PIONEER HALL 60 YEARS 1966-2026

Wuhoo Timaru

Colourful Facts: Pioneer Hall

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For six decades, South Cantabrians visited Pioneer Hall to explore the history of their region. But how many stopped to wonder why it was called Pioneer Hall?

The answer takes us back to 1941. Thomas David Burnett, a Mackenzie Country runholder and Member of Parliament, died that year, leaving his Perth Street property to Timaru Borough Council for a public historical purpose. He had a particular wish: that the rise be known as Pioneer Hill, and any new museum building erected there be called Pioneer Hall.

That same year, the South Canterbury Historical Society was formed. Its volunteers began gathering, researching and caring for the region's history. In 1952, the Society opened a public museum in two rooms of one of the houses on the property. Before long, the growing collections needed more room.

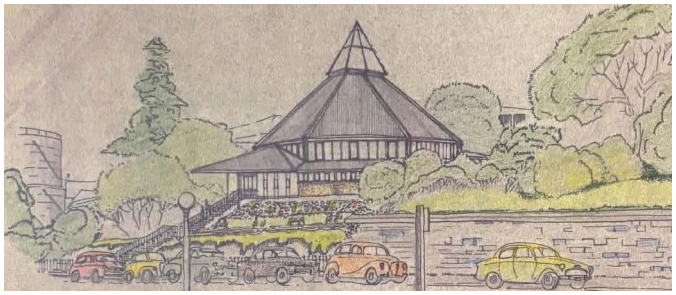
What followed was years of collecting, fundraising and planning. The Historical Society led the effort, supported by community donations, South Canterbury Centennial funding and Council assistance. W. H. Hall chaired the Society's building committee. J. B. Hamilton served as Society president. With many others, they helped turn the idea of a purpose-built museum into reality.

Timaru architect Ronald Lindsay Dohig designed something strikingly modern. Rather than making a building for history look old, he chose an octagonal design with an open exhibition space, a mezzanine floor, extensive glazing and a tall central lantern. Fletcher Construction built it, and on 10 December 1966, Mayor D. R. Dowell officially opened Pioneer Hall.

The Historical Society continued operating the Museum, with Council support, until 1988, when the collections and museum operation transferred to Timaru District Council. As collections grew, so did the building. A three-level storage and work wing was completed in 2000, while former storage areas became space for exhibitions, archives and education.

Over time, some of the features that made Pioneer Hall so modern in 1966 created challenges. The extensive glazing made temperature control difficult, and windows and the tall skylight were eventually blocked out. The mezzanine needed strengthening, insulation was improved, and exhibition spaces continued to change. A feasibility study in 2014 explored the Museum's future, while further display upgrades followed between 2016 and 2019.

In October 2026, Pioneer Hall's six decades as a public museum came to an end, marking another chapter in South Canterbury's museum history. The development of Te Kura Marumaru beside the Theatre Royal offered a new home for public exhibitions, while plans for Pioneer Hall focused on the continuing care of collections, research and archives.



Section of the the proposed plan of South Canterbury Museum by Architect Ronald Dohig, 1956. South Canterbury Museum 86/1

Next time you pass Pioneer Hall, take a closer look. Count its sides, find the plaques, look for a coin in the path, a plaque under a tree, and notice the architectural details that tell us about the optimism and ambitions of the people who built it.

Pioneer Hall was built to protect and share South Canterbury's history. After six decades as a public museum, the building itself has become part of it.



The Museum's 182-year journey has been driven by the passion and generosity of volunteers, philanthropists and communities. In 2026, this legacy finds new expression in the new museum project.

From WuHoo Timaru, thank you to everyone who has helped preserve South Canterbury's history. Burnett left the property, the Historical Society led the way, donors and Centennial funding helped build Pioneer Hall, Council and ratepayers sustained it, and museum staff and volunteers cared for, grew the collections, researched and displayed them.

Generations of locals and visitors brought the museum to life by exploring, learning and sharing stories. Together, you have helped connect people to our past, strengthen our sense of place and preserve these stories for future generations.





Pioneer Hall Timeline

Pioneer Hall was built to protect Timaru's history.
60 Years later the building has become part of it

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SCM 1057



Reading Room

1862–1878 Before the museum:
Timaru's early reading rooms and Mechanics' Institute enable subscribers access to books, newspapers and lectures. Historical objects and specimens are also collected, laying foundations for a future museum.



