

Local Studies Factsheet # 001



A brief History of the Blue Mountains Library Service

Early History

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Schools of Arts and Literary Institutes with small library collections were established in many cities and towns throughout the country. In the Blue Mountains the situation was very similar with small libraries housed in Schools of Arts in Blackheath, Katoomba, Wentworth Falls, Lawson, Springwood and Glenbrook. The facilities, under the oversight of a Council Committee, included a community hall, circulating library, newspaper reading room, card room and billiard room. The staff were usually women with some clerical or teaching experience, who worked for low wages and few benefits. Training for professional librarians did not exist outside the state and university libraries.

In 1934, Ralph Munn, Director of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and E.R. Pitt, then Chief Librarian of the Public Library of Victoria, led an inquiry into public libraries in Australia. The Munn-Pitt report as it was known, contrasted the regional library system in Australia with that in the United States and the United Kingdom. The services on offer were noted by one commentator at the time, "It is pathetic to observe the pride and complacency with which local committees exhibit wretched little institutes which have long since become cemeteries of old and forgotten books." The key recommendations of the report were easily identified: 1. to establish tax-supported municipal 'free libraries'; and 2. to strengthen and extend librarianship by professionalizing the training and registration of librarians.

Within five years the NSW Library Act of 1939 was passed into law. This enabled local councils to provide and regulate free, rate supported library services, appoint librarians and receive a subsidy towards operating costs from the State Government. It had been adopted by a majority of NSW country councils by 1947 and most metropolitan councils by 1957.



Katoomba School of Arts c1930

In the Blue Mountains a Free Children's Library and Crafts Club was opened in 1942 by the Hon. Clive Evatt, the Minister for Education. It was located in Davies Lane off Katoomba Street behind the shops and was an offshoot of the Children's Library and Craft movement founded by Elsie Rivett and her sister Mary Matheson in Surry Hills, Sydney in 1922. Among its supporters were Dr. Eric Payten Dark and his wife, the author Eleanor Dark, with prominent ALP members John Apthorp and Bruce Milliss. The librarian was Miss Kathleen Ebbs. The club issued a small magazine called *The Youthful Enterprise* containing articles by the children and acknowledgments to donors and subscribers.

It had 800 borrowing members, and was open to all children including those on holidays in Katoomba.

In 1945 Dr Eric Dark led a deputation from the Returned Soldier's League to a Katoomba Council meeting to urge the establishment of a free public library. A municipality of Katoomba's importance could well afford to impose a rate for such a purpose, he suggested. The Finance Committee would go carefully into the matter, the Mayor promised. There the matter rested.



Public Library Campaign 1970

Agitation Heats Up

In 1963 Blue Mountains City Council commissioned a report from the Library Board of NSW on the feasibility of establishing a free public library service. This was presented to Council 28 January 1964, where it was resolved not to adopt the Library Act due to the cost of providing the service. This report had recommended a central library with administration at Katoomba and a full time branch at Springwood, part time branches at Lawson, Blackheath and Wentworth Falls, with a bookmobile service to outlying areas.

Proposed operating costs were based on a State Government subsidy of 3/- per capita and a Council contribution of 9/- per capita dropping to 7/- per capita in the third year of operation. Average annual library operating costs in NSW at the time were £0/10/4 per capita (around \$17.00 in 2023 value). No further action was taken and Blue Mountains City Council continued to pay an annual subsidy to the Schools of Arts to cover library running costs, newspapers, book acquisitions and wages.

Public pressure continued through the 1960s with regular letters to the editor of the local newspapers, on the merits of a public library. The Blue Mountains Municipal Library Campaign Committee was formed in 1964 with branches in Katoomba and Springwood. The forces for change among its more than 100 members were Joy Crick, Eric Kettle, Muriel "Tibby" Whalan, with Aldermen Thelma Murphy and Margery Anderson. Penrith Council pushed the discussion along by increasing the annual charge on Blue Mountains residents using their library service from \$2.00 to \$8.00.

Finally in 1967 Council voted to adopt the Library Act, financed by a special library rate of \$2.00 on all ratable land with a UCV of up to \$4000 and 5 cents in the dollar above that amount, and that a Library Management Committee be formed to oversee library service establishment, financing and staffing. The Notice of Motion was proposed by Ald. Thelma Murphy with support from Ald. E. N. Lesslie and Ald. J. M. Powell; it was carried by seven votes to four after a lengthy debate. Ald. K. C. Coxon and Ald. K. L. King spoke in favour of the motion.

