The Melbourne Athenaeum

IN PICTURES

The Melbourne Athenaeum

The Melbourne Athenaeum at 188 Collins Street began as Melbourne's first Mechanics' Institution in 1839. Originally two blocks extending through to Little Collins Street were purchased at a Government land sale in 1840. One block was later sold and the proceeds used to erect the building completed in 1842.

"It was a substantial two-storey brick building, some feet from and above the street level. It was reached by several steps …. The meeting place for the Town Council was upstairs in the large room. This larger apartment or "hall," as it used to be grandiloquently styled, was one of the most historic places in Early Melbourne, for here were held some of the most important gatherings in Port Phillip–social, charitable, and political."

The Chronicles of Early Melbourne by Garryowen, 1880, p.421

The Mechanics' Institution 1842
A drawing by ST Gill
The primary object of the Institution was "the diffusion of Literary, Scientific, and other useful knowledge amongst its members".
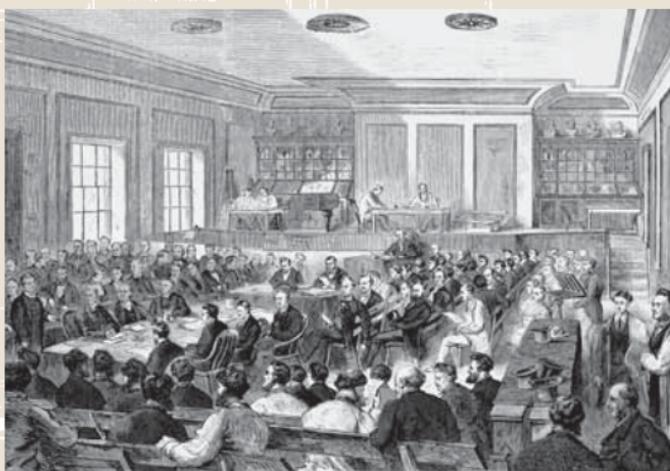*Original glass negative held by the Royal Historical Society of Victoria*

The Melbourne Athenaeum c1874
The exterior of the building changed in 1854. Two sections were added to the front, which were leased to commercial enterprises.
The photograph was taken between 1872 and 1876 and is part of the Holtermann collection held by the National Library of Australia
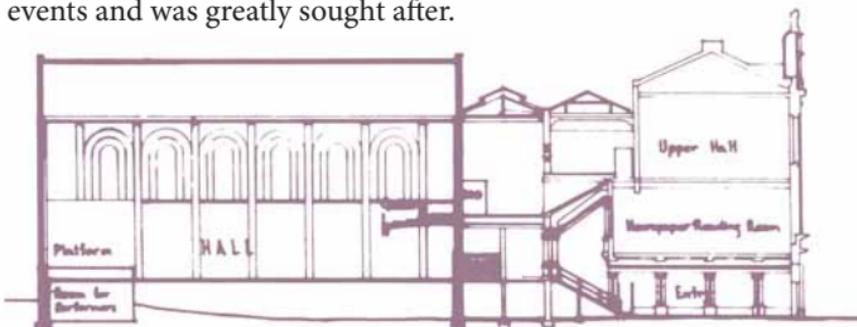

Church of England Assembly in the Hall 1870
The meeting was conducted over eight days and reported in detail in The Argus. This image shows the original hall on the first floor.
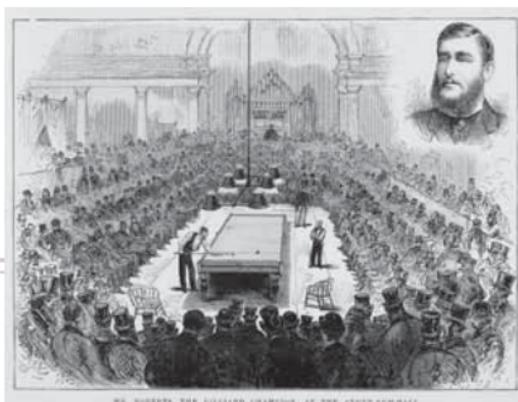*Pictures Collection State Library of Victoria*

In 1872, a large hall was constructed on the ground floor, and the library and meeting rooms moved to the first floor. The name was changed to The Melbourne Athenaeum to reflect the nature of the grand New Hall. The New Hall was the venue for a variety of events and was greatly sought after.

