

Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.

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Museum and Galleries Hunter Chapter



Celebrating Maitland's Libraries

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*The Aims of the Society are to
Discover, Record, Preserve, Advise on and Teach the History of Maitland and the
District*

Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.

Cover: The photo of the Maitland Public Library in 1968 is from the Library collection.

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Location: 3 Cathedral Street Maitland (opposite Bishop's House)

Lecture meetings are held on the first Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7.00pm as a forum for lectures, talks and presentations.

Business meetings are held on the third Tuesday of even months from 5:30-7.00pm.

Committee meetings are held on the third Tuesday of odd months from 5:30-7.00pm. Members are invited to attend all monthly meetings.

Meetings are held at the Society's rooms, 3 Cathedral Street Maitland.

Membership fees : \$20 (single) and \$30 (double / family)

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Editor's Notes:

Where would Australia be without its libraries? In particular, where would Maitland be without its libraries? In her 28 September 2019 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend* article titled "A Turn-Up for the Books", Jane Cadzow looked at the various contributions which Australia's approximately 1500 public lending libraries make in people's lives. She noted that people go to libraries for company as well as literature. Libraries are "centres for research, for recreation, for respite from the daily slog". In this edition of the Bulletin we are pleased to present an article by Keryl Collard, the Head Librarian of the Maitland Public Library system, in which she looks at our libraries, their precursors and their future. Ms Collard had previously presented a version of this article at the 2 October 2018 meeting of the Historical Society.

On an unrelated issue, two years ago the MDHS celebrated 40 years of existence. Another anniversary, however, almost passed without acknowledgement. In 2009 the Society almost closed down. It was due to a committed band of members that this did not happen. And though not all the ambitious goals of those members 10 years ago have been achieved, many have. And, of course, we are still here. Vivat.

A Place for the People

by Keryl Collard

A place for the people, the local public library is an important place of learning, culture and social connection in the community. A survivor, a symbol of the freedom of the mind, a source of enlightenment, the public library is a trusted institution providing free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought and ideas. Maitland City Library is a well-loved and well-used service by people of all ages and all walks of life, both now and throughout its history.

But how did the public library begin? This presentation reflects on the origins of the public library in the School of Arts/Mechanics Institute movement, with a specific focus on the Maitland area and the development of Maitland City Library.

The Wonnarua people, traditional indigenous owners of the local land, are acknowledged. It is on their ancestral land that our libraries are built and these stories are told.

So how did public libraries in Australia begin?

Early European settlers to the Australian colonies brought with them knowledge

of libraries and in particular, of mechanics institutes. There were around 2000 of these identified as being in existence in Australia by 1900.

They generally attracted a wider range of people than the name implies and were variously known as mechanics institutes or schools of art, and later literary institutes, athenaeums or lyceums.

The mechanics institute movement

Born from a radical Scottish movement aimed at educating the working class, mechanics institutes and schools of arts spread across the English-speaking world in the 19th century, following what is historically known as the Enlightenment period, a time which had engendered a passion for science, rationality and popular improvement.

Public lectures were an increasingly common mode of social intercourse and the principle vehicle for both political reform movements and attempts at what was described as a general diffusion of knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge. Meanwhile the industrial revolution was changing both the nature of work and the skills and knowledge required of manual workers and tradesmen, known generally as mechanics and artisans.

Underpinning the movement was the idea that industry and society would benefit from an educated artisan class and that a new breed of inventors might arise. There was also the belief that disorderly behaviour would be counteracted by the wholesome experience of attending lectures and classes, the institutes providing everything a working man might need to attain upward mobility.

The concept was a successful one and several hundred mechanics institutes spread across England's major urban centres during the early 1800s. A significant proportion was purpose-built, showing an investment in the nation's workforce and the priority given to the initiative.

In the following years, similar institutions proliferated across the British Empire – one historian suggests that the mechanics institute movement may well have been one of the most successful examples of British educational imperialism,

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spreading to the US, Canada, the West Indies, South Africa, India, Australia and the Pacific. The Hobart Mechanics Institute was founded as early as 1827 and Sydney followed in 1833.

