

WANDONG PUBLIC HALL

AND

MECHANICS INSTITUTE

FREE LIBRARY

HISTORY

WANDONG HALL

The Wandong Hall is situated on the corner of Rail Street and Wandong Avenue, 400 meters north of Wandong Primary School at the northern end of the township. Originally known as the Free Library and Mechanics Institute, the hall was built in 1901. Mr. R Fennelly, the architect and Kilmore Civil Engineer for the Shire of Kilmore opened it in 1902. The Australian Seasoned Timber Company offered as a donation 1000 feet of timber with the remainder offered at "lowest rates". When the company was liquidated, the hall committee still owed 65 pounds.



Stephen Price the schoolteacher was also the Secretary of the hall committee and when the school residence was destroyed by fire on 1st November 1930 all the early minute books were lost. Records still on hand start on 4th December 1930 with a motion of sympathy to Stephen Price on the loss of his home and several sets of records.

During the 1930's, Wandong had about it an air of being a derelict town. The houses and the hall were unpainted and unkempt. Fire had destroyed the Anglican Church, school residence and the hotel during this time, adding to the overall downward appearance of the town. The committee operated on an overdraft during this time and fees for borrowing of books and the hire of the hall were adjusted to the prevailing financial climate.

Angus McDonald was chairman from 1930 with schoolteacher Price as Secretary. Ernest Thomas succeeded him as President the following year and served for the next 20 years assisted by Jim Patton as secretary/treasurer. Mr. Patton also fulfilled the role of caretaker when the committee had sufficient funds to reimburse him.

In 1942 war damage insurance was claimed and finally in the post war period, money finally became available for overdue maintenance and improvements. Roof paint was purchased in 1949 but it was some years before it was actually applied and the roof repaired. Gloria lights were installed at the front and back doors. Library and hall hire fees were increased to help offset rising costs the committee was experiencing.

Electricity came to Wandong in 1956. To bring this about the State Electricity Commission wanted a substantial amount of money put up as security. Angus McDonald, Ernie Thomas and Laurie Davern were part of a residents group who negotiated the sale of SEC Bonds to raise the money necessary. Laurie's father, Bob had died recently leaving a large amount of bonds in his will. These were converted to SEC bonds and sold to residents thus raising the money needed. Angus McDonald who was once again the President conducted a switch on ceremony at the hall on 6th September 1957. He served in this capacity until 1963 with Ernest Thomas as Treasurer and Jim Patton still serving as Secretary.

Angus McDonald was born 1886 and was educated at the Comet Mill School and Scotch College in Melbourne. He also served as Secretary of the Wandong Cricket Club and Football Club for many years. He was a member of the Wandong Primary School Committee for 25 years and a member of the hall committee for 65 years. He died in 1972 aged 86 years. He was often referred to as 'the grand old man of Wandong'. Those that knew him describe him as "one of life's true gentlemen" who never let a swear word pass his lips.

By 1961 the condition of the hall had deteriorated to the extent that a loan was applied for. Councillor Laurie Davern, Wandong's representative on the Kilmore Shire Council, suggested applying for a grant from the Public Works Department. The name change to the Wandong Hall came about at this time, as councils could assist Public Halls but not Mechanics Institutes. The requested grant came through the next year, but escalating costs again forestalled the grand dreams of the committee. However, the hall was painted and repaired for the first time in many years.

The hall was available for hire for parties. The Wandong Mouth Organ Band gave dances and concerts, in the years prior to the war of 1939-45. They practiced one night a week at the McDonald house. Paddy Davern (mouth organ), Mannix Davern (mouth organ), Ewan McDonald (piano /violin), Sid Sheehan (mouth organ) and Bill Forbes (mouth organ). Joe Shiels played drums with Chris Carroll on piano for many of the local dances at Wandong, Kilmore, Kilmore East and Wallan also before the Second World War. A visiting saxophonist sometimes accompanied them. Many times Lottie Campbell and Ally Vallence helped out on the piano for social occasions. During World War II a sendoff for the enlisted men was held in the hall to raise funds for the war effort.

On 22nd April 1910 Lorna Christensen's (nee Smedley) grandparents celebrated their Diamond Wedding Anniversary with a large gathering of friends and relatives at the hall. Photos from this event show the walls and ceiling unlined. The Smedley family is holding a reunion of all family members from around Australia in November 1998 at the Wandong Hall in memory of where it all started. Many of the young bucks pulled many a prank after the dances at the hall. Some of the favourites were to jack up the back wheels of someone's car or put a spud in the exhaust. The best one though was to unhitch the horse from the jinker and put the shaft through the fence then re-hitch the horse on the other side of the fence. And they talk about the young of today!

Throughout the years the hall has seen a great many varied events. Wedding receptions, dances, school concerts, parties, aerobics, craft classes, club meetings, dance schools, garden club and book club venue, church fairs and bazaars, and also as a polling booth at each election both state and federal, are just some of the uses the hall has provided.

It had been many years since the hall had been used for large events and it was looking very run down. In 1973 the committee was given a Government grant which was used to restore the hall to some of its former glory. A Nostalgia Day was held on 15th November 1987 and included displays from many different people and groups within the community.

During the 1990's with an annual grant from the Kilmore Shire council and money raised from other sources, the committee replaced the floor, installed a new kitchen, updated and modernised the toilet facilities. The hall received a new coat of paint in 1996 and new gas heaters were installed in 1994 making it much more cosy in winter months for users.

The Garden Club for many years looked after the upkeep and maintenance of the gardens. The committee is constantly working to improve and save this historical landmark. With their voluntary work they are helping to keep this icon of our historical heritage alive and well. In more recent years it is with thanks to some committed community members who have taken on the responsibility for maintaining the grounds including gardens, with regular mowing from council workers.

Currently the car park is too small for the numbers who use the hall and it is becoming a problem when wanting to hire out the facility. Since the shire amalgamations the committee has become a Section 86 committee of management of Mitchell Shire and is allocated an annual grant to help towards upkeep. Mitchell Shire is also in the process of having the hall registered as a heritage building so funding can be sourced from the State Government to refurbish the hall and keep it in good health.

Curb and channeling were completed on the road corner in 2002 by Mitchel Shire Council. Other projects to improve the hall in recent years have been a new electrical switchboard. The six-member committee of management meets once a month and has the local ward council or a council representative on the committee to liaise between the committee and council.

The craft group still meets every week and sells craft and miscellaneous items at the hall to supplement their fund-raising. The hiring charges today are still very reasonable with a cost per hour and slightly more for the hours after midnight. The committee also hires out trestle tables and seating for a small charge to local groups and residents for private functions. At present there is one regular user with a dancing group which meets weekly.

This community expo is new innovation from the committee for all the community groups to display their activities to new residents who may like to join a group or club. Local artisans have been invited to display their wares and skills. It is hoped the market will become a regular event utilising the hall in another manner and more importantly making the members of the community aware of this wonderful treasure, one of the few original buildings left in Wandong, and keeping it viable and still a major part of this community's history.