

Mechanics' Institute, 136-140 High Street, Prahran



History and Description

This imposing red brick building, which dominates the High Street streetscape, has played an important role in the history of technical education in the Prahran district and beyond. Historically, it owes its origins to the Prahran Mechanics Institute, founded in 1854. In 1915, the present brick building at 136-140 High Street was constructed for the Prahran Mechanics Institute and leased to the Education Department for a peppercorn rent (then one shilling a year) for use as a Prahran Technical School.¹⁵³ The Prahran Tech. gradually evolved until it became part of the Prahran Campus of Victoria College.¹⁵⁴

From the 1870s, the Prahran Mechanics Institute had offered classes in art and design. Later, in 1908, Mr. T. Levick from the Working Men's College (now RMIT) began part-time art classes there. The following year, the Prahran Technical Art School was registered with the Education Department.¹⁵⁵ Under the direction of W. R. Dean, the Prahran Tech's second principal, enrolments increased so rapidly that in 1910 larger premises were sought. In 1913, the present High Street site was purchased.¹⁵⁶ Two small earlier buildings on the site since about 1898 were demolished to make way for the new structure.¹⁵⁷

153. L. B. McCalman, *Pioneer and Hardy Survivor, the Prahran Mechanics' since 1854*, p. 24.
154. Sally Wilde, *The History of Prahran, 1925-1990*, pp.223-224.
155. Sally Wilde, p. 218.
156. J. B. Cooper, *The History of Prahran*, pp. 317-318.
157. MMBW House Cover No. 13276.

The building was designed by the architect E. H. Willis whose other work in Prahran includes Fawkner Mansions on the corner of Punt and Commercial Roads, which is believed to be the earliest existing block of flats in Melbourne.¹⁵⁸

Ground plans of the new brick building are shown on a 1915 MMBW drainage plan. There is a 2-storey High Street building connected to another behind it which extends back to St. Johns Street.¹⁵⁹ This new building was described in the 1916 Windsor Ward rate book as a 12-roomed brick building occupied by Prahran Technical School and owned by the Prahran Mechanics Institute.¹⁶⁰ The total cost of buildings and land was 17,500 pounds with Prahran Council providing a subsidy.¹⁶¹

Over the years there have been many changes. Prahran Technical School moved into secondary and then into tertiary education. Leased to the Government until the year 2046, the building now houses the library resource centre and other facilities of Victoria College (Prahran Campus) and Prahran College of Technical and Further Education. The old-established circulating library of the Mechanics Institute, which now specialises in local history, is housed on the ground floor facing High Street.¹⁶²

The two storey building with its classical red brick facade forms a distinctive land mark on High Street with three copper domed turrets protruding from the roof. Circular vents and flag poles feature in the turrets. The eclectic combination of elements drawn from classical and Romanesque styles, with a predominance of stucco rendering in the facade is characteristic of the Federation Free Style of the early years of this century.

The ground floor has shop front windows with copper frames intact with new doors. The central arched entrance is also altered. A cantilevered verandah is a later addition composed of studded metal sheeting.

Significance

This building, which dominates the High Street streetscape, has state significance relating to its history as the early headquarters of the Prahran Technical School, a major regional educational establishment. The building has significance, also, for its association with the Prahran Mechanics Institute, an important district institution since its foundation in 1854. It is of architectural importance as an example of the work of the architect E. H. Willis. It has cultural importance relating to sentiment attached to this place of education for generations of pupils.

Sources

City of Prahran Rate Books, Windsor Ward.

City of Prahran Valuers records, Windsor Ward.

Cooper, J. B., *The History of Prahran*, 1924.

158. NTA File No. 3167.

159. MMBW House Cover No. 13276.

160. Prahran Rate Book 1915-16 Windsor Ward Nos. 11643; 1916-17 Windsor Ward No. 11667. Not rated.

161. J. B. Cooper, p.318.

162. McCalman, pp. 26, 32-34.

McCalman, L. B., *Pioneer and Hardy Survivor, the Prahran Mechanics' since 1854*, 1983.

MMBW House Cover No. 13276.

National Trust File No. 3167.

Wilde, Saily, *The History of Prahran 1925-1990*, 1993.

Analysis & Recommendations

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