The period up to 1972 was a time of development towards a public library service, further encouraged no doubt by the visit of C. R. Weeden O.B.E. M.A. Dip. Ed. acting as consultant for the Independent Review of Library Services in NSW, known as the Weeden Report. The Town Clerk advised that the result of a library special rate of \$2.50 would be \$70,577; being the amount sufficient to attract the library subsidy. A library committee was formed composed of Mayor Dash, with Ald. Anderson, Crick, Hunter, Lesslie, Murphy, Quirk and Tonner. Among their recommendations to Council in June 1972, was that Miss Helen Woodward of the State Library NSW and the Library Board be commissioned to undertake a survey on how a library service could best be undertaken. Elements of this report formed the basis of the 1972 report to Council that cleared the way for the library service to begin in earnest.

Library Establishment Timeline

1964 – Public Library Campaign Committee formed.

1966 – Petitions circulated and essay competition for children: ‘The Need for a Library in the Blue Mountains’.

1967 - Council resolves to adopt the Library Act and appoint a library management committee.

1969 – further Council resolutions to investigate costs in conjunction with Lithgow and Penrith Councils.

1972 – Report of final costing reported to Council, Library special rate of \$2.50 introduced.

1974 - the position of Chief Librarian was advertised. The City’s first Chief Librarian Mrs Gay Baker was appointed in June. Agreements were reached with the Schools of Arts management committees to take over operational responsibility for all public library

services across the city. The majority of these former stand-alone libraries were refurbished and reopened as branch libraries, see below.

1977 - Hugo Orro appointed Chief Librarian.

1984 - Drusilla Wendoloski – Chief Librarian

1989 - John Merriman – Chief Librarian and Manager Library and Community Services, with responsibility for Aquatic Centre management added in 1996.

1999 - Marie Jackson – former Deputy and Children’s Librarian appointed Acting Manager

1999 - 2003 - David Linden – Manager Library and Community Services

2003 - Dallas Curry - Manager Library and Family Day Care.

2006 - Vicki Edmunds - Manager Library and Family Day Care

- Manager Library and Community Services (2008)

- Manager Library and Customer Services (2011)

- Manager Community & Library (2022)

Services

By the end of 1975, full time branches were operating in Springwood, Katoomba and Blaxland, with part-time branches in Lawson, Blackheath and Mount Victoria. A Deputy Chief Librarian had been appointed, with a clerk-typist, Cataloguer and a growing number of library assistants. A Holden Kingswood station wagon was procured through Council and a library assistant-driver



Mount Victoria Community Library 1976

employed to make daily book deliveries to the newly established branches.



Braemar House 2010

The headquarters of the library was located in historic 'Braemar House' in Macquarie Road, Springwood, recently purchased by the Council. A Children's Librarian and a Reference Librarian were appointed in 1976. By that time the library service had registered 16,033 borrowers from a population of just over 47,000. Book loans were based on the Browne card system originally developed in 1895. In 1978 the special library rate set at \$12.50 was abolished. A charge for lost/damaged books was introduced – calculated on the retail cost plus a \$2.00 processing fee. Thursday night late opening to 7.00 pm was introduced at Springwood, Blaxland and Katoomba libraries, this was discontinued after a 12 month trial period due to low patronage. Regular children's programs were introduced in branches.

Only one central card catalogue existed until simplified author, title and subject print-outs were introduced to all branches. An in-house circulation system was developed utilising 2nd hand NCR cash registers with light pens scanning in-house generated book and member barcodes. This system could not track loans or issue overdue notices.

A Microfiche catalogue was introduced in 1978 with quarterly updates. A manual reservation system used hand written card strips checked against returns trollies.

The Stowe Book 38 library management system was adopted in 1986, and later upgraded to Book Plus, this necessitated replacing barcodes on all book stock and issuing new membership cards.

Online Public Access Catalogue terminals (OPACS) were installed in six branches in June 1994 as a result of a successful State Library grant of \$38,000. This completed the final stage of library automation that began in 1986.

In 1998 colour photocopiers and public access PCs with dial-up Internet were introduced, this was later expanded to broadband connection. The Horizon Information Management System was introduced in 2003. This was replaced by Sirsi-Dynix Symphony in 2012. Music CDs, music cassettes, videos and literacy collections were established and a Council intranet and web site were introduced.

In 2003 a DVD loan collection was set up and the Book Express service was established, offering paperbacks for loan to early morning commuters at Katoomba and Springwood stations from a laptop.



