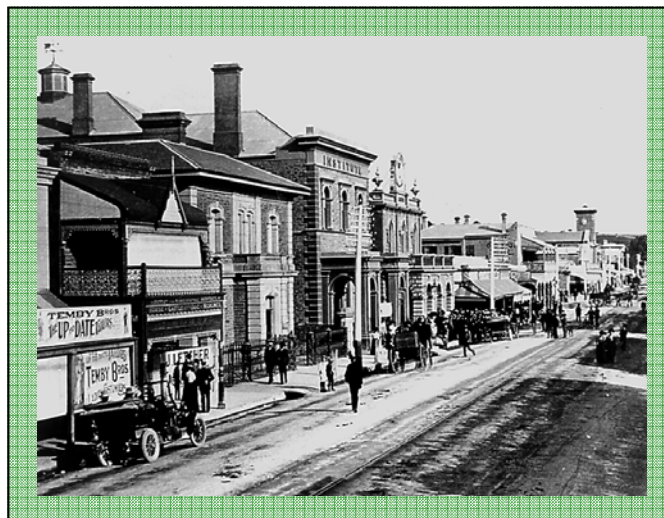




TOWN OF GAWLER

Gawler Public Library

A brief history



Murray Street, Gawler. Early 1900s

Gawler Public Library



Gawler Institute - the beginning

Gawler Public Library would not exist today if it were not for the foresight of people like Walter Duffield and James Martin. They and many other Gawler citizens were active in setting up the Gawler Institute. Mechanics' Institutes were the forerunners of public libraries and adult education in Australia.

The Mechanics' Institute movement began in 1799 when Dr George Birkbeck conducted a series of free lectures for the working men of Glasgow. The term 'mechanic' at that time meant artisan, tradesman or working man. The movement spread throughout Britain and its colonies including Canada, South Africa, India and Australia, as well as the United States.

The first to be set up in South Australia was the Adelaide Mechanics' Institute in 1838. It was dominated by influential colonists but the first committee included a builder, a painter, a grocer and a publican. Despite early interest, the Adelaide Mechanics' Institute struggled to survive and it was eventually succeeded by the South Australian Subscription Library.

The first attempt to establish a Mechanics' Institute at Gawler was led by Walter Duffield in July 1848. This attempt failed due to lack of interest but the seed was sown and eventually, in October 1857, the Gawler Institute was founded. The first committee meeting was held at the home of James Martin in Murray Street. Arrangements were then made to hire a room in a building opposite the Globe Hotel (now the Kingsford Hotel) and on 3 November 1857, the Gawler Institute was officially opened with a vocal and instrumental concert.

During the following year (1858) the Oddfellows Hall (now Super Elliotts) was built in Murray Street and the Institute committee became tenants of the lower rooms. Agreement was also reached to lease the hall above for 12 concerts a year.

Once established, the Gawler Institute rapidly gained momentum and by the time of the first half-yearly meeting of the Institute the library already held 926 volumes of which 471 were donated. Three years later there were 2,000 volumes and 250 subscribers.

The first few years saw overwhelming support for the Institute from the men of the town - women, of course, were still at home cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, rearing children, etc. To celebrate the first anniversary of the Institute a 2-day exhibition of works of art and natural curiosities was held.

For the second anniversary, the *Song of Australia* competition was held. For the fourth anniversary, a prize of 200 guineas was offered for the best history of South Australia up to the end of 1861.



The fifth anniversary was celebrated with a brass band concert, picnic and rural fete at Para Para. For the seventh anniversary an “immense fancy fair” was held on the Parklands. The streets of the town were decorated and there was a procession. The proceeds were used to begin the building fund for the Institute building. One visitor to the town was quoted to have said “If ever there is a go-ahead little spot of earth on the globe’s surface, Gawler may lay claim to that distinction”.

The Institute continued to grow and flourish and apart from the annual celebrations, there were concerts, lectures and other activities. A literary and debating society was established and boxes of books were sent out from its library to several neighbouring townships. The influence that the Gawler Institute exercised over the town and its willingness to provide intellectual stimulation and entertainment was recognized far and wide and Gawler became known as “the Colonial Athens”.

After the Fancy Fair, the push was on to build a permanent home for the Institute. During the tenth anniversary of the Institute its president, James Martin, urged that the town should make an effort to raise the money required. Land that had been previously purchased was considered unsuitable and it was divided into blocks which became prizes in a huge art union which raised about one thousand pounds. Residents were assessed for subscriptions of up to fifty pounds depending on a resident’s ability to pay. Canvassers then went to the individuals and told them what was expected from them. Then, to ensure that funds were available to start the building, about 20 of the townsmen and committee signed a

promissory note to the bank for one thousand pounds. Land was donated by James Martin and the late Thomas Martin and the plans drawn up by James Martin were adopted as the most suitable for the building. The foundation stone was laid on 13 April, 1870 and when the building was completed in April 1871, there was a debt of 1,600 pounds. To clear this debt, a vote of one thousand pounds was obtained from Parliament and another assessment of residents was made.

In 1885, a revolution took place-subscriptions were reduced and members were able to extend the privileges of the library and reading room to their families, if they wished. This new policy proved to be very popular and it resulted in a large increase in the number of members.

The Institute continued to do its work and to increase its influence in the town. The lending library grew from a modest collection to one of 10,000 volumes during the first forty years. In the Reading Room could be found all the leading magazines, newspapers and periodicals. By about 1900, the number of subscribers was just over 400, representing about 10% of the population.

