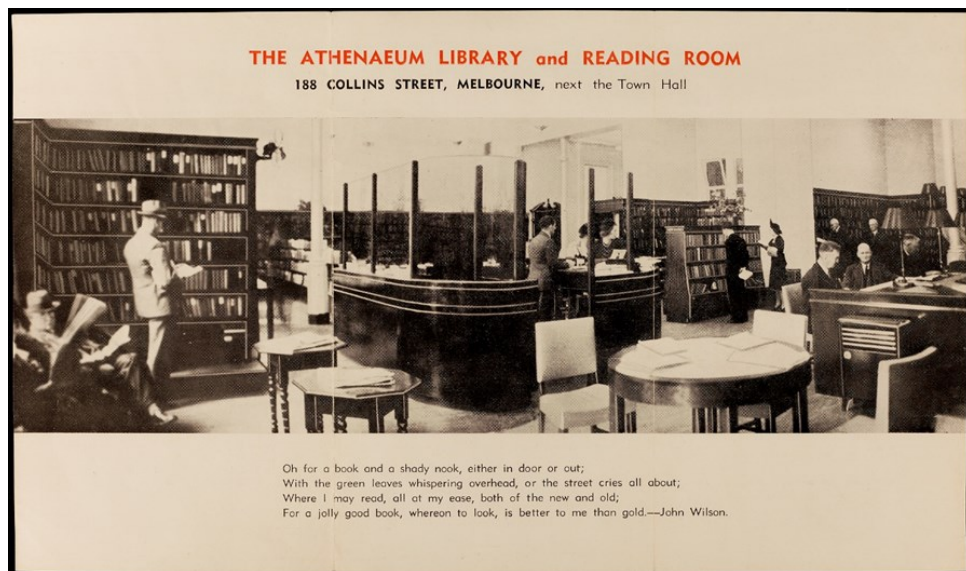




*Melbourne Athenaeum Library Brochure, 1939
(Melbourne Athenaeum Archive)*

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FIFTY THINGS ABOUT THE ATH

1. The Melbourne Athenaeum (known then as the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution) is the oldest public cultural institution in Victoria. Established in 1839, it has been operating in its current location at 188 Collins Street since 1842.



*The Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, Collins Street, Melbourne, Hamm Brothers 1842
(Image courtesy of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria)*

2. When the Athenaeum first opened, its inventory consisted of 12 chairs, two candlesticks, two sets of bookshelves, three tables, two window blinds, one pair of snuffers and a tray.

3. The first library books that were made available to members in 1840 were from the collection of Henry Fysche Gisborne. He was a leading figure in the formation of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, taking on the role as Acting Secretary, and was also one of the first Vice-Presidents. The books included non-fiction titles covering subjects such as philosophy, history, geography, mathematics and one gothic novel.

4. Its name was changed from the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution to the Melbourne Athenaeum in 1872 to greater reflect the variety of cultural activities and resources provided by the institution.

44. Melbourne chocolate company Newman's Chocolates became a tenant in the Athenaeum in 1948, leasing one of the shops at the front of the building. It sold some of the first milkshakes in Melbourne as well as espresso coffee.

45. As part of the celebrations for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the Fellowship of Australian Artists held an exhibition at the Athenaeum displaying works by artists such as William Dargie, Hans Heysen, Nora Heysen, Charles Wheeler and Norma Bull.

46. The Melbourne Athenaeum was added to the Victorian Heritage Register in 1981 in recognition of its historical and architectural significance.

47. The Melbourne Theatre Company occupied the Athenaeum Theatre from 1977 to 1986.

48. Today, the Melbourne Athenaeum is home to the Melbourne Opera Company and the Australian Shakespeare Company, and is a principal venue for the annual Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

49. Situated under the Melbourne Athenaeum's Foundation Stone are three time capsules dating from 1872, 1924 and 1991, containing objects that were buried after the theatre underwent extensive renovations and expansion in these years.

50. Currently, the Melbourne Athenaeum Library holds over 30,000 titles including magazines, DVDs and eBooks and specialises in crime fiction, biography and Australian literature.

