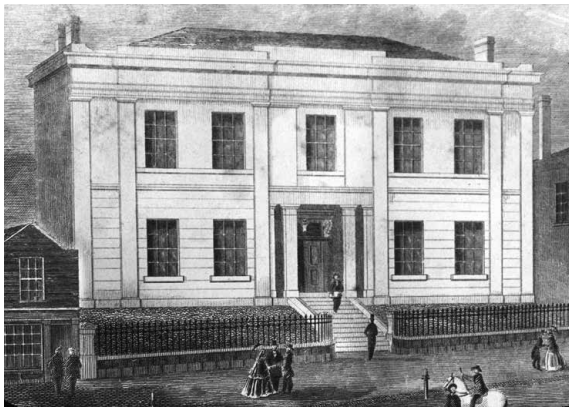
Melbourne Athenaeum
A historical overview



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Left: Ham Brothers, The Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, Collins Street, Melbourne, 1842, image Courtesy of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria

Below: Items from Melbourne Athenaeum Archives
Photographer, Grace Petrou

Since 1839, the Melbourne Athenaeum has provided a unique social and cultural hub in the heart of Melbourne. Originally known as the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution and School of Arts, the Collins St location housed the city's first official library, museum, and exhibition space.

Even the town council meetings were hosted here until the town hall was completed.

As Melbourne gradually became a more complex city, the organisation and its building evolved to accommodate the changing needs and sophisticated pastimes of the people of the city. Something that it has consistently done ever since.

This document provides an overview of the Ath's history since 1839 and includes some of the key highlights and milestones. It has been designed to be the first in a series of publications which will bring to life important features of the Ath such as the Library (in place across the entire history), the Museum – the first of its kind in Melbourne, the Art Gallery which operated for over sixty years and the Theatre which remains a much loved venue today.



Our early days

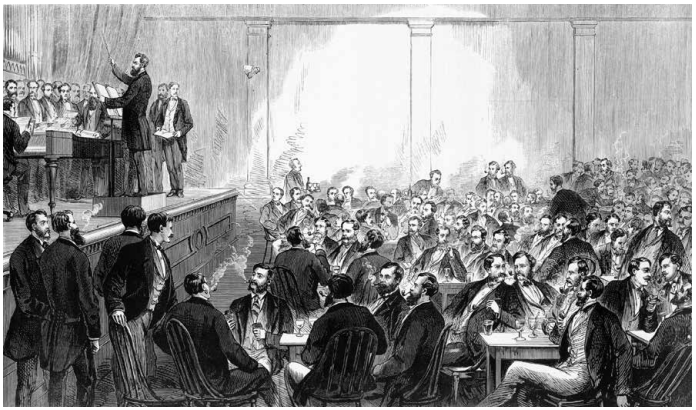
European settlers arrived at Port Phillip in 1835. When NSW Governor, Sir Richard Bourke, authorised the settlement in 1836, a census that year showed there were 13 buildings, 142 men, 35 women, 26,500 sheep, 57 horses and 100 cattle.

Soon after the first settlers, there came merchants and "mechanics" – an umbrella term used for the colony's first builders, stonemasons, carpenters, tilers, and other workmen. The settlers, proud of the new town they were building, understood the need to plan for a better future and formed a Union Benefit Society. At its first meeting on 12 November 1839, the society's members discussed the need for a mechanics institute to provide opportunities for education and self-improvement.

In 1839, the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution and School of Arts opened its doors in rented premises as Victoria's first adult education provider and library, with its aim being the "diffusion of scientific and useful knowledge".

Historian, Pam Baragwanath, in her article," In Long may Minerva reign from her niche overlooking Collins Street," discusses the role mechanics institutes played in supporting the development of new settlements such as Melbourne.