Te Papa O.051443

1908–1909
The Carnegie Library: Built in 1908 with support from Andrew Carnegie and opened in 1909, Timaru's new public library becomes a home for learning and early museum collections. Space eventually runs out.



1941
A gift for the future: Thomas D. Burnett, Mount Cook Station runholder and MP, leaves his Perth Street property, including two houses, for a public historical purpose. He requests the names Pioneer Hill for the site and Pioneer Hall for any new museum. The South Canterbury Historical Society establishes the museum and begins building its collections.


Burnett House

1952
Timaru's first public museum: The Historical Society opens a museum in a former Perth Street house, with two exhibition rooms and a cramped storeroom. Volunteers and a part-time custodian care for the growing collections.


Pioneer Hall nears completion in 1966.

1952–1966
Community determination: Over 14 years, the Historical Society collects, plans and fundraises for a purpose-built museum, supported by donors, South Canterbury Centennial funding and Council.

1964–1966
An unusual design: Timaru architect Ronald Lindsay Dohig designs an octagonal museum with a mezzanine, extensive glazing, flexible displays and a central lantern, greatly increasing exhibition and storage space. Fletcher Construction begins work 1965. Historical Society building committee chairman W. H. Hall OBE JP helps drive fundraising, while J. B. Hamilton serves as Society president.


Drawing room display for the opening

10 Dec 1966
Pioneer Hall opens: Opened by Timaru Mayor D. Dowell, watched by South Canterbury Historical Society members T. Hall and J. Hamilton, and architect R. Dohig.


Drawing room display for the opening

1966–1988
Generations of memories: The Historical Society operates the museum with Council support. Exhibitions, school visits and community programmes bring local history to life as the collections grow.



1988–1989
A Council museum: Ownership of collections and responsibility for operations transfer to Timaru District Council. A full-time Museum Director is appointed, marking a new era of professional management.



1999–2000
Room for more history: A three-level rectangular wing expands collection storage, exhibition space and work areas. Nearly half the $800,000 budget is raised through the South Canterbury Museum Development Trust.

2014
Planning ahead: A feasibility study considers expanding Pioneer Hall or developing a museum elsewhere. Conservation, accessibility, storage and exhibition requirements highlight the building's limitations.

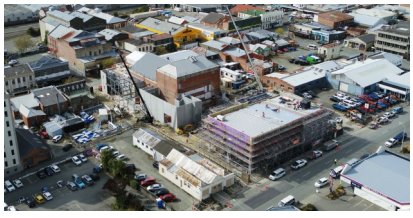
2016–2019
Refreshing the stories: Major exhibition upgrades help visitors explore South Canterbury's history through objects, photographs and interactive displays, supported by community donations and grants.

2023
A new museum is planned: Plans progress for a purpose-built museum alongside the Theatre Royal, with the Perth Street site intended to retain collections, archives and research facilities.

2026:
Te Rūnanga o Arowhenua gifts the name: Te Kura Marumaru for the new South Canterbury Museum. Construction progresses on Barnard Street.

26 Oct 2026
Pioneer Hall welcomes visitors for the final time: South Canterbury Museum's main public exhibition venue. A Labour Weekend celebration marks generations of discovery, learning and community memories.

2027
Te Kura Marumaru South Canterbury Museum is targeting an April 2027: Pioneer Hall will initially remain a whare taoka, housing heritage collections and public-access archives while its longer-term future is considered.


Progress of Te Kura Marumaru South Canterbury Museum September 2026

mage acknowledgement: Historical photographs sourced from publications by South Canterbury Museum. With thanks to the Museum for preserving and sharing South Canterbury's history.

CREATE A PIONEER HALL 60th ANNIVERSARY STAMP

NO REWARD WITHOUT EFFORT

Design your own stamp. Make it easy to recognise and worth keeping. The world's first adhesive postage stamp appeared in Britain in 1840. New Zealand followed in 1855. A stamp showed you had paid to send a letter or parcel: moisten the gummed back, stick it on, and off it went. Timaru's first post office operated in lower George Street, and from 1858 mail travelled between Timaru and Christchurch on horseback. Later, special stamps marked famous people, events and anniversaries. Some stamps were saved rather than posted, and rare ones became valuable collector's items.

