

Mount Gambier Institute: an idea that grew

Joelie Hancock

It was a visiting Episcopalian minister, the Rev Pitt Corbett, who in 1862 convinced the people of Mount Gambier that they should have an institute in their town. He had delivered a lecture to the local book club in the Mount Gambier public school on *Prince Albert*, Queen Victoria's consort.

Within a year sixty people had registered their interest. They set about organising lectures and a library and raising funds for an institute building.

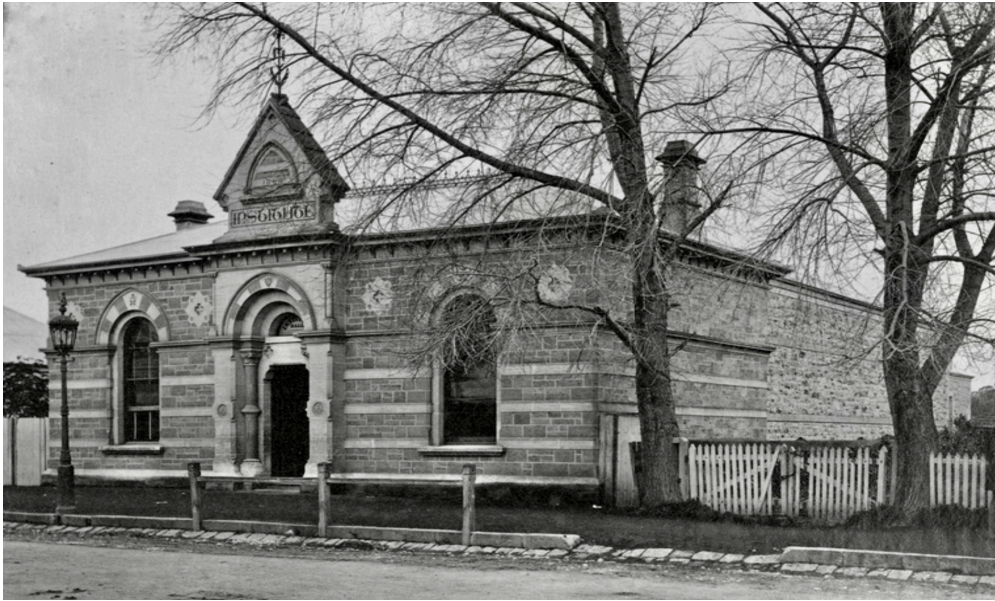
They soon had a library that was kept at A K Varley's office in the Mount Gambier West Council Chambers and monthly lectures were organised. In 1863 the Mount Gambier Institute was affiliated with the central SA Institute. This body was funded by the state government and provided support in organisation, lecturers and books.

Two temporary weather-board rooms were opened in 1865 at a cost of £157. Lectures and evenings of recitations, readings and entertainments were held every month from 1863 to 1867 but there was no room at that stage to run classes.

In 1866 the South Australian Government granted the institute a site on the Cave Reserve and a building grant of £1,000. This was only the second building grant to an institute made by the Government. Its first building grant was to the Burra Institute eight years before and its last was in 1887. A further £300 was later added to the Mount Gambier grant.

The foundation stone for the new permanent building was laid in 1868 by John Riddoch, pastoralist, parliamentarian and cultural benefactor. The designer was W T Gore and the contractors George Avey and Henry Hale. The total cost was £1,150. Later that year the first part of the building – a reading-room and a museum – was available for use. By this time the library had 950 books. The reading-room was open for twelve hours a day from 10am to 10pm.

The official opening of the ground floor library, reading-rooms and a lecture hall was in 1869. The SA Governor was guest of honour at the soirée that followed.



Mount Gambier Institute building, 1880

Image: State Library of South Australia

The Institute was going from strength to strength. By 1872 the Institute had a Philharmonic Society, drawing and German classes and monthly lectures that were attended by up to 200 people.

The Institute soon outgrew its premises. In November 1885 Riddoch gave £1,000 towards an enlargement fund. A second storey, a gallery for 150 people, a deepening of the stage and an ante room on either side of the stage were added. The Riddoch Art Gallery funded by Riddoch opened in the Institute building in 1887. That Gallery continues to have exhibitions in 2023.