The first President was Captain William Lonsdale, and the first Patron was Superintendent of Port Phillip, Charles La Trobe – names synonymous with Melbourne. Other prominent figures included Supreme Court Judge and founder of many of Melbourne's cultural institutions,



Left: Samuel Calvert, Metropolitan Liedertafel, Gentleman's Night, 1875
The State Library of Victoria

Right: The Bulb Show at the Athenaeum Hall, 1892
The State Library of Victoria

Below: Exhibition of Charles Wheeler Paintings at the Athenaeum Art Gallery, 1920
The State Library of Victoria



Sir Redmond Barry. Its founding Committee was of course all male, reflecting the patriarchal conventions of the day.

Within a year of establishing the Institute, the Founding Committee had devised a program of public lectures, had begun amassing a collection of books to form a lending library, appointed a Librarian as well as a Curator to oversee its growing collection of objects which were to form a museum.

Although originally begun as a Mechanics' Institution for skilled workmen, anyone could join. A yearly subscription of one pound entitled the whole family to use the Library and Reading Room, visit the Museum and attend lectures organised by the Committee of Management. Women were able to be individual members and the first to do so was Mrs Anderson in 1848. Read about her in *First lady* by long-time Athenaeum Archives volunteer, Margaret Bowman. Women were not employed at the Athenaeum until 1918 and there were no female members elected to its Committee of Management until 1973.

A cultural hub

The building was well-used from the beginning, with areas rented out to people needing a place to meet, discuss, lecture, or entertain. Sir Redmond Barry gave lectures. Teachers rented space for classes such as drawing, music, languages, and science.

Rowdy political meetings were held, many regarding democratic rights. An 1844 squatters' meeting to discuss their concerns about land tenure drew such a large crowd that the meeting was held in front of the building.

Scientific and musical groups and associations also now had a place to meet. Philosophical Institute discussions around inland exploration led to the decision to mount the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition. Concerts by the Liedertafel and the Philharmonic Society were popular, and the very first performance of Handel's Messiah was given by the Philharmonic Society choir.

The Institute's first art exhibition was held in April 1847, displaying works by artist, and drawing teacher, George Alexander Gilbert who had arrived in Melbourne from England in 1841. Gilbert's exhibition is credited as being the first solo art exhibition in the Port Phillip District.

Gilbert was appointed as the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute Secretary and Curator of Fine Arts in 1844. He went onto establish the colony's first art school on the premises which ran until 1850.

The organisation had over 700 members by this time and the library over 5,000 volumes.

By 1851, the annual report showed that the need for a larger lecture hall was being discussed because the existing hall could not accommodate the increasing number of people wanting to attend lectures, classes, and entertainments. It was common for people to be turned away at the door.

Once the new larger hall was finished, the Committee planned to renovate the original hall to properly store the growing collection of donated museum objects. Establishing a museum had been identified as an important part of meeting the Ath's purpose to impart literary, scientific, and other useful knowledge to members and the general public (read more in the Museum history).

The Committee raised enough money to buy a small piece of land at the back of the building and finalised for a large hall and additional wings on both sides at the front of the building. Builders tendered for the construction and work commenced on laying the foundations for the new hall. However, insufficient finances prevented the project being completed for a further two decades.





Left: Melbourne Athenaeum Façade Lettering
Photographer, Peter Ittak

Right: Statue of Minerva
Photographer, Peter Ittak



The *Melbourne Athenaeum* a better reflection of the organisation's progress

By the early 1870s, it was decided that the organisation had sufficiently developed to need a new name – the aspirational Melbourne Athenaeum. The Committee believed it was important to recognise that the institution was no longer a 'mechanics Institute' in the same way it had been when formed.

Among the early office bearers of the institution was author Marcus Clarke, who took on the role of chairman of the library committee in 1877. By this time, membership was 1,680 strong. In 1879, there were 30,000 visits to the library.

The new hall was an instant success, with an extraordinary variety of events held there. Everything from sporting exhibitions and social occasions to musical and theatrical performances and banquets. In 1880, it was reported "that the floor of the large hall was the only one in Melbourne expressly constructed for dancing".

The last significant changes to the building led to the "new Building" being formally opened by the then Governor in 1886.