Book Express, Springwood Station 2017

A restructure in 2004 saw the appointment of Upper and Lower Mountains Co-ordinators, Information and Support Services Co-ordinator and a Children's Services Team Leader.

The Local Studies historical photograph collection was digitised in 2007.

Library staff were enrolled in Library 2.0 in 2008, this included training in Blogger, YouTube, RSS, Mashups, Wikipedia, Library Thing and [Flickr](#) photo sharing.

By 2013 free Wi-Fi was available in all branches, eBooks were introduced in 2014.

Historical Blue Mountains newspaper collections were digitised in 2014-15 utilising NSW Library Council grant funding with contributions from the library budget and local historical groups.

In 2021-22, the Library Service had 25 full time equivalent staff operating 6 service points open a total of 194.5 hours per week with 28,648 registered members out of a population of 78,740 and a per capita expenditure of \$44.43. The state average for expenditure was \$50.25 and on this measure Blue Mountains ranked 61 in the 90 public library services in the state. Circulation of library materials was 354,373 and 4.50 per capita, ranking 26 in the 90 library services. Total stock was 94,036 items with a lending stock turnover of 4.05 items coming in at 10th highest. (NSW Public Library Statistics)

For much of 2021-22 the covid-19 pandemic impacted library services with branch closures and staff working from home while attending Zoom meetings. Services were restricted due to covid-19 Safety Plans and library buildings were closed to the public for extended periods. When branches were permitted to reopen, lim-

its on visitor numbers and PC usage, reduced opening hours and a ban on programs and events resulted in lower than usual activity figures. In addition there was quarantining of returns, mandatory mask wearing, hand sanitising and mandatory signing in of patrons. These restrictions gradually eased during 2022.

In 2022 tenders were awarded a Black Summer Bushfire Grant from Federal Government for a whole of library RFID project incorporating library services to the isolated and vulnerable communities at Mount Wilson (including Mt Irvine/Mt Tomah) and Megalong Valley. A city wide Home Library Service (HLS) was also established following the cessation of the Book Express service that did not resume after covid-19 restrictions

Branches

Springwood – full time branch

In June 1974 Springwood Library was established in historic Braemar built by James Hunter Lawson in 1882. Fiction, Non-Fiction, Junior and Reference sections were all in separate rooms with some overflow in the hallway between rooms. Library administration, book processing and cataloguing occupied the kitchen, scullery and servants' rooms at the rear.

Late in 1975 the headquarters administration section at the rear of Braemar was demolished to make room for the new Springwood library and relocated to the former Susan Price clothing factory on the Springwood industrial estate in Lawson Road behind the Eastern Sector Council Depot.

On 14 August 1976 the new Springwood Central Library was officially opened by the Hon. R. J. Mulock MLA, at a cost of \$463,000. Library headquarters and Springwood Council

offices occupied the lower ground floor.

In 1982 a part time Local Studies Librarian, John Low, was appointed and in 1984 the Local Studies position was made permanent full time. A fire set by vandals caused severe smoke damage to offices and Local Studies archives in the lower ground floor, library operations were moved into Braemar until refurbishment was completed.

In 1988 the Local Studies collection, together with the Springwood Historical Society collection, moved into Braemar following a Bicentennial restoration project. A new library circulation desk was installed in June 1996.

In 2012 demolition and redevelopment of Springwood Civic Centre received Council approval, and commenced in September 2013. The branch closed for the building works in Sept 2014 and new carpet tiles were laid. A multilevel carpark was constructed at the back of the library. The Blue Mountains Theatre and Community Hub officially opened in July 2015 with modern meeting rooms, accessible toilets, a 436 seat theatre and linkage to the Library and Council building.



Springwood Library 2023

Library renewal

A grant under the Western Parkland City Liveability Project enabled a major refurbishment that commenced in 2021. A Little Library in the Loft operated in a HUB meeting room, offering basic lending services while building works forced closure of the main branch. In 2022 Council received a \$500,000 State Library of NSW Public Library Infrastructure Grant for library fit-out. Works were completed in 2023 with the installation of RFID circulation, an expanded lower ground floor containing Library Administration with a Local Studies and Family History research area and Council Customer Service centre. Sunday opening 10.00 am – 4.00 pm to match Saturday hours and extended weekly open hours to 10.00 am 6.00 pm were also introduced.