Mechanics institutes in Australia

Although established with the knowledge of institutes in Great Britain, the Australian institutes were different. The new settlers generally wanted a better-educated and more egalitarian society in the colonies and Australia was not yet a mechanised society. Each new town established, alongside the hotels, churches and one teacher schools, an institute to suit their own needs, which might have included lectures, classes, voice and theatre groups, boxing matches, billiard games and so on.

They did, however, broadly share a common aim, which was:

The instruction of the members in the principles of the arts; the diffusion of scientific, literary and other useful knowledge; and the rational amusement of the members and cultivation of their tastes
(Candy and Laurent 1994, p7)

As well as public lectures and classes, the provision of books, journals and newspapers for the use of members was a key function of schools of arts and mechanics institutes in Australia. Frequently, an institute had a library before it had a building in which to house it. Elaborate book box schemes developed where books were exchanged and passed around between different institutes. A government subsidy was available to schools of arts for the upkeep of the collection. Indeed, the library function grew to be so important that schools of arts, especially after the turn of the century, were often known as literary institutes.

(I am indebted to Catherine Freyne's account of the school of arts movement in The Dictionary of Sydney for this overview of the movement.)

Mechanics institutes in Maitland

More than 70 of these institutes are listed in the Hunter Valley. Research indicates that five schools of arts were constructed in the Maitland area, the

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buildings still in existence.

Maitland City Library records show that a Mechanics' Institution and Subscription Library began operation in Maitland as early as 1839, 15 years before a building specifically for this purpose was constructed. The *Colonist* newspaper reported that the opening lecture was delivered by the Rev Robert Blain on 28 Sep 1839 in the Old Scots Kirk building (in St Andrews Street opened in 1832) before a crowd of '...ladies, gentlemen, mechanics, etc -all apparently anxious to witness and lend their countenance and influence to the commencement of an institution so well calculated to benefit the town and the district.'

However, 4 years later, in 1843, the organisation appeared to have run into difficulties, and was described as the late unfortunate Maitland Mechanics Institute in a *Maitland Mercury* advertisement where the executor of the Institute estate, a Mr W Lipscomb, was selling 'Books at Reduced Prices'. (*Maitland Mercury and Hunter River Gatherer* 7 Jan 1843).

Either not having disposed adequately of the collection or otherwise committed to the establishment of a library, 6 months later Mr Lipscomb was advertising for subscribers to a new Circulating Library and Reading Room in West Maitland. (*Maitland Mercury and Hunter River Gatherer* 11 Nov 1843)

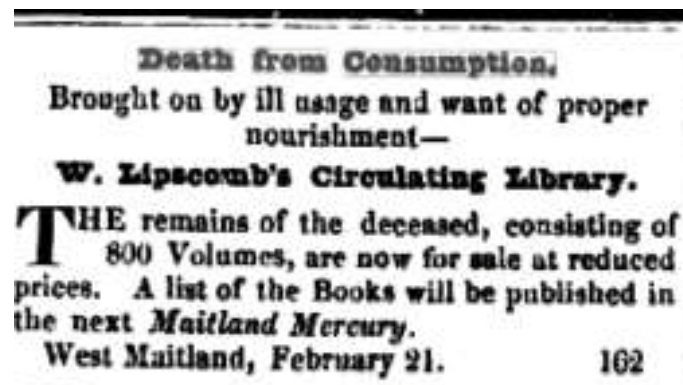
The venture required one hundred subscribers and proved to be a success. Lipscomb's Reading Room and Circulating Library was situated in High Street next door to Cohen's stores and was favourably reviewed the following year (July 1844), with a brief report in the *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River Gatherer* describing the '...reading room table well stocked with newspapers..' as well as the promise of the best English papers and magazines.

