floor window states: Reading Room. Subscription 3/6d per quarter. The entrance door, which appears not to be original, is topped by a simple semi-circular molding featuring a keystone decorated with a male mask. On either side are false, fluted columns with Corinthian-style capitals.



The interior features a wide entrance hall with plastered and painted walls. The two main rooms to either side of the hall exhibit painted brick walls; the western room features a late Victorian timber fireplace, the mantle supported by acanthus corbels with a cast iron register grate. The ground floor rooms retain their tongue and groove painted board ceilings, with simple timber cornices, and the Victorian skirting boards, architraves and four panelled internal doors also remain intact.

The two buildings, the Institute Hall and the Mechanics Institute, are joined by a covered walkway, or Mall if you like, making easy access from one building to the other.

1993 saw the upstairs room leased to the Hunter MG car club. Once again it was up to the members to clean and paint the area, they were then able to decorate with all manner of MG memorabilia.



Hunter MG Club

Both these organisations have breathed new life into the 1894 building and with the help of grants acquired by the Trust it still stands proudly in Elder Street overlooking the beautiful Lambton Park and Rotunda.

It is a constant battle to keep the building in good order and to meet the present day building regulations. The exterior of the building was painted in 2001.

Recently (2019) the building's structural integrity was severely impacted when the parapets were found to be absorbing water and the front was being affected by rising damp. The parapets were covered with lead, paint was removed and replaced with lime wash, and additional moisture control and ventilation measures were done. Grants were obtained to undertake this work as well as to repaint the building and repair failing weatherboards on the wooden building at the rear. The outdated kitchen was replaced and the installation of a unisex accessible toilet was also included in the work.³⁵

To maintain a building that is almost 120 years old, built to the standards of 1904, in a condition that meets today's building and health standards is a constant and expensive battle. The Mechanics

Institute has seen some very sad times where it was empty for many years and the accumulated detritus that gathers when a building is empty resulted in massive cleaning before a new tenant could occupy the building, the Girl Guides and their extraordinary effort to clean and restore the building for their use is one example. Fortunately in more recent times Government grants have been available and the Trustees have managed to gain many thousands of dollars to do much needed work. This no doubt saved the building from demolition or being taken over for commercial reasons and no longer available for community use.

Some of the grants acquired are:

2016 - \$45,000 in State Government funding to repaint the exterior. This work took approximately two years to complete. (*NBN News* 29 May 2018). A contribution from the Trust provided the balance of the \$66,000 project.

2018 - Almost \$20,000 to knock down and rebuild the toilet facilities. Received its second government grant in as many years. A \$19,500 cash injection covered the \$23,000 knock down and rebuild of the existing toilets to see them rebuilt with an accessible unisex toilet.

2021 - \$14,000 NSW Government to repair storm damaged internal paintwork

The Trust is rightly proud of its efforts to give this beautiful Lambton heritage building a chance to live on; in so doing another generation is able to reflect and appreciate a building ingrained as part of Lambton's history.



The Institute Hall as it stands today after renovations in 1987.

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The story of Lambton Mechanics Institute would not have been possible without the generosity of the Newcastle Family History Society. They kindly granted permission to quote from Julie Keating's booklet written on the occasion of the 125th Anniversary of the building in 2019, and also the wonderful book compiled by Maree Shilling *The Story of Lambton*. Ben Engel and Wendy Swan's contribution to this book under the chapter heading Lambton Mechanics' and Miners' Institution afforded much anecdotal information that I had missed in my initial research. Mention must also be made of John Price, former Trustee of the Institute, for his help.

The many proud people of Lambton to whom I spoke about their suburb also need mentioning. The memorial gates story is for another day.

The University of Newcastle holds most of the surviving records of the Institute including, but not exclusive to, Membership summaries, Subscribers Ledgers, meeting minutes for some years, but not all, and a small collection of ephemera.

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Contributor: Lesley C Gent OAM
Member ADFAS Newcastle

ADFAS Newcastle

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