Katoomba – full time branch

The Katoomba School of Arts Library in Katoomba Street opened 1st July 1889, staffed by a librarian with oversight from a library committee. Membership was by subscription and new book arrivals were advertised in the local newspaper. Open hours extended to 8.00 pm several nights a week in line with billiard room hours. Management was taken over by a committee of Blue Mountains City Council when the old School of Arts building was demolished in the early 1970s.

The Library was moved temporarily to a house in Parke St., where Flemings, later Target supermarket now stands. In September 1975, after Council commenced a public library service under the Library Act, the branch was moved to a shop front in Katoomba St. on the corner of Waratah St. Open hours were 10.00 – 5.00 weekdays, 9.00-12.00 Saturday. Thursday late night opening to 7.00 was discontinued after a 12 month trial period. The new Katoomba Library and Community Centre in

Katoomba St. opened in 1978.

In 2007 Council approved tenders for a new library and city art gallery in Park St. on the old primary school site, designs were finalised and work commenced in 2010. In 2011 Katoomba received a \$200,000 State Library of NSW Public Library Infrastructure Grant to fund the fit-out of new library premises.

After more than a decade of planning, the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre incorporating the new Katoomba Library opened in November 2012. The new 900 sq m library incorporated multipurpose spaces, 12 public internet terminals and free Wi-Fi with Sunday opening to match the Cultural Centre.



Katoomba Library 2015

In 2023 RFID circulation was introduced and Sunday opening was standardised to match Springwood branch.

Blaxland – full time branch

There had been a School of Arts library at nearby Glenbrook since 1909, it had fallen into disuse by the 1970s. In 1974 Blaxland was the first new branch to be opened by the Chief Librarian, Mrs Gay Baker. There were no former library premises in the township, so the branch was housed in a fibro cottage in Short St, close to the shopping area. It consisted of a small reference collection and large print room, an adult fiction room, non-fiction and a

separate junior room. Open hours were week-days 11.00 – 12.30 and 1.30 – 5.00 with late night opening Thursday to 7.00, 9.00 – 12.00 Saturday. The present branch library located in the new community centre opened in 1977.



Blaxland Library 2023

Lawson – part time branch

Lawson Branch Library is a continuation of a former School of Arts Library in the Lawson Mechanics Institute opened in June 1896. Taken over by Council in 1974, it moved from there to a shop front at 303 Great Western Highway in November 1976, opening 21½ hours weekly. It moved again in 1984 to rooms in the old Blue Mountains Shire Council Building, opened in 1915. Part time opening was increased in 2001 to seven hours on Wednesday and Friday. The branch was extensively refurbished in 2010 and celebrated its centenary in 2015.



Lawson Library 2003

Blackheath – part time branch

Blackheath Branch Library is also a continuation of a former School of Arts Library, opened 10 November 1906. The original library room was refurbished and restocked in 1975 and expanded to incorporate an adjoining room in 1977. It was again renovated in 2008 with the addition of air conditioning, improved lighting, carpets, new book returns bin and paint scheme.



Blackheath Library 2008

Mt Victoria Community library

The branch library at Mt. Victoria was very different to the other branches. In 1972, the building, an historic former butcher shop in Station St. near the police Station, was provided for community use by the owner. It consisted of a library room that also hosted local meetings, art groups and other small functions. Local residents renovated the building and when taken over by Council in 1975, new books and shelving were provided. The library was operated by volunteers while local resident, Mrs Betty Thompson received an honorarium to keep the library in order. In 1986 permission to use the premises was withdrawn by the owner and it moved to the basement of the Mt Vic Flicks in Harley Ave, eventually closing in 1990.

Wentworth Falls – part time branch

The Wentworth Falls School of Arts Library opened in 1915 but had fallen into disuse by the 1970s. In 1985 following community

lobbying, Alderman Bob Clarke moved a successful motion in Council that a library be established in the village and Wentworth Falls became the last modern era branch to be opened. It was originally located in the Station Street shopping centre, before returning to its original home in the School of Arts in 1988, as part of the Bicentennial renovation of the building. The branch was refurbished in 2007 with the installation of air conditioning, new carpeting and improved lighting.



Wentworth Falls Library 2015

Mount Wilson and Megalong Valley

In 2022 a Black Summer Bushfire Grant from the Federal Government was obtained to introduce a book locker system incorporating free Wi-Fi and RFID circulation to these two remote villages, activation is planned for later in 2024.



Megalong Valley book locker 2024

**John Merriman
Local Studies Librarian, March 2024**

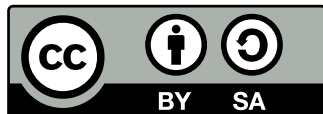
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