

Prahran Mechanics' Institute Timeline

The Prahran Mechanics' Institute was established after meetings convened by Rev William Moss "for the Mental and Moral Improvement and Rational Recreation of its Members, by means of Lectures, Discussions, Library, Reading Rooms, Classes, Museum, Philosophical Apparatus, &c.."

George William Rusden, Frederick James Sargood and Dr James Stokes were appointed as Trustees, and Governor Hotham and his wife accept patronage of the PMI. Schools Inspector Arthur Orlebar gives the inaugural lecture.

1854

The PMI Library was first established at the schoolroom of Prahran's first church, then at a large room in Chapel Street made available by shopkeeper John Stabb.

Local publican James Mason, donated a portion of land adjacent to his hotel (the Royal George, on the north corner of Greville and Chapel streets) "provided there would be a respectable building put on it". The PMI also purchased an additional strip of land adjoining the PMI to the north, from a Mr Dunnit, to extend the property.

The Council of the new municipality of Prahran would hold its meetings at the PMI from 1856 until 1861.

1857

Governor Barkly opened the PMI's new building on the the land donated by James Mason and purchaed from Mr Dunnit (at what is now 259-261 Chapel Street) on Monday 26 January.



Image: Original silk invitation from 1854 to the opening of the PMI's new building on Chapel Street.



Image: The PMI building on Chapel Street (at what is now 259-261 Chapel Street).

1861

Prahran Town Hall, containing a new free library, opened on the south-west corner of Greville and Chapel streets. Prahran Council meetings shifted to the Town Hall and the PMI library found it difficult to compete with the free library.

PMI Secretary, William John Allen, wrote an anonymous letter to the *South Melbourne Standard* critical of a PMI Committee member, Rev Potter — who had been attempting to have himself appointed Secretary of the Emerald Hill Mechanics' Institute. Unfortunately for Allen, Rev Potter knew the publisher of the *Standard*, Mr Osment, and the name of the anonymous letter writer was revealed.

1868

Allen was dismissed from the PMI, but he refused to leave the Secretary's residence on the top floor of the Chapel Street building. PMI operations were brought to a standstill throughout the year as the saga was played out in the Prahran Court.

Ultimately, part of the roof was removed under the cover of darkness so as to make the building unlivable for Allen. The court awarded Allen fourteen pounds, instead of the ninety-nine pounds damages he claimed.

1870

A School of Art and Design was held for a time but not sustainable as the PMI needed to lease out more space to cover its debts.

1899

After a period of decline which saw the PMI in the custodianship of an elderly and unmotivated secretary, with a run down library, building in disrepair and around 10 members, the state of the PMI became a local scandal.

Prahran council and the remaining original trustees intervened and, with the help of Frederick Thomas Sargood, created the PMI Act No 1617, which would incorporate the PMI and provide conditions for its proper administration. From this time and for the next 96 years, the Mayor of Prahran would be President of the PMI, with the rest of the committee to be made up of four Prahran Councillors and four elected citizens.

1900

John Henry Furneaux was appointed Secretary of the PMI. He re-established the library and arranged for the demolition and rebuilding of the PMI on the Chapel Street site. At this time, the then licensee of the Royal George Hotel, gave the PMI an additional parcel of land in exchange for access to the alley at the rear of the PMI. Furneaux hires an art master, named Levick, to teach classes that would become the Prahran Technical Art School.

1908

The Prahran Technical Art School was registered with the Victorian Education Department.

1910

A proposal by the Prahran Council to absorb the Mechanics' Institute Library into the public library was overwhelmingly defeated in a vote of members.

1915

The foundation stone of the High Street buildings was laid by Alexander Peacock in February, and the buildings are opened in October by Donald McKinnon.

The buildings were designed by architect, Prahran Councillor and PMI Committee member Ernest Horatio Willis. The builder was James Simpson Green Wright. The main building faces onto High Street, Prahran and the rear building faces onto St John Street to the south.