The report spoke favourably of the rendezvous for the many enterprising men in and around Maitland, in addition to its more legitimate use as a literary gathering place.

The library was closed in 1845, coinciding with the death of Mr Lipscomb's brother from consumption. An advertisement in the *Maitland Mercury* appears to have conflated the causes of death for Mr Lipscomb's brother with the closure

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of the library, its death brought on by ill usage and want of proper nourishment.
(*Maitland Mercury and Hunter River Gatherer* February 1845)



West Maitland School of Arts

Ten years later (1854), the West Maitland School of Arts was constructed in Victoria Street and was to remain in operation for 85 years.

There are a number of newspaper reports detailing the half-yearly or annual report of the West Maitland School of Arts. An 1860 catalogue and two reports in the Maitland City Library collection (1913 and 1919) provide an insight into operations and matters of interest.

The 1860 catalogue of works includes the objects and membership of the Institution

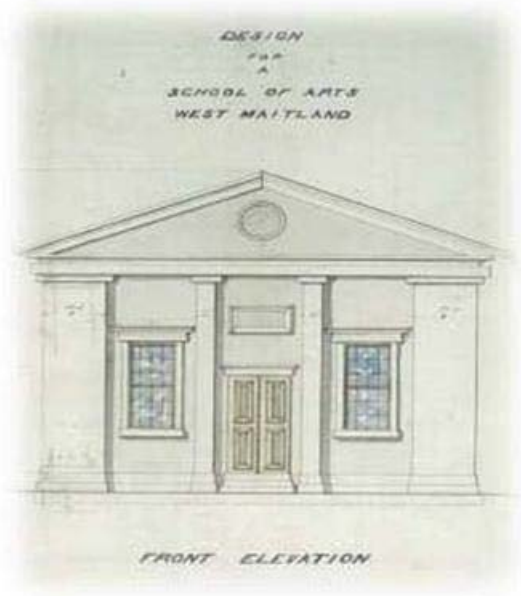
Its purpose (as stated in the objects of the institution) was for ' the mental and moral improvement and rational recreation of its members.' It included a Library and Reading Room, held Lectures and Readings, and encouraged the Formation of Classes.

You couldn't just walk in and use the resources for free - persons desirous of joining the Society had to be nominated and seconded at a Committee meeting and approved or rejected by a majority of the votes of those present. Membership was admitted on the payment of an entrance fee of 2 shillings and sixpence, in addition to subscription fees of 12 shillings *per annum*, payable half-yearly in advance from the date of entrance.

The catalogue was reasonably extensive and covered Theology, Mental and Moral Sciences, Physical Sciences including Natural History, History and

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Biography, Voyages and Travels, Geography, Poetry and Drama, Fiction, Miscellaneous Literature, Periodicals, etc



West Maitland School of Arts Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland

So what did miscellaneous literature contain? Dr L Beecher's Lectures on Intemperance, Confessions of an English Opium Eater, Facts for Everybody- Things not Generally Known and more!

In 1861, there were 284 members of the Institute, a satisfactory increase of 40% as noted in the Committee's half yearly report. It is estimated that the population of Maitland around this time was 5,000, so about 5% of the community were members. Committee meetings were being held weekly and lasted from 7.30pm sometimes to 9 or 10pm.

In 1883, the half yearly report indicated the Institution was in a 'very flourishing and prosperous position' with 300 members and over 5000 items in its collection and 3000 loans recorded. There were an enormous number of newspapers available, from *Punch* to the *Wilcannia Times*. Mr R Jacob was reported as saying he was surprised to see so many larrikins employing themselves elsewhere on the streets when they could, for a small sum, go to the institution and improve their minds.

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It seems that the larrikins were not only on the streets – a Mr Menkens said he had been accused of causing a disturbance at the last half-yearly meeting by bringing in a number of new members in order to turn out the old fogies. Of course, he denied doing anything of the kind. (3 May 1883 *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*).