At the opening celebration – attended by "members and friends of this oldest of Melbourne literary and educational centres", then President Charles Rennie announced that a generous donation of 100 guineas by Mr Alderman Moubray, one of the institution's Trustees, had allowed for the design and installation of a statue of Minerva to be placed in the niche at the top of the building. Associated with the earlier Greek deity, Athena who championed wisdom and handicraft, Minerva is a Roman deity concerned with wisdom, education, arts, and literature.

With a completely renovated façade and large hall, the Melbourne Athenaeum continued to be a cultural hub in the city. Dances and balls, musical and theatrical performances, exhibitions, flower shows and meetings were held.

In 1890, the Athenaeum introduced Melburnians to the wonders of Mr Edison's talking machine; Henry Morton Stanley lectured here in 1892, and Mark Twain in 1895. Edison's Vitascope was demonstrated in 1896, and the Cinematographe in 1897. Three years later came newsreels of the Boer War. *The Story of the Kelly Gang* by the Tait Brothers, the world's first dramatic feature film, was shown at the Athenaeum in 1906, followed by *Robbery Under Arms* (1907), *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1908) and *The Squatter's Daughter* (1910).

In between movie seasons, Gregan McMahon presented important drama productions, including the Australian premieres of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Louis Esson's *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe*, and *Shaw's Man* and *Superman* and *Major Barbara*.

The Ath brings a new style of theatre to Melbourne

In 1923, changing cultural interests and the prevalence of other venues by this time, led to the large hall being transformed into an intimate 880 seat theatre by Frank Talbot, working with architect Henry White. Tons of clay were removed to lower the floor and the new theatre was built inside the old hall. The floor level of the current dress circle was once the floor level of the old hall.

The Theatre opened on 23 December 1924 with a performance of Sir James Barrie's comedy *Dear Brutus* by the Melbourne Repertory Theatre Company. The Argus wrote that it "seemed incredible that such transformation could have been wrought in so brief a period".

On 2 February 1929, the Athenaeum introduced Melbourne to the 'talkies' with the first screenings of Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*, before it became the first "all-British theatre in the Empire" in 1932. *Pygmalion* ran for 25 weeks.

Visit our website for two beautiful accounts of the Theatre's history – the first by Frank Van Straten and the second by Alan Winn, relieving projectionist from 1957 to 1961.

Right: Melbourne
Athenaeum Elevator
Photographer, Peter Ittak



1930 – Our Famous Lift

"One day it struck me that in the light area [the space between the Town Hall and Athenaeum buildings], there was room for a lift, and on examination, it was found that we could erect one.

After consultation with the various authorities, and by concession to Mr Talbot, we were able to proceed and in June 1930, the lift was established. It has been a boon to members."

'The Melbourne Athenaeum: History and records of the Institution 1839–1939' by R.W.E. Wilmot from *The Melbourne Athenaeum: A Journal of the History of a Melbourne institution*, 2009.

Mr. R.W.E. Wilmot, the secretary of the Institution from 1909 to 1948, together with the institution's honorary architect, Mr. Sydney Smith, pondered for years over the possibility of installing a passenger lift from the ground floor theatre foyer to the first floor library and the second floor art gallery.

A series of events in 1925 created an opportunity for this to occur. A fire in part of the Melbourne Town Hall followed by the demolition of the adjoining Coffee Palace created the opportunity for the Athenaeum to claim "ancient lights" rights, which, if enforced, would have prevented the erection of the new Town Hall. An agreement was eventually reached between the parties, whereby the Athenaeum's rights were sold to the City Council who agreed to maintain its eastern wall in a clean state, thus making space available to accommodate the lift works.

At the end of 1929, architects Sydney Smith, Ogg & Serpell provided plans and estimates for the lift project and a Lift Sub-committee was formed comprising the President, Vice-President and Treasurer of the Athenaeum.

Quotes were obtained for the construction of the lift shaft and the machinery room on the top floor. Budgets were established for running costs, such as annual maintenance of the elevator, the weekly wages of its operator, accident insurance and electricity usage. It was noted that a revenue loss would occur as one of the shops would have to be closed for the duration of the works, however a rent rise could be implemented on the other tenancies.

