

Heritage Overlay No.: 115
Citation No.: 404
Place: Rockbank Community Hall

Other Names of Place: Rockbank Mechanics' Institute
Location: Leakes Road, Rockbank. (Lot 3, LP 7311)
Critical Dates: c.1920
Existing Heritage Listings: None
Shire of Melton Historical Themes: 'Community'
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The Rockbank Mechanics' Institute / Community Hall, Leakes Road, Rockbank, has significance as an important social centre for the local community, and as a mostly intact example of an interwar hall building.

The Rockbank Mechanics' Institute / Community Hall is architecturally significant at a LOCAL level (AHC D.2). Although the front flat roofed, brick toilet wing has been introduced and does not enhance the significance of the place, the hall still demonstrates original design qualities for an interwar building. These qualities include the long gable roof form clad in green painted and lapped galvanised corrugated steel and the broad eaves. Other intact or appropriate qualities include the horizontal timber weatherboard wall cladding, regular bays of

timber framed double hung windows at the sides, and the decorative gable infill (timber brackets and timber shingling).

The Rockbank Mechanics' Institute / Community Hall is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A4, B2). It expresses the movement for education and self improvement, and an informed participatory democracy which swept across Victoria in the latter nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century, as well as a need for facilities for entertainment and community life in rural towns. It also represents community life in an era before electronic communication and the motor car became widespread, and when municipalities responsibilities were limited to provision of physical infrastructure services.

The Mechanics' Institute / Hall has played an important role in the story of Rockbank social life, and in the development of its learning, culture, entertainment, celebration, commemoration, and community groups.

The building, with its distinctive inter-war architecture, also expresses a major era of growth in the Rockbank district and township following the break-up of the massive Clarke estate. It is one of only three remaining buildings (with the post office, and a private dwelling) of eight that represented the core of the town in the late 1930s. Its context of sugar gums and peppercorn tree plantings also contributes to this historic context.

The Rockbank Mechanics' Institute / Community Hall is socially significant at a LOCAL level (AHC G.1). It is recognised and valued by the local community of cultural and recreational reasons.

Overall, the Rockbank Mechanics' Institute / Community Hall, Leakes Road, is of LOCAL significance.

Description:

The Rockbank Community Hall, Leakes Road, Rockbank, is set close to the road. The horizontal timber weatherboard interwar hall building is characterised by a long gable roof form clad in green painted and lapped galvanised corrugated steel. At the rear is an additional gable that houses the kitchen/supper area. An introduced flat roofed brick toilet block at the front detracts noticeably from the significance of the building.

Internally the timber floors, lining boards, and ceiling all appear to be in good condition. The stage and decorative arch are still intact, as are the original air vents in the walls. The kitchen facilities are in good condition and the toilet block at the front is fairly new.

Broad overhangs are a feature of the early hall, as are the regular bays of timber framed double hung windows. Early features of the design include the decorative gable infill of timber brackets and timber shingling, which is in poor condition. The horizontal bank of timber framed windows in the gable end may have been introduced as were the four brick buttresses along the south side. The new skillion entry porch is very unsympathetic.

Its setting close to the road enhances its contribution to a small historic precinct in Rockbank. It is one of three old buildings, which includes an adjacent turn of the century era double-fronted weatherboard house, and the Rockbank General Store / Post Office, which although significantly altered, includes an early-mid twentieth century corrugated iron shed set on the

road. It also has a context of old trees, including an avenue of sugar gums, adjacent peppercorn trees and new landscaping at the front.

History:

The Mechanics Institute Movement

The Mechanics Institute movement flourished in Victoria from 1839 to 1950.¹ It was based on the development of Mechanics' Institutes in Scotland and England from the 1820s, which were intended to educate and enlighten the working classes. The term 'mechanic' in those days meant an artisan, craftsman or working man, especially those who had moved from rural areas to work in new city factories during the Industrial Revolution. The early Institutes were usually equipped with a reading room, a library and a lecture room. Although enjoying mixed success in Britain, they contributed to the development of public education and library services.

