

HERITAGE PLACE

NAME OF PLACE: MECHANICS INSTITUTE HALL (FORMER)

ADDRESS/LOCATION OF PLACE: McNicol Street BRANXHOLME

STUDY NUMBER: 217

HERITAGE OVERLAY NUMBER:

OTHER NAME/S OF PLACE: BRANXHOLME PUBLIC HALL

PRECINCT: Branxholme

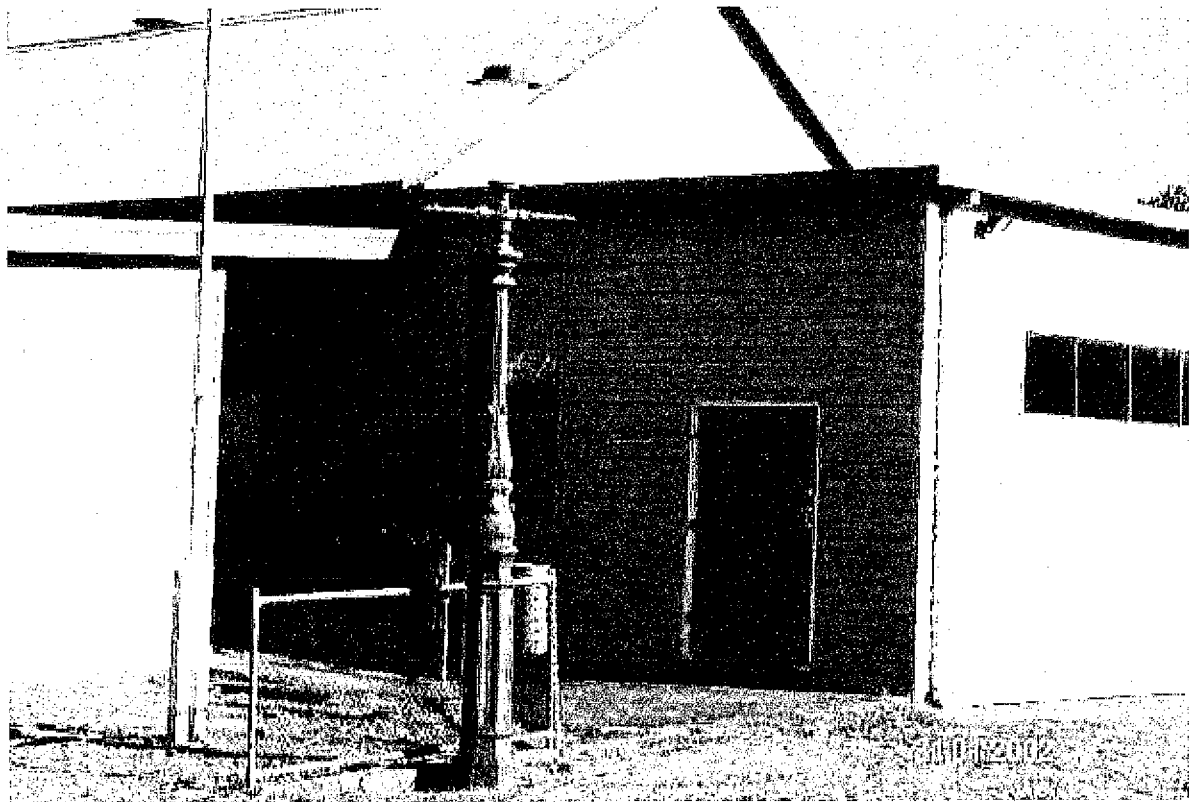
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA: Southern Grampians Shire

ALLOTMENT: 3 **SECTION:** 34 **PARISH:** PARISH OF BRANXHOLME

ACCESS DESCRIPTION:

CFA 473 J-2; VicRoads 233 R3; located on the east side of McNicol Street about 75m south of the intersection with Cox Street.

SIGNIFICANCE RATING: Local



Mechanic's Institute Hall (former), McNicol Street, Branxholme.

Image Date: 30/01/02

EXTENT OF LISTING:

To the extent of: 1. All the building fabric including the interiors of the main hall, stage and rear rooms and all the memorial plaques but otherwise excluding the interiors of the supper room, kitchen and recent extensions; and all the land.

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PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

The former Mechanics Institute is a large timber hall with many extensions, additions and alterations. The main hall has a stage at the southern end with two small rooms behind. These rooms are lined with pine boards and are largely in original condition. The floor of the hall has been replaced recently. The porch, possibly not added until the early 1900s, was enlarged in 1959 and has since been much altered. The supper room and kitchen, added in 1936, survive largely in original condition but with modern facilities. A new wing was added at the front of the building to accommodate visiting community services. The whole of the exterior of the complex has been clad but the weatherboards presumably survive beneath the cladding. Most of the original timber windows have been replaced with aluminium windows. One original polychromatic chimney survives.

There are many honour boards and memorial plaques surviving throughout the building, especially in the supper room.

Two cast iron street lights of standard design survive on the footpath outside the hall.

HISTORY:

The Mechanics Institute movement emerged in Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century. It quickly spread to London and the developing industrial cities of England in the first half of the nineteenth century. The movement succeeded best in Australia and that success was especially strong in colonial Victoria. This was due to a combination of social, economic and political factors, although the discussion of politics and religion was usually banned by an institute's regulations. Over one thousand institutes, some with associated free libraries and lecture halls, were built in the city and country. The first to be built was the Melbourne Athenaeum in 1848, the majority of examples were built in the 1860s and 1870s, and the last examples in the more remote parts of Victoria were built up to the outbreak of World War One, and possibly later. Although dominated by the middle class, the movement could cross class and religious divisions, often uniting a town in its aspiration so that the construction of a mechanics institute represented not just a practical civic achievement but a real expression of shared cultural values.