Classes in literacy and technical education were added to the Institute's offerings in the 1880s and later the School of Mines provided courses there. Picture shows began in the building in 1897 and a Choral Society was formed in 1902. The Institute again required more room.

In 1904 land at the centre of Mount Gambier with a further 54ft frontage on Commercial Street was granted by the Government and a new large hall was added to the Institute building. This 1,000-capacity hall adjoined the first building and was opened in August 1907.

More alterations and additions in 1915 created a spacious public reading-room that was decorated with fine statues. By this time the library held some 9,000 books and had 590 subscribers. Special attention was given to the juvenile section which was housed in its own alcove.

The building was renovated in 1933 and the old building let for roller skating and dancing. After several years of negotiation the Institute property was taken over by the Mount Gambier City Council on October 9 1939.



Mount Gambier Institute, 2018

Image: Joelle Hancock

The Institute building then became the nucleus of the Mount Gambier Town Hall. The library remained under the control of the Institute with support of some funding from the corporation. Part of the agreement in the transfer was that when the new building was erected, suitable rooms would be provided for the art gallery, the museum and the library.

By 1955 the total number of subscribers was 731 of which 247 were juvenile members. Just seven years later there were 400 junior members. As well as providing the space for reading-rooms, a library, a museum and art gallery, the Council continued to give the Institute a substantial grant each year.

During the 1960s the number of subscribers decreased – from 1,143 in 1963 to 580 in 1968, due it was thought to the introduction of television.

As part of the state-wide phasing out of Institute libraries in 1978-1979 the members of the Mount Gambier Institute dissolved their Institute in favour of a new free public library in what is now called the South East Regional Cultural Centre.

Major alterations and additions to the City Hall were completed in 2003-2004 at a cost of \$3.5 million and there was further site redeveloped in 2011.

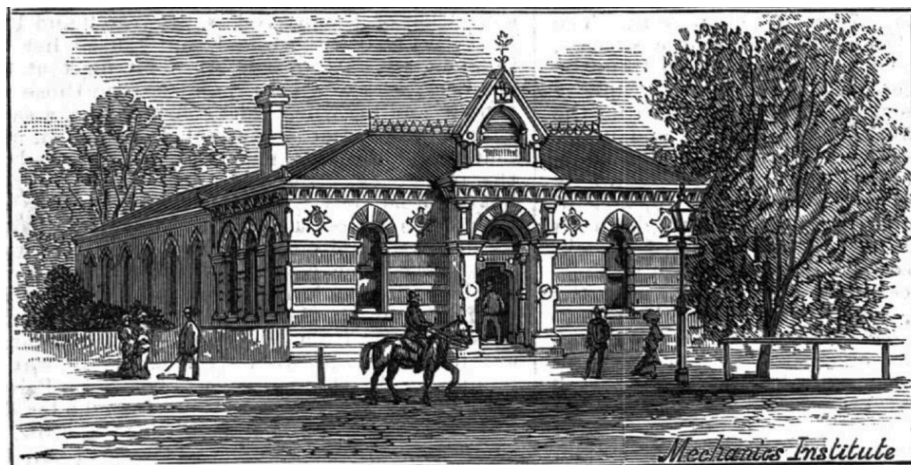


Mount Gambier Civic Centre, 2022.

Image: David Fleay

In 2023 the Mount Gambier Civic Centre still houses the Riddoch Art Gallery which in 2017 initiated the 'Riddoch Institute'. This Institute is committed to research in visual and performing arts, cultural studies, political sciences, psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, literature, and art history.

The James Morrison Jazz Academy and the Riddoch Art Gallery now occupy a large part of the City Hall complex – that began as the Institute. The Mount Gambier Library is in a new large building around the corner from the Civic Centre in Watson Street.



Mount Gambier Institute

From *Views in Gambier town, South Australia*, first published in *The Australian Sketcher with pen and pencil*, 1882 by A M Ebsworth.

State Library of Victoria image

Article first published in
Useful Knowledge,
the magazine of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria
No. 59 Winter 2023, pp6-8