50 years on

Fast forward 50 years to 1919 and an annual report from that year tells us, that there were 17,000 items in the lending collection, two first class billiard tables, a chess and draughts room and new fiction was added every fortnight. There were memberships for the wives and daughters of full annual members, as well as for widows and single women not residing at their parent's home. There were complaints about mutilated literature and missing magazines and the Committee appealed to members to assist in 'stamping out the evil' by reporting any person seen removing papers from the room.

Another matter which had become 'most pronounced ... is that of members writing their comments and criticisms in the Library books. Indeed, the Committee come down heavily on such activities - Instead of indicating cleverness, as some would assume, it displays gross ignorance and a want of refinement and good breeding, and as strangers to the town are drawing attention to the evil the Committee kindly asks members to refrain from the practice and so enable visitors to carry away a good impression of the people generally'.

This was interspersed with advertisements for lady's corsets, freckle wax, hair restorer and worm powders. Funeral Directors Fry Brothers advertised their manufacture of furniture and encouraged those contemplating matrimony to seek a quotation for furnishing their nest.



Reading room West Maitland School of Arts Image: University of Newcastle Cultural Collections



West Maitland School of Arts 1930 flood Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland

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The flood of 1930 no doubt contributed to some difficulties for the West Maitland School of Arts. A newspaper in Oct 1932 reported the property was sold and preparations for the Institution to move to the upper floor of the Pastoral Chambers in High Street were being made. The building had formerly housed the Masonic Lodge and the Technological Museum.



East Maitland Mechanics Institute 1859 Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland Chambers Collection



East Maitland Mechanics Institute 1978 Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland

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East Maitland Literary Institute 1994 Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland

The buildings were used for weddings, parties, anything. (Preparations for a c1890 ball)

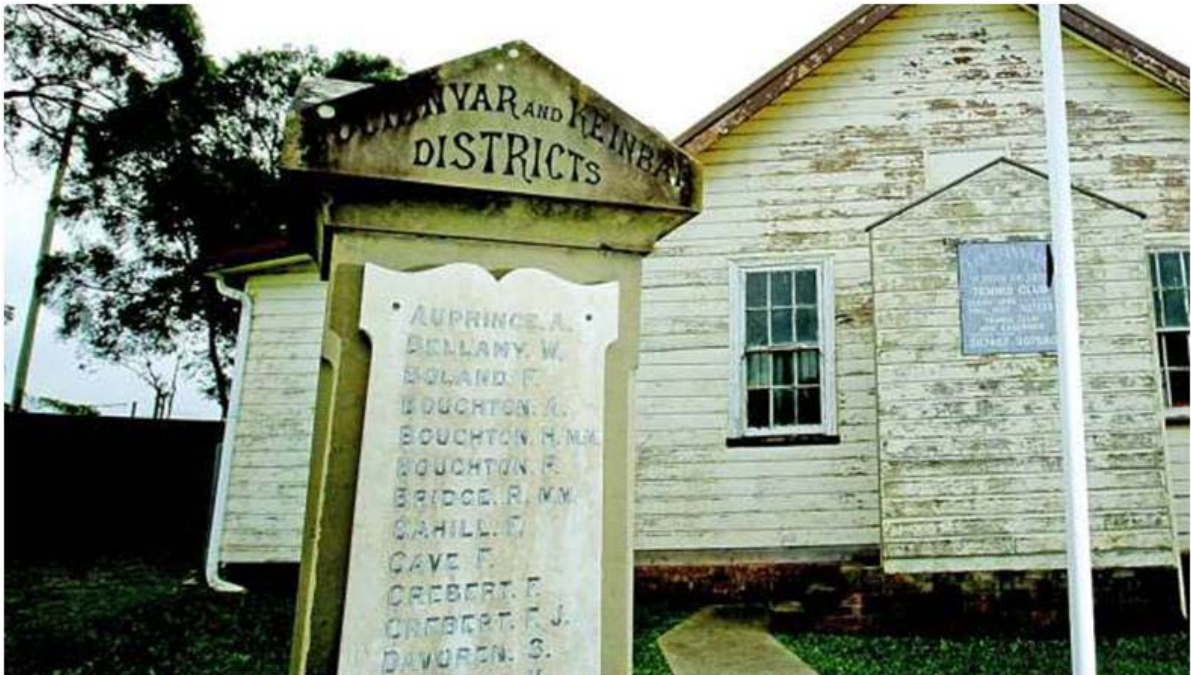




Morpeth School of Arts 1860 Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland



Largs School of Arts est 1878



Lochinvar School of Arts est 1905 Image: Courtesy of *Maitland Mercury*

Public libraries

In the new century most of the schools of arts libraries across NSW were in a poor state, with random, increasingly shabby collections of light fiction, low membership and many were in financial difficulties. In 1912 a committee was set up to examine whether the 10,000 pound subsidy paid annually by the NSW Government to schools of art and similar institutions was justified. The committee determined that it wasn't – book collections were meagre, especially non-fiction, and services were limited. The committee recommended phasing out the subsidies in metropolitan areas and municipalities, and the takeover of schools of arts by local authorities in accordance with practice by large cities around the world where public libraries were maintained and controlled by local government.

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However, powerful local lobbying prevented these recommendations from being implemented and government subsidies to schools of art continued until the 1930s.

In the mid 1930's, the Australian Council on Educational Research and New York's Carnegie Corporation (which had an interest in Australian education) conducted a survey of Australian libraries. The result was the highly critical Munn-Pitt report of 1935 – it found what was described as 'wretched little institutes which have long since become cemeteries of old and forgotten books'. The report galvanised the free library movement and led to the introduction of new public library legislation in all Australian states, with the NSW Public Library Act being passed in 1944. Over the following decade and a half, the library collections of schools of arts were taken over by municipal councils.

Factors impacting on the closure or conclusion of the schools of art movement included diminished government funding during the depression years, expansion of formal adult education systems (such as the WEA) and proliferation of licensed clubs (meaning fewer people making use of the institute's revenue raising billiard tables). Meanwhile, recreational interests were increasingly captured by movie theatres and later by television. As populations grew, more specialised community services and facilities developed and new council-run public libraries with up-to-date collections and trained staff made the older, more limited collections of the institute's subscription libraries redundant.

However, for close to a century the schools of arts and mechanics institutes contributed to the social, recreational and educational lives of their communities. Their legacy can be seen not only in our local public libraries and neighbourhood centres, but the technical college education system as well.

Maitland Council adopted the NSW Library Act 4 May 1945, being the 30th council in NSW to do so. Maitland Library opened in Dec 1946 (72 years ago), operating initially from the former Australian Joint Stock Bank at 248 High Street, an impressive building designed by WJ Pender and later known as Maitland Cultural Centre.

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The Premier, Mr WJ McKell, in officially opening Maitland's public library, said that a community which had no place for art or culture was not civilised. He said he looked forward to the time when there would be a chain of such libraries throughout the State, each associated with an art gallery, a civic orchestra or community centre, bringing these good things which for too long had been missing from Australian life.

He heartily congratulated Maitland Council on establishing the library, on appointing a qualified librarian to ensure its success, and on being able to obtain such a magnificent building.

The Mayor, Ald HT Skilton, said they were all proud to be associated in the foundation of the library, which henceforth would play an important part in the life of the city.

After expressing appreciation of the Government's action in subsidising the library, the Mayor said the way was now open for generous and civic minded citizens, of whom there were many in the community, to give further assistance by means of donations, endowments and gifts. This would be an excellent way, he said, of demonstrating their tangible appreciation and pride in the institution.

The Mayor told the Premier that the building had been purchased by council for 2,500 pounds and a further 1000 pounds had been spent on renovations to fit it for use as a public library.

Schools of Arts at East and West Maitland and Morpeth were praised for the work they had done through the years. The trustees of the West Maitland School of Arts had been of considerable assistance in making a gift of 1000 pounds towards the establishment of the new library.