Land in McNicol Street was purchased by the local Mutual Improvement Association in 1878. The trustees were important local people including William Howarth, a storekeeper, W R Skene, a businessman and flour miller (and son of the pastoralist William Skene), and William Gough Jr., a publican. No architect has been linked with the design but the builder's name is known. George Foster's tender to construct the hall was accepted in September 1883. The cost was 197 pounds but this was offset by a government grant of 50 pounds. The design of the façade was simple and symmetrical with an arched door and arched windows. These windows were painted and had "Mechanics Institute and Free Library" in gold lettering. The side windows were rectangular with 12-paned double-hung sashes.

The hall opened with a concert and ball in January 1884. William Howarth became the first president of the committee, the Rev W C Wallace, the local Presbyterian minister was the vice-president, Edward Gough was the honorary secretary and Kenneth Snodgrass was the treasurer. The hall has been used for a wide range of cultural, social and sporting activities. In 1888 it was used for skating and in 1895 it was used for indoor bowling. Rooms used for reading and holding meetings were added behind the stage in 1888. The builder was a Mr. J Coutts. Tennis was played on asphalt courts built in 1894 behind the hall. The first annual flower show was held, apparently, in 1899. By 1913, the show was so successful that the needlework display and the afternoon tea were transferred to the court house.

The supper room and kitchen were added in 1936 by builders Ewan Coutts and E Gibbons, this extension being designed by the Hamilton architect, H I McGuigan. An Infant Welfare League was formed in 1937 when the Baby Health Centre opened at the hall. This role has continued and health and social services are now provided in a modern extension at the front of the hall.

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A bowling green was constructed behind the hall in the 1970s, and the hall continues to function as the Bowling Club rooms.

The property was transferred to the Crown Lands Department in 1959. With the help of another grant, the front porch was enlarged and a sewerer toilet block was added. The builder for these works was W Cochrane of Hamilton.

Various locals have acted as the hall's caretaker and secretary.

THEMATIC CONTEXT:

3. Developing local, regional and national economies

3.21 Entertaining for profit

6. Educating

6.1 Forming associations, libraries, and institutes for self-education

8. Developing Australia's cultural life

8.5 Forming associations

8.5.3 Associating for mutual aid

8.5.4 Pursuing common leisure interests

8.14 Living in the country and rural settlements

CONDITION:

The building is maintained in good condition.

INTEGRITY:

Very low integrity externally but fair degree of integrity internally

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

What is significant?

The former Mechanics Institute in McNicol Street, Branhholme is a large timber building incorporating the main hall, stage and lobby, a reading and a meeting room, the supper room and kitchen, and a recent extension used for community support groups. The hall is located in the centre of the town. The local Mutual Improvement Association purchased the land in 1878. Construction commenced late in 1883 and the hall was opened with a concert and ball in January 1884. Leading townfolk were associated with the project from the beginning and continued to serve as members of the committee. Rooms with access from the rear, used as library reading rooms and for holding meetings, were added behind the stage in 1888. The supper room and kitchen were added in 1936. The property was transferred to the Crown in 1959 which allowed for further improvements under a grant. No architect has been associated with the original design but the builder was George Foster. The 1888 extensions were built by J Coutts, and Ewan Coutts and E Gibbons built the 1936 extension which was designed by the Hamilton architect, H I McGuigan. Subsequently, the complex has been modified unsympathetically by the replacement of windows, the cladding of the walls and certain internal changes. It now has a low degree of integrity but is in good condition. There are many timber memorial plaques inside the main hall and supper room. Two standard cast iron street lights survive outside.

How is it significant?

The former Mechanics Institute Hall is of historical, cultural and social significance to the township of Branhholme and Southern Grampians Shire.

Why is it significant?

The former Mechanics Institute is of historical significance to Branhholme because, in the 19th and early 20th

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centuries it reflected the town's status and aspirations.

It is of cultural significance for its association with the self-improvement of all citizens through reading, lectures and concerts, and for the shared community values which are the basis of a community.

Socially, the hall is significant because it provides a focus for community activities and entertainment such as dances and film nights, importantly, across traditional class and other divisions. These roles continue and the hall is now used for infant welfare and other community support groups, and as the bowling club's rooms.

COMPARISON:

244 Memorial Hall/Mechanics Institute, Glendinning St, Balmoral

213 Mechanics Institute, Hamilton-Port Fairy Rd, Byaduk

134 Mechanics Institute, Winter and Pilleau Streets, Coleraine

ASSESSED BY: tfh

ASSESSMENT DATE:

28-Mar-02

EXISTING LISTINGS:

HERITAGE STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Include in VHR Include in RNE Include in Local Planning Scheme

No Recommendations for Inclusions

REFERENCES:

Author	Title	Year	Page
	Mechanics' Institutes The Way Forward, Conference organised by the Kilmore Mechanics' Institute	1998	66
	Rediscovering Mechanics' Institutes, Australian Mechanics' Institute Conference 2000	2000	128
Agnes V. Walter	Branxholme 1843-1973	1973	31, 34
Frances Clancy	The Libraries of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria	2000	
George Nadel	Australia's Colonial Culture, Ideas, Men and Institutions in Mid-Nineteenth Century Eastern Australia.	1957	74 - 88, 111-152
R. C. Connell & T. H. Irving	Class Structure in Australian History, Documents, Narrative and Argument	1980	var.