



WILLIAMSTOWN: NEW LIBRARY, OLD SPIRIT

Williamstown in Victoria is a proud community with a strong library history and a spirit born and shaped by the land and its people. The Williamstown library spirit has thrived throughout many incarnations, and is currently undergoing its biggest reincarnation yet, with September 2012 marking the opening of the new \$7.8m Williamstown Library.

Williamstown, situated on a peninsula eight kilometres south-west of Melbourne, is the oldest continuous settlement on the shores of Port Phillip. The town's safe anchorage ensured her status as Melbourne's first port, where citizens of that lawless settlement relied on arriving ships to bring news and supplies. Crowds would gather at the pier to greet the arriving ships, anxious for the information contained in newspapers from the civilized world beyond.

Integral to the spirit that shaped Williamstown is the vision of Sir George Frederick Verdon (1834-1896). George Verdon represented well the educated but unassisted Victorian immigrants of the gold rush period. He was energetic, responsible, an idealist. A devoted public servant, he "acquired the esteem and respect of everyone" and made a substantial contribution to the artistic, intellectual and political development of Victoria and the Williamstown Library.



Williamstown Mechanics Institute, 1870

Arriving in Melbourne aged 17 in 1851, he first set up as a ship chandler in Williamstown and later became a politician and banker. He made major contributions to the development of Victoria and her public institutions, including the Melbourne Observatory, Victorian Navy and Royal Mint. He was an active trustee of the Public Library, museums, and the National Gallery from 1872, for which he served as president from 1883-96. When Verdon retired, he founded a scholarship for art education at the Working Men's College. He was knighted for his services in 1872 and his contribution is commemorated at the old National Gallery and by the Verdon Library.

Verdon and a committee of eminent citizens helped establish a humble Athenaeum over 150 years ago. Based in Little Nelson Place, the Athenaeum housed a small library containing a few books and old newspapers. It was here that plans for the establishment of a Mechanics Institute began, with fundraising activities including a series of colourful soirees.

When George was elected to the first Williamstown Council in 1856 one of his first initiatives was to apply for land in Electra Street for the site of the Williamstown Mechanics' Institute. At the inaugural soiree, the Reverend

Henderson stated the Mechanics Institute was to be, "an institution for the mental and moral improvement of the working man". John Pascoe Fawkner acted as chairman and donated 103 books to the Institute. The Institute operated a subscription lending library for over 100 years. A free children's library service opened in 1936 and fond memories of the Mechanics Library live on in the hearts of many locals.

Planning for the fundraising soirees was not without drama. George was considered by some as pompous and overbearing and he managed to offend the lady committee members who, feeling slighted, staged a successful 'petticoat mutiny' and had plans for the Institute suspended until an apology was delivered. (Amongst these ladies was my great great Grandmother.)



Future spirit: The new Williamstown Library will open in September 2012

Finally, and with great fanfare, the foundation stone was laid on February 18th, 1860 with assistance from Dr Eades, then Mayor of Melbourne. The ceremony conducted jointly by the seven Masonic Lodges from Williamstown and Melbourne included a large procession. Yet another soiree was held on the July 10th of that year to mark the opening.

A century later, after much community agitation for a municipal library, reading took precedence over films and the Shore Picture Theatre made way for the Williamstown City Library in 1968. It was immediately popular and soon outgrew its premises. After several further reincarnations, permission was granted for a new library in 2009. The 1968 Ferguson Street Library was demolished in 2010 and, after 42 years, we relocated back to the Mechanics Institute in Electra Street.

Williamstown's library spirit has continued to grow. In 1993, the library recorded the highest per capita loans in Victoria. The spirit of learning, recreation and information is alive and well. A warm welcome, comfortable and safe environment and access to a free library service is treasured by locals and visitors alike. The \$7.8 million Williamstown Library paints a new and innovative picture of libraries in the community. By providing the latest technology as well as the best of the traditional library services we will be honouring the spirit of George Verdon and come September 2012 there will be another great soiree to celebrate.

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