

State Heritage Areas of South Australia



Riddoch Art Gallery

former Mount Gambier Institute Building, City Hall and King's Theatre

Commercial Street East, Mount Gambier

SHR 10238 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 24 July 1980

Mount Gambier's Institute was one of the earliest public buildings in the Commercial Street precinct, and served the educational and cultural needs of the community for more than a century.

Tenders for the new building, to contain a library, reading room and lecture hall, were called in August 1867, based on amended plans submitted by W.T. Gore of Mosquito Plains (Naracoorte). The foundation stone of the single-storey building was laid by John Riddoch on 6 January 1868.

By June, the institute library moved to the partly completed new building. One month later work began on the hall at the rear. The completed institute complex was opened on 8 May 1869, with an evening performance in the presence of the governor.

A reading room was opened for the public in 1870, with many daily and weekly newspapers available. This service continued for 60 years, until the privilege was withdrawn because of continual abuse by some readers.

A museum was opened in the building in the 1870s. Exhibits included early coins, medals, stuffed animals and weapons and other artefacts of local indigenous people. The museum was broken up in 1875 due to lack of space, with many of the exhibits given to the museum in Adelaide.

Increasing numbers of subscribers, and the growth of the library caused the committee to consider expansion. Their decision was made after John Riddoch offered £1,000 towards the cost (augmented by a further £1,000 from Government), requesting that a second storey be added, to be used as a gallery. Tenders were called in October 1886 and the foundation stone for the new upper storey was laid, again by John Riddoch, on 19 February 1887. Under the stone was placed a pint of Tuscan wheat grown at Yahl. The crop had produced 55 bushels to the acre, and it was claimed that this wheat would create more interest in the future than a handful of coins. By June that year the extensions were complete. The opening of the new section, which included a gallery for 150 people, was celebrated with an art exhibition.



*Mount Gambier Institute 1868
Photo B 11412: State Library of SA*



Commercial Street East frontage, April 2005

In July 1890 a bazaar raised £255, which was partly used to renovate the main hall and lobby, and in the same year tenders were called to supply gas to the building.

The old hall at the rear of the building was used for many types of entertainment between 1869-1907. It was in continual use for concert parties, political meetings, balls and sporting entertainments. On one occasion a man walked for three hours in the room, making 940 circuits before a large gathering of spectators. On 26 January 1897 motion pictures were shown in the hall, for the first time in Mount Gambier.

An ever-increasing need for more hall space led to extensive negotiations to secure additional Commercial Street frontage, on which to build a hall seating 1 200 people. The foundation stone for this new building, later called King's Theatre, was laid in June 1907. The architect, Thomas Hall, carefully adapted parts of the original institute design to link this new section to the earlier central area. The passage between the two halls was roofed in 1911. Plans for alterations were approved in 1912 and the rebuilding completed in 1913.



*Star Theatre re-opening night 1925
Photo B 15202: State Library of SA*



*Star Theatre
Mount Gambier 1918
Photo B 15185: State Library of SA*

The hall at the rear continued to be used for an assortment of activities. A miniature golf course was installed in 1928 and was a popular feature for a number of years. For three years, from July 1932, the old hall was used as a dancing and skating palais, which required the installation of a new floor.

Alterations, additions and refurbishments to various areas of the building continued, including approval for electric lighting in 1924. Plans were drawn in 1958 for the remodelling of the civic buildings, the main part of which involved upgrading the old institute hall to become the Civic Hall. In September 1959 a ball was held to open the renovated hall.

The Institute's centenary was celebrated on 4 September 1962, marked by an open day at the library, and the erection of a plaque commemorating the occasion.

In 1979-80 the Mount Gambier Institute was dissolved, a new public library built in the new Civic Centre in Watson Terrace and the institute's collection of paintings, artefacts and sculptures handed over to the South East Regional Cultural Trust. The rooms of the Institute Building were subsequently used as offices and studios. In 1988 the Riddoch Art Gallery moved into the redeveloped King's Theatre building.



*Mount Gambier Civic Hall: indoor golf area 1929
Photo B 19995: State Library of SA*