In his address, the Premier said the Government realised the importance of catering for the educational and cultural needs, not only of school children, but also of the people as a whole. The most effective channel for this purpose was by means of books and libraries.

"The public library system is the means of unlocking to each and everyone the treasury of accumulated knowledge, the gems of literature, reproduction of works of art, and even recorded music of great composers," he said.

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He said that the present Government was aware of the importance of libraries, which was demonstrated by the fact that in the midst of war it proclaimed financial provisions of the Library Act operative from January 1, 1944. This meant that councils adopting the Act and maintaining sufficient library services would receive assistance from the Government.

The first Librarian, Mr James Allison, spent almost 1000 pounds establishing the collection, and a similar sum was to be spent annually on supplementing the library. Opening hours were noon to 4.30pm and 7 to 8pm on week-days and from 10am to 12.30pm on Saturdays (30 hours a week).

A charge of 3 shillings per week was made for fiction, but other books could be borrowed free of charge. The first library card was issued to a 13 year old boy named Mark O'Rourke who was present at the official opening of the library. A student at the Marist Brothers High school and a keen reader, his father was the manager of the Rural Bank, situated just down the road from the library. This card was given to the Library in 2003 by Mr O'Rourke (57 years after he first joined)! After its first year of operation, Maitland Library had 2,500 members, a collection of almost 4,000 books and loans of almost 50,000.

Miss Cribb and the expansion of the library network

James Allison was succeeded by Mavis Cribb as Librarian in Charge in 1949. Miss Cribb was a dynamo and a network of branches followed in reasonably quick succession, including establishment at East Maitland in 1949, Morpeth in 1954 and Rutherford in 1961.

East Maitland Library was established in the East Maitland Literary Institute in Banks Street, opening in September 1949. It had been originally scheduled to open in June, but this had to be postponed because of the flood in that year.

In 1953, a public appeal commenced to raise funds for library development and the purchase of a bookmobile. A small commercial vehicle was purchased for £1000 and equipped with children's books, subsequently providing service to 19 schools in the LGA that lacked libraries. Collections and services for children were an important part of the public library offering.

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By 1954 membership had risen to over 10,000 and loans had more than doubled to 105,000 across the Maitland LGA.



Miss Mavis Cribb (second from left) Image: Maitland City Library

Morpeth Library 1954

A new library branch was opened at Morpeth in July 1954. Located in the Morpeth Courthouse, £100 on was spent on shelving, partitions and renovations to transform the courtroom for use as a library with a collection of 1,000 items. This library was staffed by volunteer members of the Maitland branch of the CWA who lived at Morpeth.



Morpeth Library est 1954 Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland

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Impact of the 1955 flood

In February 1955, Maitland Library closed temporarily after losing an estimated 90% (over 8,000 items) of its collection in the devastating 1955 flood. East Maitland was also closed due to a reported eleven feet of flood water entering the building.

Collections and donations from the community and libraries across NSW, including the University of Sydney and the Library Board of NSW allowed the library to re-open with a reduced book-stock. The repair bill was estimated at £7,000 and it took more than a fortnight to clear two and half feet of mud from the Maitland Library premises.

There were no recorded minutes of the Library Committee during February or March in 1955. In the April minutes, it was noted that the City Librarian and staff were to be congratulated on their devotion to duty during the flood period and in restoration work following the flood. Thanks were also given to the 47 institutions and individuals who had contributed funds or books. It was also noted that the Bank Street premises at East Maitland be permanently closed.



Maitland Library in 1955 Image: courtesy of Peter Bogan



New East Maitland Library 1957 and Rutherford Library 1960

Meanwhile, planning for a new civic centre on the corner of Newcastle Road and George Street was taking place. This opened in 1957, housing the East Maitland library, a baby health clinic and an Electricity and Gas showroom.