The movement was adopted more enthusiastically in the colonies. It began slowly in Victoria but its expansion after the gold rushes population influx was rapid, especially in rural areas. Every suburb and town wanted to have a Mechanics' Institute. During the 1850s approximately forty Institutes were established, with even greater growth in the period 1860 to 1900. By 1900 there were 400 Institutes in Victoria.

The establishment of a Mechanics' Institute was often a great achievement for a local community, requiring organising committees to raise substantial funds for a building site (where this had not been granted by the Government), and the building. Once built, the committee then had to purchase books, provide a caretaker or librarian, and finance the ongoing use of and improvements to the building. 'The history of many Institutes is a story of tremendous community effort, and often, financial difficulties'.²

In addition to being monuments to local enterprise and community life, the Mechanics' Institutes played a vital role as an intellectual forum, and in contributing to an informed and participatory democracy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They provided journals and other reading matter on local, state, national and international issues, and hosted of lectures and held debates about wider issues such as Federation, colonial nationalism, defence, female suffrage, the price of land and labour.³

With the development of the school and technical education in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the need for community technical and adult education declined. As a result of the introduction of government library grants in 1867, many Mechanics' Institutes incorporated a free library in their buildings to finance collection of their books. By 1884-85, there were 257 free libraries in Victoria. However, government support and library grants dropped off in the 1890s depression.

¹ The information for this section is mostly taken from Baragwanath, P, Hodgson, J, *An Inventory of Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria*, Vol.1 (DNRE, Historic Places Section, September 1998), pp.iii-vi.

² *ibid*, p.iv.

³ Candy, Philip, 'Ex unitate vires: Mechanics' Institutes and the Federal Ideal', in Baragwanath, P, *If These Walls Could Speak: A Social History of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria* (Mechanics Institute Inc, Windsor, 2000), pp.3-5.

Entertainment took on a greater role in the 1890s, with the introduction of moving pictures, billiards rooms, games rooms (chess), concerts and dances.

The First World War had a devastating impact on many rural communities, and some Mechanics' Institutes were no longer viable. On the other hand the early twentieth century was also a time of agricultural development, and many country towns were growing in this period. The 1930s depression further limited growth of many libraries and reduced grants substantially. In response many Mechanics' Institutes were renamed, for example as memorial halls, in order to retain and attract more patrons (eg at nearby Sunbury). The diminishing role for Mechanics' Institutes and the preference for larger and better appointed halls (with supper rooms, cloak rooms etc) resulted in demolition of some small Institutes.

The advent of cars, radios, and television also provided other opportunities for recreation, learning and entertainment. The greater role of municipalities in providing library services also eroded the need for free libraries.

While over 500 Mechanics' Institutes or halls are extant, very few of these retain their original role as 'diffusers of useful knowledge'. Most are still available for community purposes, as venues for meetings, socials, civic occasions etc, while others are employed as museums, shops and theatres. Most buildings are on Crown land, and managed by a delegated committee of management, who are responsible for raising revenue to maintain aging buildings. Many of those which were originally established on private land, such as Melton, have since reverted back to the Crown, and municipal Councils.

The most common Mechanics Institute building form is the simple weatherboard gable building with iron roofs, notable for their 'honest simplicity' rather than as 'monuments of the ancients'.⁴ At the other extreme there are some magnificent two storeyed brick and stucco structures with elaborate ornamentation (as was apparently envisaged by some in Melton in 1905-10).