THE ATHENÆUM, Melbourne. A reconstruction of the section through the Hall as it would have appeared prior to alterations by Henry White.

In 1886 the entire façade was extended and in line with nearby buildings, a third storey added becoming "a lofty substantial structure … that harmonises well with adjacent buildings". Alderman Moubray donated 100 guineas to purchase a statue of Athena to be placed in a niche at the top of the building.
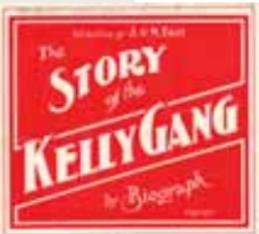

Mr Roberts - the billiard champion in the Hall 1876
Pictures Collection
State Library of Victoria

Collins Street in the late 1880s
The picture shows the Athenaeum, the Victoria Coffee Palace - built in 1880 - and the Melbourne Town Hall, completed in 1854.
Undated postcard

The Melbourne Athenaeum 1895
The photograph shows the changes to the façade that were completed in 1886. The banner across the front advertises a lecture by the Rev. Haskett Smith held in 1895.
Pictures Collection State Library of Victoria

The Reading Room c1918
"Subscribers become members of the Institution, and are entitled to the use of the Reading Room, the Smoking Room, and the Library."
1918 brochure of the Melbourne Athenaeum

The first floor contained the lending library, reading room and cloak rooms; on the second floor there was "a small lecture hall with a platform at the eastern end, adapted for meeting purposes, rehearsals of musical societies and other kindred objects". There were also club rooms for the Metropolitan Liedertafel and rooms provided for the Public Service Association. *Extracts from The Argus 8 July 1886, page 7*

The Large Hall c1920
This photograph of the Hall with a stage, curtaining and seating was taken by H Faulkner Smith, theatrical director and entrepreneur. The interior design of the hall had not changed since 1872. Notes on the original photograph state that the backdrop was dark blue; the baize cloth at the front of the stage was dark red; four screens were black & gold and two screens were coloured red with flower designs; there were 12 electric lights on each side; the stage was adorned with 24 palms and three pot plants.

The Story of the Kelly Gang **1906 poster**
The large hall was used to screen movies as early as October 1896. The first feature film in the world, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, was premiered in the Athenaeum hall in 1906, with an edited version re-screening in 1910.
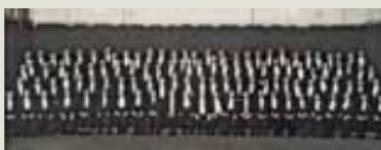*Image provided courtesy of the National Film and Sound Archive Australia*

Mr W H Jude 1891
Mr W H Jude composer, performed 'miscellaneous entertainments' at the Athenaeum Hall in 1891.
Pictures Collection State Library of Victoria

The upper hall (Small Hall) was used extensively for a variety of activities. In 1910, the Small Hall was converted into an Art Gallery. The list of exhibitors over the next decades included Frederick McCubbin, Tom Roberts, Max Meldrum and his pupils, Arthur Streeton and a host of other prominent artists and art groups.

The hall was an art gallery by day and a meeting room for a range of groups at night. The Art Gallery closed in 1971. The space is now the venue for the Melbourne Comedy Club.

The Royal Victorian Liedertafel, 1925
The photograph was taken in the Small Hall (Art Gallery). The Athenaeum was the home of the Royal Victorian Liedertafel which was created in 1905 from the merging of several Liedertafel choirs. The room designated for their use retains music scores on its walls.
From the archives of the Royal Victorian Liedertafel held by University of Melbourne

The Melbourne Athenaeum Theatre July 2010
A new theatre was build in 1924 inside the large hall of 1872, and remains unchanged. The photograph, supplied as a digital image by photographer Stefan Wilksch will be on permanent display in the foyer.