40. The Athenaeum Library's first female employee was Alice Cooper, who was employed in 1918 as a Librarian Assistant.

41. The Melbourne Athenaeum introduced country memberships in 1921. These were so popular an entire room had to be fitted out for the administration of these loans. Country members would receive the Athenaeum Library Quarterly Lists so they could select their books. The Assistant Hall Keeper would take the packaged books to Spencer Street (now Southern Cross) and Flinders Street stations for transport throughout regional Victoria and then collect the returns. By 1970, the library had 528 country members.



*Pair of metal postal tags, used by the Victorian Railways Postal Service for delivery of library book loans to country members
(Melbourne Athenaeum Archive)*

42. At its peak in 1951, the Melbourne Athenaeum had 7000 members, including country subscribers.

43. The Athenaeum's lift was installed in 1930 and is one of the oldest lifts still operational in Melbourne.

5. The Corporation of Melbourne (now known as the City of Melbourne) was the Athenaeum's first tenant in 1843 and had its offices in the building until 1852 when it relocated to the newly-constructed Melbourne Town Hall.

6. In its early years, the Athenaeum had a museum with thousands of items managed by curator David Elliot Wilkie M.D., who was also Treasurer of the Mechanics' Institution from 1856 to 1878. The institution also had curators in fine arts, zoology, geology, entomology, botany, ornithology, and antiquities, among other subject areas.



*The Hon. Sir Redmond Barry KCMG,
George Folingsby c. 1874 (University of
Melbourne Art Collection)*

7. Supreme Court Justice Sir Redmond Barry (a leading figure in the founding of the University of Melbourne, the State Library of Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria and the presiding judge in the sentencing of bush-ranger Ned Kelly to the gallows) was a Committee Member of the institution. He also lectured at the institution on music, poetry, fine arts, sculpture, architecture and agriculture.

8. The first art exhibition to be held in the Port Phillip District by a solo artist, George Alexander Gilbert, took place at the institution in 1847. Gilbert was Secretary of the Mechanics' Institution from 1844 as well as Curator of Fine Arts and established the city's first art school at the institution.

9. The first performance in Melbourne of Handel's *Messiah* was performed by the Melbourne Philharmonic Society (now the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic) at the institution in December 1853.

10. Acclaimed humanitarian and philanthropist Caroline Chisholm was given a 'welcome soiree' in the hall in 1854 and addressed the audience on the social conditions of the miners working on the Victorian goldfields.

11. In the aftermath of the Eureka rebellion at the Ballarat goldfields, a public meeting was held at the institution in 1854 to discuss protecting Melbourne in the event of a similar rebellion arising in the city.

12. Gas lighting was introduced to the institution in 1856, superseding the candles and lamps that had been used to illuminate the building.

13. The Melbourne Chess Club, which is still operating today, was formed at a meeting held at the institution in 1866.

14. Music dealer George Leavis Allan of Allan's Music Warehouse taught singing at the institution in the 1850s and 1860s.

15. The first meeting to raise funds for what was to become the infamous Burke and Wills expedition, attempting to travel from southern to northern Australia, was held at the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution in 1858. It was arranged by Dr David Wilkie, who was also the expedition's Treasurer. Dr John Macadam, who was Curator of the Chemical and Philosophical Department of the institution's museum, was Secretary of the expedition committee.

36. The Athenaeum Theatre (in its current form) opened in 1924, replacing the Athenaeum Hall. It was designed by Henry E. White, the leading theatre architect in Australia and New Zealand. The opening show was *Dear Brutus*, written by Sir James Barrie and performed by the Melbourne Repertory Theatre Society.

37. In 1932, the Athenaeum became the only all-British film house in the Southern Hemisphere. It was the brainchild of cinema entrepreneur Frank Talbot who also led the redesign of the Athenaeum Theatre in 1924 as the principal leaseholder.

38. In 1948 the first Australian screening of Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* was held at the Athenaeum with the Oliviers in attendance. The release of the film coincided with the Olivier/Leigh tour of Australia. Olivier gave a brief speech from the stage.

39. The Fisk Jubilee singers, the first African American group to tour the world, performed at the Athenaeum in 1917 and 1921.