The school buildings were fitted out by the PMI, and the administration of the Prahran Technical School handed over to the Education Department from this time. The buildings were leased to the Minister for Education at a peppercorn rental for 33 years to accommodate the school.

The PMI library moved into a room at the rear of the main High Street building and the Chapel Street buildings were commercially leased to provide income for the Library.

1947

The 33-year lease for the High Street buildings to the Minister for Education expired and the PMI grants the Minister a further lease for 99 years at a peppercorn rental of one shilling per year.

1958

A girls' section of the Prahran Technical School opened at Hornby Street, Windsor and junior girls' classes were moved to that location.

1966

The senior section of the Prahran Technical School affiliated with the Victorian Colleges Association and will become a higher education entity known originally as the Prahran College of Technology, then Prahran College of Advanced Education and later Prahran TAFE. Victoria College, later taken over by Deakin University also resided on the campus in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

1971

The last of the junior Tech School boys' classes were moved to the Hornby Street site. The school would be merged with Windsor Technical School, Prahran High School and Ardoch Windsor High school and eventually closed completely in the 1980s.

1974

At the request of the college, the PMI library is moved to the front of High Street building, into space previously occupied by shops that had provided the PMI library with income.

1981

The PMI Library begins to specialise in the history of Victoria, and Prahran Library agrees to help the PMI to automate its library catalogue and make it available online. At this time the PMI was able to add its holdings to the national database now known as Libraries Australia.

1983

A short history of the PMI, *Pioneer and Hardy Survivor*, by Laurie McCalman, is published in conjunction with the Prahran Historical & Arts Society.

1984

The Minister for Education grants the PMI some further space in the High Street building to accommodate the Victorian history collection.

1992

Deakin University moves the School of Design to the Victorian College of the Arts and Swinburne University takes over the campus.

1993

Swinburne University carries out a refurbishment of the High Street building facade. Previously the building had been painted mission brown from top to bottom. The paint was stripped back to expose the red brickwork and the architectural features painted heritage colours.

1996

With the amalgamation of the Cities of Prahran and Malvern, to form the City of Stonnington, the PMI Rules were amended to reconstitute the committee. From this time there would be only one municipal council representative on the PMI committee.

PMI Secretary Librarian Catherine Milward-Bason organised a Prahran Technical School reunion which was held at Prahran Town Hall. Out of the reunion came an oral history project which would lead to a published history of the school a decade later.

2004

An international conference of mechanics institutes was held at Prahran and the proceedings would be the first publication of PMI Press.

2005

The PMI Act was transferred from the portfolio of the Minister for Education to the Minister for Local Government. The 90th anniversary of the High Street building was celebrated by the installation of an MIV heritage plaque (no. 11 in the series).

Ms Chris Gallagher of Heritage Victoria unveils the plaque.

2007

Design for Living: a History of 'Prahran Tech' was launched at the Prahran Town Hall by Terence Lane of the National Gallery of Victoria. The book was commissioned by the PMI, written by Dr Judith Buckrich and published by PMI Press.

The PMI minute books 1861-1984 were restored with the assistance of a City of Stonnington grant.

2008

The City of Stonnington provided an upgrade to the PMI online catalogue, enabling it to automate its loans systems. For the first time PMI members could check their records and renew items online.

2008

PMI began an active volunteer program with generous members participating in book care, newsletter mailing duties, book indexing and other useful tasks.

2015

Desperately in need of more space for the growing library collection, and with the operating cost about to exceed the income from the aging Chapel Street property, the PMI committee entered into mediation with the Victorian Minister for Education and Swinburne University. The committee wanted to end the 99-year lease (to expire in 2046) with the tenant (the Minister) and create a new lease with the occupant (the University). The Minister agreed to relinquish the lease provided the PMI sell the High Street buildings to the university. The PMI membership voted to sell the High Street buildings to Swinburne University and relocated the library in late 2014.



Image: The PMI building on St Edmonds Road, 2018



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