Horse-drawn coaches carried letters, news and business correspondence between towns. In 1959, people re-enacted how mail was carried through South Canterbury by horse-drawn coach 100 years earlier, in 1859.

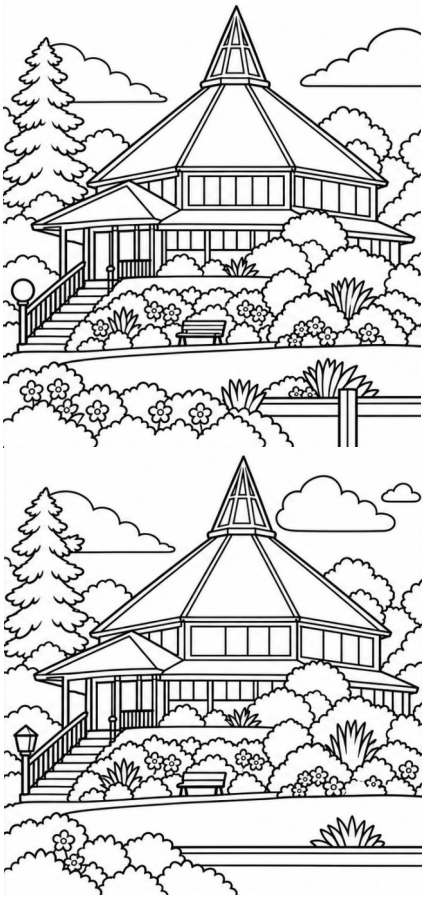


Timaru Canterbury Centennial stamp

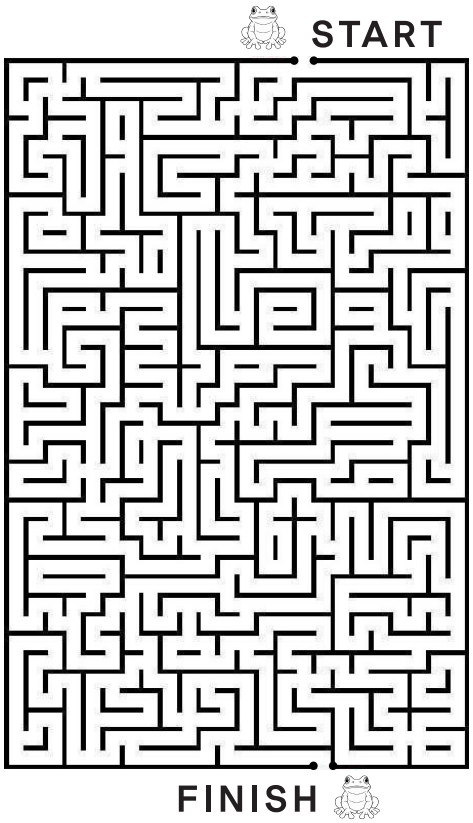


South Canterbury Museum 2017/095.015

SPOT 10 DIFFERENCES



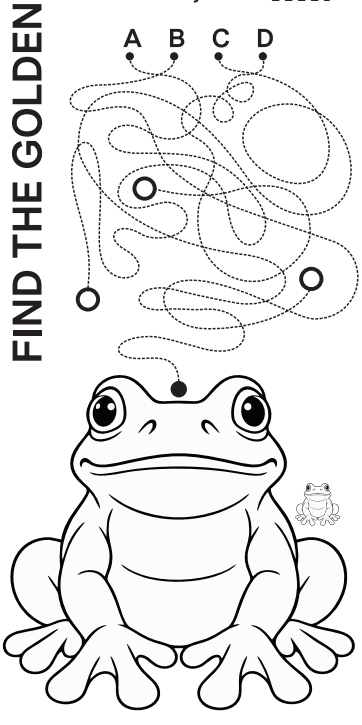
SOLVE THE MAZE



FIND THE GOLDEN FROG

Can you find the path to the Golden Frog? _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

How many frogs can you find on our activity sheet? _ _ _ _ _



EYE SPY

Slow down and take a closer look to find a 'WuHoo'... How many signs and interesting things can you find outside Pioneer Hall? Why are they there? What do they tell us?