Melbourne Athenaeum Theatre, photo Stephan Wilksh
(Melbourne Athenaeum Archive)

29. The Victorian Horticultural Society, which was established in 1849 and is still operating today as the Royal Horticultural Society, held its monthly meetings at the insitution as well as an annual bulb show which included displays of fresh flowers.

30. In 1896, the Athenaeum showed the first films using the Vitascope (first motion picture projector). Advertised as a showcase of 'living pictures and moving scenes of actual life,' the program was screened for an exclusive seven-day period.

31. The world's first feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, produced by the Tait Brothers, premiered at the Athenaeum in 1906.

32. A film of a football match between Carlton and Fitzroy was shown at the Athenaeum in 1906, arranged by film exhibitor T.J. West. This was one of the first Australian rules games filmed in Australia.

33. The world's first 'talking picture,' *The Jazz Singer*, made in America, had its Melbourne premiere at the Athenaeum in 1929. It was brought to Australia by theatre and film entrepreneur E.J. Carroll.

34. Composer, musician, conductor and the inaugural Professor of Music at the University of Melbourne, George Marshall Hall, composed the music for a performance of *The Trojan Women* by the Melbourne Repertory Theatre Society, held at the Athenaeum in 1915.

35. Acclaimed British playwright George Bernard Shaw's play *Major Barbara* premiered in Australia at the Athenaeum in 1913, in a production by Gegan McMahon's Melbourne Repertory Theatre Society.

16. The Athenaeum Hall, which opened in 1872 replacing the original small hall, was designed by architect Alfred Smith. It measured over 13 metres long and nearly 15 metres wide and was fitted with a floor specifically constructed for dancing.

17. From the 1870s onwards the new hall was the venue for a wide range of events including art exhibitions, billiard championships, musicals, concerts, plays, lectures, flower shows, auctions, fetes, banquets and fundraising concerts.



Silk Program, Fundraising Concert, Melbourne Athenaeum Hall, 1884
(Melbourne Athenaeum Archive)

18. The Liedertafel choir (male voices) was based at the Athenaeum for more than 100 years and performed here regularly.

19. Samuel Shergold, who was employed as the Athenaeum's Hall Keeper from 1872 to 1910, lived with his wife Ellen and children on site in four rooms.

20. British astronomer and writer Richard Anthony Proctor, who produced one of the earliest maps of Mars and was a contributor on astronomy to the Encyclopedia Britannica, lectured at the Athenaeum in 1880.

21. The first demonstration of electricity in Melbourne took place at the Athenaeum in 1882. Electric light was on display for 15 minutes every hour and lectures were given on how it could be used in commercial and domestic settings. Nearly 2000 people visited the display on its closing day.

22. The statue of Minerva on the Athenaeum's facade is over 3 metres high and cast in Portland cement. It was made by sculptor Richard Kretzschmar and installed in December 1886.



Statue of Minerva, photo Janine Eastgate (Melbourne Athenaeum Archive)

23. The first demonstration of the phonograph in Australia took place at the Athenaeum in 1890.

24. Dame Nellie Melba sang at the Athenaeum at concerts held in August and December 1884.

25. As part of his Australian tour, renowned author Mark Twain presented two lectures at the Athenaeum in 1895.



William Strutt, Black Thursday, February 6th, 1851 (1864), oil on canvas, acquired 1954 (State Library Victoria)

26. Artist William Strutt's painting *Black Thursday*, which depicts the ravages of the bushfires that struck Victoria on 6 February 1851, was exhibited at the Athenaeum in 1883. Strutt was Curator of Fine Arts at the institution in 1852 and a leading figure in the establishment of Victoria's first fine art society, which had its first (and only) exhibition at the Athenaeum. His painting is now held at the State Library of Victoria.

27. Frederick McCubbin's famous painting *The Pioneer* was first exhibited at the Athenaeum in 1904. It was priced at £525 and was purchased the following year by the National Gallery of Victoria through the Felton Bequest.

28. The Athenaeum had an art gallery that ran for over 60 years, opening in 1910. Some of Australia's most successful and significant artists and art societies exhibited there, including Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton, Rupert Bunny, Jane Price, Clarice Beckett, Hans Heysen, Albert Namatjira, the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and the Victorian Artists' Society.