The Charles Wheeler Exhibition 1922
The Athenaeum Gallery, June 1922. The lady in the photograph is admiring a self-portrait of Charles Wheeler.
Pictures Collection State Library of Victoria

The Melbourne Chess Club 1924
A chess exhibition by Grand Chess-Master, Boris Kostich, who played six boards simultaneously, blindfolded. The event was held in the Art Gallery during May, 1924. Paintings from an exhibition by "*20 Melbourne Artists*" can be seen on the walls.
Photograph supplied by the Melbourne Chess Club

Significant renovations were undertaken by Frank Talbot in 1924 to convert the large hall into a modern theatre with tiered seating, a balcony and a dress circle. The Athenaeum became one of Melbourne's premier picture theatres, screening films from 1929 to 1970 when it returned briefly to live theatre. It finally closed as a Hoyts picture theatre in 1977.

The Jazz Singer – poster
The first `talkie' or film with sound, *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, was screened at the Athenaeum in 1929.

A verandah was added to the front of the building in 1924 and this necessitated the removal of a few trees in Collins Street. The matter was discussed at official levels and in the press.

The Melbourne Athenaeum 1939
Note Newman's chocolate shop at street level on the left.

The Athenaeum Library 1940
Mr Burgess who was employed in the library for over 46 years, retired in 1975. He worked as the night librarian for 16 years, at a time when the library was open from 9am to 10pm.

To celebrate its centenary in 1939, the library was renovated. The Reading Room, Lending Library and Reference Library were merged, creating the library design that remains today.

Library interior 1957
-a sign states "quietness required".

The Loans Desk 1962

Library interior 1962

Gentlemen reading the newspapers 1963

Library interior 1940

The Art Gallery 1943 to 1962
The Governor Sir Winston Dugan, opened an exhibition of war pictures, *The Services Art Exhibition* in the Art Gallery, 26 January 1943. The Athenaeum committee offered the gallery free of charge with proceeds in aid of the Red Cross war appeal.
Photograph from the Australian War Memorial courtesy of The Herald & Weekly Times Pty Ltd

Assistant librarian Betty Birtwistle and a library staff member viewing a portrait by Reshid Bey at an exhibition in the Art Gallery c1955. Betty was employed in the library as a junior assistant in 1949 and became assistant librarian in 1953.

Assistant librarian Helen King with artist John Loxton at his exhibition in the Art Gallery May 1952.
Courtesy of The Age

Sir John Barry opening Dick Ovenden's exhibition at the Art Gallery, 1962.
Courtesy of The Herald & Weekly Times Pty Ltd

The John Flexmore Exhibition c1970
John Flexmore talks to a visitor at his exhibition, in the newly modernised Art Gallery in the 1970s. *Image courtesy of the estate of John Flexmore*

The Athenaeum holds an original cartoon of Dick Ovenden by cartoonist WEG (William Ellis Green)

The Exhibition

The Melbourne Athenaeum in pictures was launched in February 2011.

The Melbourne Athenaeum gratefully acknowledges the work of curator Jenny Davies and the Archives team for mounting this exhibition.

The original images in the exhibition are held by the Melbourne Athenaeum archives unless otherwise stated.

Reproduction of the images for this exhibition by *all about graphics*.

The Melbourne Athenaeum: A Journal of the history of a Melbourne institution can be purchased in the library.

This exhibition was made possible by a grant from Museums Australia (Victoria) and Arts Victoria.

The Theatre Usherettes
The photograph was taken around 1932 when the Athenaeum theatre management signed an agreement with British Columbia films to screen only British films.
The photograph is printed on canvas and is on permanent display in the foyer

The Melbourne Athenaeum is a not-for-profit organisation. For annual subscriptions to the Athenaeum Library please see the library staff for details.

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The cover image is a drawing of the building exterior in 1936 created by Clifford Ormé, an architect who exhibited paintings and drawings in the Athenaeum Art Gallery in the 1920s.

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