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FIND FREE FUN

Next time you are out, see if you can find some free fun by looking for foundation stones, plaques, carved dates or even names hidden in grilles and stonework.

People have marked important buildings for more than 4,000 years, sometimes placing inscriptions, coins, pottery, tools or other objects beneath foundations or into the building itself.

By Victorian and Edwardian times, foundation-stone ceremonies could include flags, music, prayers, speeches and crowds. A special guest might use a silver trowel, tap and level the stone, then declare it "well and truly laid", with coins, newspapers or documents sealed underneath.

At Pioneer Hall, see if you can find the plaques that record its opening.
Then imagine standing there in 1966 with members of the South Canterbury Historical Society, the architect, builders and all the people who had planned, fundraised and worked towards the new museum. After years of effort, they were finally able to open the doors and welcome the public in.





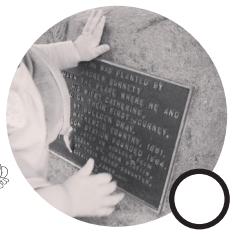












WORDFIND

Answer the questions to reveal the words hidden in the word find.

Z	L	B	V	C	S	T	O	R	I	E	S	O	T	O	H	P	Z
I	O	Y	R	Z	S	F	N	N	Y	E	X	P	L	O	R	E	K
O	Q	A	Q	N	O	I	T	C	E	L	L	O	C	V	B	T	B
R	T	H	O	P	Q	A	N	C	Y	J	Y	R	O	A	M	B	E
D	I	T	F	E	G	L	K	G	A	X	H	W	M	F	U	N	B
E	M	U	T	O	L	P	I	O	N	E	E	R	E	L	U	A	X
Z	A	I	R	E	V	O	C	S	I	D	J	B	A	M	O	W	W
S	R	E	E	T	N	U	L	O	V	V	N	G	N	K	Q	O	O
Q	U	C	B	K	A	A	J	E	S	B	D	S	I	K	C	B	K
C	M	C	O	M	M	U	N	I	T	Y	G	R	N	Z	L	J	F
M	S	G	T	T	M	U	E	S	U	M	E	S	G	P	I	E	O
Q	H	T	S	T	L	Y	Z	U	X	C	N	E	F	E	B	C	Z
L	E	G	A	T	I	R	E	H	A	M	J	I	U	R	R	T	L
R	C	P	P	M	S	D	N	L	H	C	R	R	L	T	A	S	N
T	X	Q	W	U	P	G	P	G	Q	B	V	O	C	H	R	D	D
O	X	C	F	R	E	E	M	G	C	O	E	M	W	T	Y	N	Q
R	Y	R	O	T	S	I	H	H	L	T	U	E	C	D	I	O	C
O	E	P	X	Y	B	M	U	H	G	I	J	M	K	F	A	L	D

1. PERTH, 2. PIONEER, 3. MUSEUM, 4. TIMARU, 5. FREE, 6. FUN, 7. MEANINGFUL, 8. HISTORY, 9. STORIES, 10. OBJECTS, 11. PHOTOS, 12. MEMORIES, 13. HERITAGE, 14. COMMUNITY, 15. VOLUNTEERS, 16. COLLECTION, 17. DISCOVER, 18. EXPLORE, 19. STAMP, 20. LIBRARY.

1 The street Pioneer Hall stands on? P _____

2 The name of this historic building? P _____

3 A place that keeps and shares objects and stories from the past? M _____

4 The town this museum belongs to? T _____

5 Something everyone can enjoy without paying? F _____

6 Something enjoyable to do? F _____

7 Something with purpose that helps connect us with people and place? M _____

8 The story of what happened in the past? H _____

9 What people tell and share about the past? S _____

10 Things museums collect and care for? O _____

11 Pictures that help us see the past? P _____

12 Things we remember from our lives? M _____

13 The history, places and traditions we inherit and care for? H _____

14 The people who live, work and belong in a place? C _____

15 People who give their time to help? V _____

16 A group of objects cared for by a museum? C _____

17 To find out something new? D _____

18 To look around and learn more? E _____

19 A tiny piece of postal history featured on this activity sheet? S _____

20 Timaru's first one opened in 1862? L _____