By 1959, loans had risen to 150,000 and collections had tripled in size (30,000). A library for the growing western suburbs of the city was opened in the Rutherford East Mall Shopping Centre in September 1960 at a cost of £6,800 and a collection of 5,000 items. (operated for 40 years from this place, described as a small dingy space).

A new library for Maitland

In 1962, following an inspection, the Library Board of NSW recommended better accommodation for Maitland Library. The architecture firm Bunning and Madden was appointed in July 1964 to advise on the suitability of sites for a new library, including near Belmore Bridge, in Church Street and also in East Maitland. It was considered that the Belmore Bridge site lent itself to an attractive building which would continually be in the public eye. It was also considered that the library would be a symbol of pride, showing Council as a progressive and forward thinking organisation.

Our records show that the decision to build Maitland Library was vigorously debated by the Council of the day, actually developing into one of the hottest

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civic issues of 1966. The Mayor of the time, Alderman J Wolstenhome, said that no matter had received more consideration by Council in recent years than the new library building and the site where it was to be situated. He was reported by the Newcastle Herald as asking for the 'library venture' to be accepted by Maitland residents as 'tangible evidence' of Council's faith in the future of the city.

Maitland Library was designed by Walter Bunning (also the architect of the Australian National Library in Canberra, which opened in the same year 1968). In fact, a newspaper article at the time, reported Alderman N. Blake, Vice-Chairman of the Maitland City Council Finance Committee, as saying many of the National Library's striking features had been translated on a smaller scale to the Maitland Library design.

The foundation stone was unveiled by the Member for Maitland and Minister for Transport Mr Milton Morris on 6 May 1968. At the time, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the library would be a 'show place' for Maitland. The *Newcastle Herald* reported that 400 people attended the unveiling of the foundation stone, including dignitaries, community leaders and school children. After its opening, Maitland Library was viewed as the cultural centre of the city, a major attraction enhancing the city's architecture. It was certainly big news – we have found more than 30 newspaper reports in our archives detailing the development, fit-out and opening of the library.

Miss Cribb commented that the library wanted to move with the times. Indeed the new library offered increased space for developing collections and hosting activities, being close to 10 times the capacity of the original library. The cost of the building was estimated at \$188,000 (this equates to about \$2.2 million today) and much was made of the fact it was to be air-conditioned.

Contemporary newspaper articles described the library as ultra-modern, indeed one of the most modern in Australia. It now stands as a rare example of post-World War 2 modernism in the centre of Maitland, maintaining a high degree of integrity in its modernist design and architecturally significant as a custom designed community facility.

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Tribute was paid to the Friends of the Library who had raised \$10,000 to contribute towards the building. The Maitland Lions Club also contributed \$10,000 to construct the fountain at the front of the library site.

The fountain is still operational, but lots of things have changed since 1968. The *Mercury* reported that the new library could accommodate the 'new corners of knowledge', which included films, slides, tape recordings and records. Tape recordings and audio cassettes have come and gone, to be replaced by compact discs which have been replaced by downloadable digital music. Videos came and went, replaced by DVDs and streaming movies. Many resources are now available online rather than in print and so it goes.

As Miss Cribb predicted, the library has indeed moved with the times and the changing needs and expectations of its community.

Miss Cribb was acknowledged as a central figure in Maitland's cultural life, instrumental in introducing a variety of cultural and educational activities in Maitland. She retired in 1978, 10 years after the new Maitland Library opened and after 29 years as City Librarian. She was made a Freeman of the City in 1994 for her outstanding contributions to community life. It was said that she taught people to think outside the little square they lived.



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Bookmobile 1975

Agitation for a better mobile service took place throughout the sixties and into the seventies. In 1975, a new Bedford truck (a big change from the modified Kombi van used from 1964) allowed an expansion of the library's mobile service. With a capacity more than double the size of its predecessor, this was an effective way to deliver library services to schools and new communities in the Maitland area.



Bookmobile service est 1955 Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland

Thornton Library 1999

The growing population of the city led to a further expansion of the library network -a new purpose built facility was opened at Thornton in July 1999 and renewal of facilities was planned for Rutherford and East Maitland.