The Development of Rockbank

Despite the dominance of the Clarke estate, the Rockbank - Mount Atkinson area became home to small farmers in the 1850s, growing and selling hay and dairy produce in Melbourne. In about 1861 there is evidence that the Cropley family conducted a general store at Rockbank. It was not a thriving area, and in the 1870s the Cropleys left to settle in Gippsland.⁵

In 1868 the 'New Cambridge' Common School opened.⁶ A local Missen family member looking back on the late nineteenth century wrote:

"The old school was built of stone carted by the local people. It was called "New Cambridge" Number 919. There were a lot of children going then...There were a lot of houses about then and large families, and that was the only school near them."⁷

⁴ Lovell, P, 'Temples of Learning', in Baragwanath (2000), *op cit*, pp.41-43

⁵ Starr, J, Melton: *Plains of Promise* (Shire of Melton, nd), p.132

⁶ Blake, LJ, Vision and Realisation: A Centenary History of State Education in Victoria, Vol.3 (Education Department of Victoria, 1973), pp.50-51

⁷ Starr, *op cit*, p.117

In 1884, Keilor Road Station school (No.1641) operated half-time with New Cambridge (No.919) until 1886 when Keilor Road was closed. In 1906 the name of the school changed to Rockbank.⁸ A residence was built in 1934.⁹

In about 1871 a Mr Quale had a smithy, and some of the residents were trying to get a post office. It was thought that these would be the nucleus of a township known generally as Rockbank, but by some as New Cambridge.¹⁰ At the same time Mr G Missen received a licence for the Rose and Crown hotel in Rockbank.

In 1871 WJ Clarke was elected to Melton Shire Council, and in a few years became President: “*The roads to Rockbank benefitted accordingly, and a small village came into existence. By 1872 it even merited a Post Office.*”¹¹ The building of the bridge over the Kororoit Creek in Deer Park in 1878 finally put Rockbank on the main route to Ballarat.¹²

No doubt the opening of the Ballarat railway in the 1880s also benefitted the town. It may also have been instrumental in the establishment of the coursing ground at Rockbank.¹³

The 1920s appears to have been a period of significant growth and civic improvement in the Rockbank hamlet. In 1923 a ‘sports and coursing grounds’ was included among the towns attributes. In the late 1920s and 30s the town had a quarry and two chaff mills.¹⁴ In 1926 the accommodation quarters of the nearby Rockbank Beam Wireless Receiving Station were built, and the station opened in 1927. Much of this growth would have been enabled by the breaking up of Clarke’s massive Rockbank estate in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The Rockbank Mechanics’ Institute

In 1922 the Rockbank ‘Mechanics Institute’ (the present hall) appeared in the Victorian Municipal Directory for the first time.¹⁵ Allowing for a lapse of time for changes to be recorded in the Directory, it is more likely that the Institute/Hall was constructed c.1920.

This was in the final era of establishment of Mechanics’ Institutes. Between 1900 and 1920 nearly 200 were established, although only 31 are recorded as having been established in the 1920s. The establishment of Mechanics’ Institutes virtually ceased after 1930.¹⁶

By the time the Rockbank Mechanics’ was established the educational focus of Institutes’ had typically shifted from education to community recreation or entertainment. The reserves gazetted for Mechanics’ Institutes between 1900 and 1930 were increasingly being called ‘public halls’, reflecting this change in emphasis.¹⁷ However, as well as being used for social

⁸ Blake, *op cit*, p.72

⁹ Blake, *op cit*, pp.50-51; Starr, *op cit*. p.180

¹⁰ Macdonald, B, ‘History of Melton’, October 1969, p.9

¹¹ Clarke, M, *Clarke of Rupertswood, 1831-1897* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 1995), p.45

¹² Bilszta, J ‘The First Shire Council’, unpublished typescript (MDHS, nd)

¹³ Victorian Municipal Directories, 1919

¹⁴ Victorian Municipal Directories

¹⁵ Victorian Municipal Directories

¹⁶ Baragwanath (2000) *op cit*, pp.30, 34.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.34

functions and by community groups of various types, the Rockbank Mechanics' Institute had also incorporated a library.¹⁸

Rockbank township, like Diggers Rest (and unlike Melton, Toolern Vale and Aitkens Gap) had not been anticipated or surveyed by the Government. Neither is its Mechanics' Institute / public hall on land provided for by Crown grant, so presumably the land for the hall had been donated (perhaps by the locally prominent George Missen family, which was the historic owner of the larger property on which the hall is situated¹⁹), or purchased by public subscription.