In early 1930, a quote for the lift shaft construction was received from A.S. Kemp & Son for £1,640 and 54 tenders for the lift were received, including ones from Johns & Waygood for £1,508 and Edminston & O'Neall for £1,285. To finance the construction, the Athenaeum's members were asked to approve a loan of up to £3,500 and happily the Bank of Australasia (now ANZ Banking Group) agreed to grant an overdraft. Tenders were soon approved and work on construction of the shaft commenced in April 1930, with an estimated 'operation-ready' date of 30 June, 1930 which was realised. In January 1931 a subscription to the Lift Owners' Association of 10/– was made.

The lift is still operational and is one of only two of its vintage in Melbourne. It is loved by many library patrons for its decorative and stylish interior, best described as Interwar Neo-classical or Classical Revival. It contains simple arched panels of wood inlay, original polished metal signs and an elegant domed light. The wooden lift façade is also classically inspired with a broken pediment above decorated with a funerary urn, which lends a touch of the Baroque; the urn as a decorative motif became popular during the period of Queen Victoria's mourning, from late 1861.

References:
'The Melbourne Athenaeum 1839–1939: history and records of the institution' by R.W.E. Wilmot, 1939.
'Minutes 1929–1931 of the Melbourne Athenaeum'.
Architectural details provided courtesy of the National Trust, Victoria.



1939 – The Athenaeum celebrates its first 100 years

To celebrate its centenary, a history of the institution written by Secretary, Reginald Wilmot, was published and a grand dinner held in the Myer Mural Hall.

The Committee of Management had considered modernising the building as part of the celebrations, but finances only allowed renovations to the library. The dividing wall between the then library and reading room was removed and the new combined space remodelled. According to the 1940 annual report, the cost of the improvements was £2,639/0/9 and the amount received from subscriptions that year was £3,279/3/9, a record for the Institution.

On 1 February 1940, the new library was opened by His Worship the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Cr. A.W. Coles, who said that the Athenaeum had a long and honourable history as an asset to the city. The Lord Mayor's address and remarks by the president were broadcast on the ABC's radio station, 3LO.



The Library ventures to the suburbs

In 1952, membership of the Melbourne Athenaeum Library was at its highest level with 7,579 members. Membership declined during the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the opening of free, local public libraries and local shopping complexes which led to a decline in travel to the city.

While membership slowly declined, the Ath remained open as other subscription libraries in Melbourne closed. The lending library of the now State Library of Victoria also closed.

Several Committee members decided that a solution to falling membership would be to open a branch library in one of Melbourne's new shopping centres. In December 1969, a branch of the Library opened at the Forest Hills Shopping Centre.

Declaring it open, Channel 9 news-reader, Eric Pearce, said he was a "great lover of books and living in the superficial world of TV as much as I do, I have to have books to retain my sanity".

Opened optimistically, the branch which hired new staff and provided newly covered books, was beset with problems from flooding and competition with public libraries opened nearby soon afterwards. The Forest Hill branch closed in 1977.

Left: The Melbourne Athenaeum, c. 1940s

Right: Melbourne Athenaeum Library, 1962





Cinema or theatre – the Ath has always been popular with audiences

The theatre remained a cinema for some four decades, with Sir Laurence Olivier and his wife, Vivien Leigh, in the Ath audience in 1948 for the Australian premiere of Olivier's *Hamlet*. *In the Heat of the Night* ran for 28 weeks, while the Ath also showed the first of the Pink Panther movies, the Beatles' films *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* and *Zorba the Greek*.

In 1977, the space again became a live theatre when the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) moved in and installed new technical equipment and reworked the proscenium to enlarge the stage. The MTC's first offering was *The School for Scandal*, with other performances during its nine-year occupancy including *The Merchant of Venice* (1977), *Breaker Morant* (1978), *Cinderella* (1979), Frank Thring in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1980), Garry McDonald in *On Our Selection* (1982) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Bruce Spence and Bruce Myles (1984).