Morpeth Library closed in June 1999 after a SLNSW report deemed it sub-standard and uneconomical to continue.



Thornton Library est 1999 Image: Maitland City Library Picture Maitland

A time of change

It was during the 1990s and the turn of the century that new technologies started to change the way libraries developed their collections and delivered their services. Card catalogues were replaced with online catalogues, manual management of membership and borrowing was streamlined with library management software packages and scanning equipment. The introduction of public access computers with free internet and email expanded service into new territories.

The missions and programs of public libraries also started to change. No longer simply guardians of collections or book repositories; libraries began to identify the critical roles they were playing in the intellectual engagement and cultural enrichment of local communities in their planning and program development.

Rutherford Library 2004

In 2001, plans were made for new library facilities to cater for the rapidly growing population in the eastern and western catchments of the city. A new facility was opened in Rutherford in June 2004, more than 4 times the size of the previous location in East Mall.

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East Maitland Library 2004

A new library at East Maitland, opened also in 2004, was an outcome of Council's commitment to provide community services and facilities for its rapidly growing population. More than 3 times the size of the previous buildings located on the New England Highway and in High Street, the new building won a Lower Hunter Civic Design in 2005.



East Maitland Library est 2004 Image :Maitland City Library

Connecting with our community

The value of Maitland Library lies not just in its built history, but in the way the library's services connect the community with reading, information, ideas, learning, skills and new experiences. One of the key elements of our service is actively participating in the life of the community by coming out of the buildings we're associated with and meeting people where they're at – popping up at festivals and shopping centres, storytelling in early learning centres around the city, presenting speakers in cafes or historic buildings and providing services and collections online.

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Almost half of our community (over 45%) are library members, over 5,000 people visit library branches each week and similar numbers use the library's digital services and participate in library programs offsite, such as children's story-time and Look Who's Talking.

With almost half a million loans and almost 20,000 program participants each year, Maitland City Library is exceeding the NSW state average for engagement with collections and programs. The library is playing a key role in the intellectual engagement and cultural enrichment of the community through its services, collections and programs, as well as enabling literacy and lifelong learning.

Our Look Who's Talking program bears some similarity to the public lectures characterising the beginning of the school of arts movement in its breadth and diversity of range. For more than a decade, the Look Who's Talking program has been connecting local audiences with some of Australia's finest writers and thinkers and contributing significantly to community engagement and enrichment.

In fact, the success of the Look Who's Talking program has seen it recognised as a best practice model in the public library sector. Its longevity demonstrates the Library's strong commitment to embedding and supporting a culture of learning in the community. The program has gained a reputation that reaches beyond the boundaries of Maitland and the Hunter region. It has been described by participants as a valuable contribution to the intellectual life of the city with appreciation of the opportunity for stimulation of thought and expansion of experience.

Also as a memory institution, the Library is not defined just by the substance of our buildings or our collections, we are also rich in insights into the community which we serve and of which we are part -who we are, and the stories we tell, the memories we create.

A place for the people

People have been predicting the redundancy and demise of public libraries, books, and reading for decades. The end of print books and replacement by

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eBooks, the use of Google for all information needs. The symbolic and practical importance of libraries as community spaces where people meet, share and learn is continuing to expand. Whilst we are experiencing a period of digital revolution, our library buildings remain a critical place of community connection, essential to the cultural and social fabric of the community

In a way, the community and social focus, ownership, pride and imperative for investment in public libraries is not far removed from that which led to Australian communities and their state governments investing in mechanics' institutes and schools of arts in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This year – 2018 – represents a 50 year milestone for the Maitland Library building and has given us opportunities to reflect on the past. Milestones are points to which we are summoned to return, from which we learn and deepen our understanding, and through which to rededicate ourselves to the pursuit of goals that will outlive us.

The Library is a well-loved and well-used service by people of all ages and all walks of life, both now and throughout its history.

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