As noted, the Rockbank Mechanics' Institute / hall was built at a time of considerable expansion of the Rockbank township and district. This was most evident in the immediate context of the building. In the inter-war period the number of buildings situated around the south-western corner of Leakes Road (then Missens, or Station Road) and the Western Highway (then Ballarat Road) increased from three to eight.²⁰ These included the Rose and Crown hotel, the Post Office, and the Mechanics' Institute Hall. The railway station was also nearby. Leakes Road's sugar gums and peppercorn trees may have been planted around this time.

Apart from the Mechanics' Institute / Community Hall all that remains of this former nucleus of the Rockbank township is the post office (considerably altered), the Rose and Crown hotel (considerably altered, and now the Caravan Park office), the adjacent turn of the century era weatherboard house, and the avenue plantation.

In keeping with modern demands, the hall has had ancilliary facilities, including a foyer, supper room and toilets, added to the original building in more recent decades.

Mr Fogarty was the Secretary of the Institute for many years.²¹ In the mid 1980s the Shire of Melton purchased the hall from the Rockbank Mechanics' Institute Trust. (The Melton Mechanics' Institute and Melton South hall had also passed to the Council in this period.) The day to day management of the building is now carried out by a committee of management.²²

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

The building compares with the other Mechanics' Institutes in the Shire: the brick front portion of the Melton Mechanics' Institute (1910), and the Toolern Vale Mechanics', built in 1965 after the 1884 brick original was destroyed by fire. Apparently a Mechanics' Institute was built at Diggers Rest in the 1850s,²³ and a Mechanics' Institute (apparently new) was listed in the Municipal Directory in 1922, but nothing remains there now.

Another former building with which it might once have been compared was the 1910 weatherboard Victoria Hall, built by the Melton South community in Brooklyn Road.²⁴

¹⁸ Baragwanath, Hodgson (1998), *op cit*, Vol.3, pp.841-842

¹⁹ Parish Plan, Kororoit; also Shire Map Series, Parish of Kororoit, 1892. See also Starr, J, Melton: *Plains of Promise* (Shire of Melton, nd), pp.110 - 121

²⁰ Army Ordnance Maps: 'Sunbury' (1916, 1938).

²¹ Mr Charlie Finch, *pers. conv.* 24/1/2002

²² Baragwanath, Hodgson (1998), *op cit*, Vol.3, p.841.

²³ Baragwanath (2000), *op cit*, p.9

²⁴ Curry, A, 'Victoria Hall, 32 Brooklyn Street', Essay, 19th April 1993.

Architecturally the hall is typical of Mechanics' Institutes than the more grandiose Melton one, being of simple form and weatherboard construction. It fits Lovell's comment that 'perhaps the most distinctive feature of the vast majority is their honest simplicity. Their significance lies in their capacity to demonstrate the pursuits and aspirations of communities who sought to provide places of learning and social interaction.'²⁵ Its period timber shingling, brackets, and wider eaves are a less common architectural form of Mechanics' Institute halls, most of which were built in an earlier period.

Condition:

Good

Integrity:

Mostly intact.

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay.

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

External Paint Controls:	<i>No</i>
Internal Alteration Controls:	<i>No</i>
Tree Controls:	<i>Yes</i> (peppercorns and sugar gums)
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	<i>No</i>

Other Recommendations:

- Any future changes/improvements to the building should consider the removal of the unsympathetic brick toilet block at the front of the building, the side skillion entry and the brick buttresses. These detract considerably from the original design of the building. New toilets could be reinstated at the rear of the building. Any available historical photographs should be used as a guide.

²⁵ Lovell, *op cit*, p.43.