

Braille and Talking Book Library and Braille Hall, 31-51 Commercial Road, South Yarra



History and Description

The dome-capped octagonal building facing Commercial Road was constructed in 1918-19 as a Braille Library for the Victorian Association of Braille Writers from the designs of the architects, Anketell and K. Henderson. It was financed mainly by the Edward Wilson (*Argus*) Trust.³⁷ The designing architects were notable during the inter-war years for their commercial and hospital work in Melbourne.³⁸ The decision to build the library at this time was strongly influenced by the needs of soldiers blinded by mustard gas in the 1914-18 War.³⁹

The building was described at the time as a 'dome-capped octagonal space of large dimensions, lofty and lighted from a cupola at the summit, which has a circular row of windows'.⁴⁰ There were shelves around seven sides of the library and, on the remaining side of the octagon, facing the entrance, a stage. There were no steps and matting tracks were laid to guide the blind. Handrails were placed along the walls.⁴¹ The octagonal design is thought to be based on the reading room at the State Library of Victoria, erected seven years earlier.

A majority of this early section remains intact and still accommodates part of the book collection. The high lights in the roof provide natural light in the building.

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37. Beverley Jonson, 'The Braille and Talking Book Library', Braille Library Historical Papers.
38. Miles Lewis, *Australian Architectural Index*.
39. Braille Library Historical Records.
40. *Argus*, 28 April 1919, p.4.
41. *Argus*, 28 April 1919.

Two stained glass windows to commemorate the 120th anniversary of Louis Braille's birth were placed in the west wall above the Gallery in 1929.⁴² The upper level balcony extends on all sides apart from the northern wall where two fluted pilasters mark the area where the stage was located which is now a passage into the mail room and former hall. An Art Nouveau staircase and slender timber posts support this upper storey.

Externally, the building utilises classical and Federation motifs in the unusual octagonal design. A parapet wall clearly defines the octagonal two storey section, with the hipped central 'lantern' appearing in the centre with finial. Pilasters with tapestry brick detail emphasise the classical symmetry of the design. The front entrance block containing offices and restrooms, has a Queen Anne stylistic influence and creates an unexpected juxtaposition of styles. This form is repeated in the hall off Tyrone Street. A garden, the Millicent Ritchie Memorial Garden (1939), to the west of the building is an important aspect of the landscape.⁴³

Two women played major roles in obtaining the library which, from the start was never affiliated with any other blind organisation. One was Tilly Aston (1873-1945), born in Carisbrook, Victoria, and blind from childhood. Tilly had to give up her University course commenced in 1892, because of the lack of brailled books. She was determined that other blind people would have access to such books and so helped to establish the Victorian Association of Braille Writers. Mrs. May D. Harrison, the first Secretary and Librarian, was active in the Association from the start and a marble plaque mounted above the entrance to the library is dedicated to her. At first the braille writers met in a room in her St. Kilda home. She was appointed the first Secretary at the inaugural meeting of the Association held on 27 September, 1894 in the Prahran Town Hall, chaired by Thomas Luxton, Prahran's Mayor.⁴⁴

Land in Tyrone Street was purchased at the rear of the library in 1923. Funding came from the Edward Wilson Trustees with a similar amount from the estate of Richard Gibson. Work on the Braille Hall, an extension to the library to serve as an entertainment hall, began in August 1926. The new building was officially opened on 14 May 1927. The stage in the library was removed to provide access to the Hall. However, the new building has a stage as well as a memorial fireplace with memorial stained glass windows on either side depicting Shakespeare, Milton, Scott and Dickens.⁴⁵ All these features remain intact and the stage has been converted into a braille production room. The back stage area has been converted to a kitchen and the auditorium now accommodates a large proportion of the library collection. The floor, ceiling and two sets of concertina cedar doors are all intact.

Externally, the hall is similar in style to the earlier library building but has a large rectangular plan with two hip roofed sections at the front and rear of the building. The front section has an Edwardian parapet above the entrance which has new doors. Triplets of double hung windows flank the entrance and the end walls.

42. Beverley Johnson, p.10.

43. Beverley Johnson, p.10.

44. Beverley Johnson, pp.1-6.

45. Beverley Johnson, pp.9-10.

Further land was purchased adjoining the library in 1939 and at the rear of Braille Hall in 1944. It was planned to extend the library and hall. However, some of this land was subdivided and sold in 1962, the proceeds going towards renovation of the existing buildings. There have been no further building extensions.⁴⁶

The Braille Library grew to house the largest braille collection of its kind in the Commonwealth and the third largest in the world. In 1972, with an extension of its services, it became the Braille and Talking Book Library. Later, in May 1980, the institution was established as a free Public Library providing library services not just to the blind, but to all print handicapped persons in Victoria. In addition, the Library (with a small amount of Government funding and much voluntary assistance) provides a free postal service for braille readers throughout Australia, the Pacific Region and Africa.⁴⁷



Significance

The Braille and Talking Book Library built in 1918-19 and substantially intact, with the 1927 Braille Hall at the rear, has state significance as an important public building. It has significance relating to the cultural sentiment attached to its use as a community resource centre containing a braille collection that is the largest of its kind in the Commonwealth and the third largest in the world. The library is of architectural interest as an unusual example of Edwardian architecture, combining classical and Queen Anne motifs. The hall is sympathetic in style and is of architectural interest as an intact example of a community hall built in the mid 1920s.

46. Beverley Johnson, pp.10-11.

47. Beverley Johnson, p.5; Braille Library Historical Papers.

Sources

Argus, 28 October 1918; 28 April 1919.

Braille Library Historical Records.

Johnson, Beverley, 'The Braille and Talking Book Library', a study for the B. A. Degree in Librarianship, Riverina College of Advanced Education, 1980.

Lewis, Miles, *Australian Architectural Index*, Univ. of Melb., 1990.

Analysis & Recommendations

It is recommended that this property be retained at A1 level.