The MTC also transformed the original Art Gallery space into an upstairs studio theatre, still in operation today and affectionately known as Ath2.

After the MTC moved to the Arts Centre in 1984, the two theatres came under the management of A.T Management, which remain the leaseholders today.

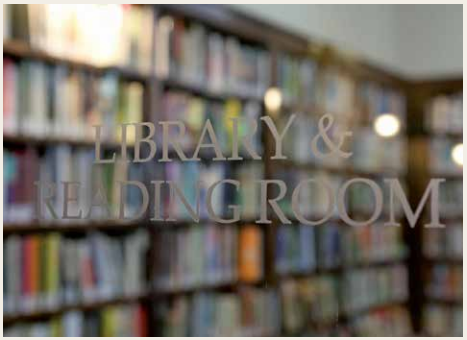
Under the guidance of directors, Glenn Elston OAM, Greg Hocking AM and Barry Janes, the main and secondary theatres are used for a range of theatre, comedy, and music performances, including as a principal venue for the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and Melbourne Opera. The Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas regularly presents discussions and talks at the theatre.

Above: Melbourne Athenaeum Theatre, 2010, Photographer, Stephen Wilksch

Left: Melbourne Athenaeum Theatre, Photographer, Jessica Edgar

Right: Performance of Cruel Intentions, Melbourne Athenaeum Theatre





Left: Melbourne Athenaeum Library and Reading Room

Right: Melbourne Athenaeum Library Board, Photographer, Janine Eastgate

Below: Sally Ford and the Idiomatics perform as part of the Library's music program

Today

The Library today remains the only part of the Ath which has operated continuously since the earliest days. It is Victoria's oldest continuing lending library and was opened well before the Melbourne Public Library (now known as the State Library of Victoria) in 1854.

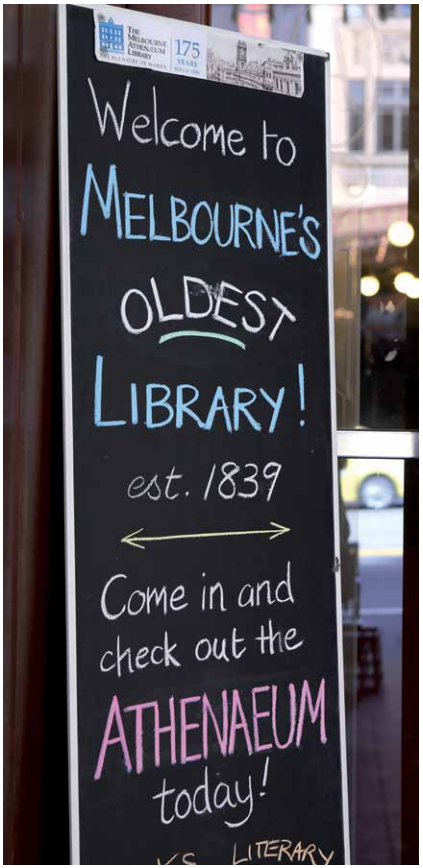
It continues to contribute to the social and cultural life of Melbourne with a robust program of events including musical and theatrical performances, poetry readings, book clubs and lectures. It has for several years also run an artist in residency program, with some of the works produced by these artists currently on display in the library.

Some of the city's most highly regarded musicians have noted the Athenaeum Library's remarkable ambience and acoustics for intimate live performances.

It is regularly referred to as one of Melbourne's best kept secrets. The RACV rates it one of the *"best libraries in Melbourne and regional Victoria"*.

Our around 1,000 members are custodians of the Athenaeum's rich living history and ongoing story, and we rely on the contributions of members, supporters, and partners to ensure we remain a vibrant cultural institution for the people of Melbourne.





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Opening Hours

Mon/Tues/Thurs: 10am – 6pm
Wed: 10am – 8pm
Fri: 10am – 4pm
Sat: 10am – 2pm

Cover image: Melbourne Athenaeum, 2019
Photographer, Grace Petrou

SINCE 1839

THE MELBOURNE ATHENÆUM