In addition to the library and reading room, the Institute also provided technical education classes through a branch of the School of Design which was set up in about 1890. This provided secondary education for many people and gave them a trade. Classes in typing and shorthand were also offered and many young men and women regularly attended the various classes.



Gawler Institute Reading Room. c. 1908

Clubs who did not have rooms of their own made good use of the Institute. Over the years these included the Druids, The Gawler Chess Club, the Gawler Club, the Whist Club, the Juvenile Singing Society and the Literary Society.

Entertainment in the Hall above was varied. There were concerts, dances, band competitions, musicals, plays, demonstrations, a skating rink (1904), Gregory's Circus (1871) and a picture theatre (from 1911).



Gawler Institute, 1800s

Much of the success of the Gawler Institute can be accredited to its librarians. During the period 1857 to 1985, there were nine librarians. Mrs Hilda Heinrich was the last Institute librarian. For thirty years the Institute and its library were her domain. There are many people in Gawler who would remember her and how fiercely proud she was of Gawler, its history and its heritage. Mrs Heinrich was recognized for her dedication to the Institute and Lending Library with the Order of Australia Medal.

Another of the long serving librarians was Mr James Beasley. He was appointed to the position in 1890. According to *The Bunyip* at the time, there were 55 applicants for the position. Mr Beasley held the position for 43 years until his death at the age of 74 in 1933. His ambition was to "municipalize" the Institute with materials being available for loan without charge and with all ratepayers paying their share.

Mr Beasley lived for a number of years with his wife, four daughters and mother in the basement of the Institute and two rooms upstairs. There were stairs which led up to the rear of the building where there was a verandah.

Gawler Public Library

The establishment of a public library came about as a consequence of the universal move away from subscription libraries to libraries which provided services free to all and which were under the management of local government. Public pressure for a public library in Gawler grew throughout the early 1970s. In 1978, after a report by the Library Services Planning Committee, the State Government adopted the Eight Year State Development Programme to establish public libraries in all local government areas without libraries. By 1984, over 90 local councils had established public libraries with funding assistance from the State Government.

In 1977, A sub-committee of the Gawler Council was formed to look into a public library. There was much discussion between the groups involved, including the Gawler Institute, the Gawler Council and the State Government. Two years later, Council's Town Planner presented a report to the Library Committee on the viability of a public library in Gawler and a public meeting was called to determine support from the community.

The location of a public library was a topic which received considerable scrutiny. Various venues were considered, including the local TAFE College and Pioneer Park. Finally the decision was made that the Institute building was the most accessible. Calls for tenders for the conversion from Institute to public library went out in late 1984. The building had already been rated as a heritage building and any plans drawn up for refurbishment and renovations had to be sympathetic to the heritage aspect while also allowing for the building to serve as a modern public library. The original reading room was retained and restored to some of its former splendor.



By July 1985, the work was finished and at about that time Helen Hennessy was employed as the Library's first Chief Librarian. Two library assistants had already been employed and the doors of the library were opened to the public on Wednesday, 16 October, 1985. On 26 May 1987, two branch libraries, at Freeling and Greenock, were

opened. A result of cooperation between the Councils of Gawler and Light, both libraries were set up in local Institutes, thus avoiding the cost of providing new buildings.

During those early days, the staff were highly active in promoting the library to the community: many displays, activities and new services were organized which kept the library in the news; in September 1987, the home library service began; the library hosted film evenings for a number of months during 1989; the history of Gawler by Derek Whitelock was launched by Max Fatchen at a picnic at Clonlea Park on 15 October 1989; the Gawler business and information directory was first published; an annotated bibliography was produced which contained all the historical research material available about the Gawler area and Hilda Heinrich's collection of dolls was donated to the library. For a number years this collection was housed at the Visitors' Centre but is now located in the Reading Room together with Doctor Popham's cannon.

The Library grew steadily and by 1992 the number of registered borrowers stood at 10,000; by 1997 regular school holiday activities were being offered; the internet was connected in 1999; the poetry book *The Colonial Athens* was published in 2000; another poetry book, *Beyond the shimmering*, was published in 2003; a short story anthology, *Naming the tortoise and other stories*, was published in 2005.

Today the library is a vibrant part of the community. A wide range of services is offered. In addition to the book loans traditionally offered by libraries, there are four computers dedicated to public access to the Internet, a home library service for housebound people, non-book materials such as CDs, video tapes and DVDs for loan, an extensive collection of large print books and books on tape and CD for sight - impaired people. The local history is extensive and well used. There is a state-of-the-art photocopier that can scan and fax documents and a laminating service is offered. Regular storytelling and craft sessions are offered to children of all ages and many activities occur during school holidays.

Library stock is now 40,000 items, there are 9 staff members (filling 6 full-time positions) and 22,000 registered borrowers, approximately 45% of whom live outside the Gawler Council area. On each week day that the library is open, approximately 400 to 500 people visit. It is an extremely busy library.



Celebrating Gawler Public Library's 20th Birthday

In October 2005, a Library Depot was established at the Sport and Community Centre, allowing library patrons the ability to return and collect items during the extended hours that the Sport Centre is open.

Helen Hennessy returned as Library Manager in July 2005 after an absence of 13 years. Her plan is to take the library into the next 20 years and beyond!

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Gawler Public Library

Institute Building, 91 Murray Street
Gawler SA 5118

Phone (08) 8522 9213 Fax (08) 8522 9212

Email library@gawler.sa.gov.au

Website www.gawler.sa.gov.au

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