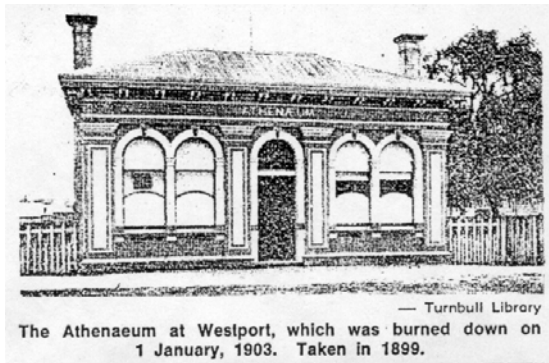


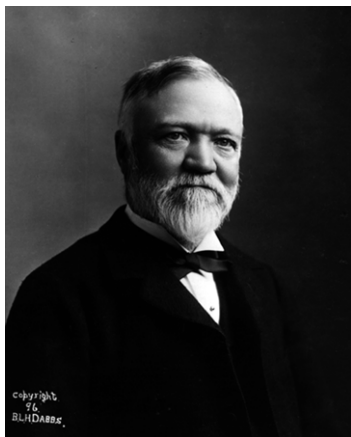
The Westport Free Library

£2000 and a promise - a historical review...

The Westport Free Library (now known as the Westport Carnegie Building) was built on the same site in Lyndhurst Street to replace the town's wooden Athenaeum building, burnt to the ground on New Year's Day 1903.



The Athenaeum committee immediately wrote to Andrew Carnegie, Pittsburgh steel magnate and self-made millionaire, famous for donating hundreds of thousands of pounds for provision of libraries throughout the English-speaking world.



Andrew Carnegie 1896:
Carnegie believed that the public library was an efficient and rational way that allowed those who were most able and motivated to educate themselves. It then allowed them to attain high status positions regardless of their background.

Months passed with no response. The Borough Council vacillated about re-building the library and instead of granting the annual £25 to the athenaeum committee, the council voted to establish a "penny rate" for library purposes as allowed under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1900. Thus the "user pays" idea for the borrowing of library books was implemented in Westport.

Late in October 1903, the council agreed to borrow £500 to rebuild the public library and reading room on the original site. One week later, a pledge of £2000 was received from Carnegie for a new library building. In exchange, he required the Borough of Westport to provide the site free of charge and to agree to devote the product of the penny rate (amounting to at least £100 per annum) to maintain the library.

In many of his libraries he insisted that the word "Free" be engraved in stone on the building to ensure that the library would always be free to the public. (This word was removed from the Westport library along with the original ornate parapet after the Inangahua earthquake in 1968).

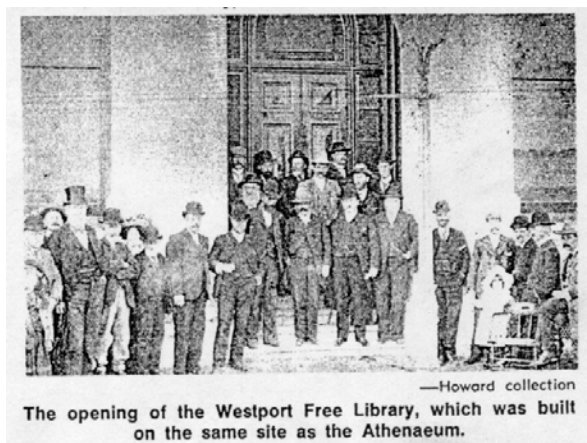
The council was delighted with Carnegie's offer and in November 1903 voted to accept the offer with thanks. Mr. John Marshall, was asked by the council and committee to act as "architect" for the new library. An interesting choice considering he was not an architect but a building contractor. He agreed to prepare plans for the building on the proviso that he also be allowed to tender for the building contract. All parties agreed and Marshall began work on the plans. He later won the tender to use local bricks against Messers. Lange and Scanlon who quoted lower and higher costs than Mr. Marshall respectively. Mr. Julius

Schadick was asked to act as building supervisor. So the first brick of the new library was laid on the afternoon of June 30, 1904 (see below).



Wife of the then Mayor Mr. F.F. Munro obliged to lay the brick. Copies of communications between the Council and Carnegie, daily newspapers and coins were installed in a wall cavity (still undiscovered). Mr. Newe, Chairman of the Athenaeum Committee, said at the ceremony "if people were educated and cultured, they would not put up with the disgusting state of things prevailing in the town" (he objected strongly to the penny rate being levied at the users of the library). Council funds were, however short owing to an ambitious schedule of public works at that time. Panic ensued amongst the Athenaeum committee when the £84.5.0 required to furnish the building over and above the Carnegie grant could not be found.

Just four days before the official opening, floor coverings were not in place. No records remain but it is thought that the generosity of local donors rescued the project. The library was opened on the afternoon of the 22nd of December 1904, with speeches delivered on the front steps.



2,500 books were housed in the library in five rooms; the reading room, the newspaper room, the library, a chess room and a special room for young people.

Historical significance: The Westport Free Library was the first of 18 Carnegie-financed libraries completed in New Zealand. Six are lost to earthquake, fire and lack of appreciation of our brief cultural heritage. The only Carnegie buildings still in use in New Zealand as libraries are situated in Marton and Balclutha.

Before 1919, when Carnegie died, he had given away \$US350,695,653 and at his death, the last \$US30 million was likewise given away to foundations, charities, and pensioners.

Carnegie believed that the public library was an efficient and rational way to allow those who were most able and motivated to educate themselves and attain high status positions regardless of their background.

His epitaph reads "Here lies a man who was able to surround himself with men far cleverer than himself." ... a legacy that cries out for preservation and perpetuation in the generations to come.