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Newsletter



FROM THE HEART:
REMEMBERING THE 2009
VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES,
EXHIBITION VIEW. MELBOURNE
MUSEUM, 2019.

Source: Sophie Shilling



Change

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This summer has barely begun and already we're in the midst of a terrible bushfire season. This awful reminder of our changing climate urges me to emphasise how important it is to assess risks to collections, particularly in rural areas, and to digitise collection objects to safeguard the future of historical societies.

In this time of change we thought it apt to devote a whole issue of our newsletter to the theme. Digital engagement remains a challenge for the cultural heritage sector, so the FAHS is helping societies improve their digital skills. You can read more about this program on pages 3 and 9.

Past President Margaret Anderson discusses the proposed changes to ICOM's definition of museums, as one of the committee members involved in that process. The new

definition is set to emphasise the importance of diversity - properly representing our diverse communities - in our collections.

As part of my outreach trip to Western Australia earlier this year I visited Narrogin Old Courthouse Museum and heard a story too good and important not to share - read about why a bomb squad had to visit the Museum. It might just save your collection, too.

Finally, a beautiful story about a family tradition that skipped a generation, and saved a lost trade in the process. It's comforting to know that some things don't change.

Stay safe this summer.

Sophie Shilling, Online Outreach Officer

From the President



One of the principal roles of historical societies has been, and is, the collection and preservation of items that together tell the stories of our history and heritage. As the FAHS' recent [flyer](#) says, 'Societies have collected and preserved millions of items which form a significant part of Australia's cultural heritage and the Distributed National Collection. Increasingly their images, documents and artefacts are being digitised and made available online, often through the Commonwealth-funded National Library of Australia Trove platform.'

The drive to digitise appears even more urgent as we face the uncertainties of climate change, fires, floods and other potential disasters that threaten the physical security of our collections. I am sure that most of us are aware of examples of societies whose collections have been lost or damaged in the last decade.

Digitising collections so that there is a second and more widely accessible format, is

the future. It also reduces wear and tear on fragile physical materials which can then be stored securely and handled infrequently.

Of course, digitisation has its traps, too. The risks involved in rapidly changing formats of digital media mean that digital collections need careful curation to ensure that their format is not superseded and that they remain accessible.

FAHS is one of the partners in Blue Shield Australia which in turn is part of an international network that works to protect the world's cultural heritage that is threatened by armed conflict and natural disasters. As its website states:

Blue Shield Australia runs an annual [MayDay Campaign](#), promoting disaster planning and awareness amongst archives, libraries, museums, galleries, heritage places, historical societies, local history groups and other cultural heritage organisations during the month of May. BSA also encourages Australian GLAM institutions

and Heritage Places and Historical Societies to review their disaster preparedness plans and resources.

Because of such concerns, FAHS is discussing a plan to encourage historical societies to prepare a time capsule of prime items from their collections. It is proposed that these will be launched in May 2020, to coincide with Blue Shield's campaign. The repositories of specially curated materials may take the form of either a physical capsule kept locally or an online 'capsule' in a space that will be created by the FAHS. Information about this project will be distributed in the new year.

In the meantime, on behalf of the FAHS Council and staff I wish all our societies and their members a safe and secure holiday period and a successful and productive 2020.

Don Garden, FAHS President

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies celebrates Get Online Week

For Get Online Week 2019, the Federation of Australian Historical Societies held two events called History Clinic Live. At these events, attendees asked an expert panel about digital projects and tools they could implement in their society. The following transcript is an amalgamation of the two discussions, in Melbourne and Parramatta.

Katie Dunn, Marketing & Digital Development at the Old Treasury Building Museum

Jillian Hiscock, Collections Manager and Volunteer Coordinator at the Royal Historical Society of Victoria

Jessica Scott, Marketing Coordinator at the Royal Historical Society of Victoria

Bernadette Flynn, Manager of Historic Houses Australia

Moderated by **Sophie Shilling**, Online Outreach Officer for the Federation of Australian Historical Societies.

Sophie: Good afternoon everyone, and thank you for coming along to History Clinic Live! I'd like to start by asking what digital initiatives are historical societies and small museums doing well?

Jillian: There are some good photographic collections I'm starting to see online. And they're sharing interesting stories about them on social media, and inviting people to give more information about the images. Historical societies teach people but we can also gather that useful information to use it in other ways.

Sophie: That social media data is so valuable. Because social media is ephemeral, people assume that the information isn't valid. But a lot of interactions that happen online between members of the public and institutions have previously played out in the form of letters, which would have been archived –



because it's all valuable information.

Audience member: It's fun to put up photos that are a mystery too – people love to be sleuths. And it's a really good way to get information.

Jillian: Yes, we've used social media to help figure out names in signatures.

Sophie: The #twitterstorians hashtag is really helpful for that.

Jillian: That information needs to be taken with a grain of salt though – it needs to be recorded differently. In eHive you can put research details into a special field, where it's private information, so we can put in that there were comments on Facebook indicating a correction or suggestion. Or you might change the record.

Jessica: You can also use Facebook to connect with your community and volunteers. It's a great way to have a two-way conversation, and for attracting new members or keeping your community updated. If you want to get a lot of pictures online, Instagram is great because it's a visual social media tool.

Audience member: The thing about Instagram is that you have to use the right kind of language – don't use old speak.

Jessica: Yes, it's called social media for a reason – it's meant to be social – if you get a comment, respond to

that person. People like to see that there is a real person behind the business page.

Sophie: Exactly. You know how when someone speaks passionately about something it's really engaging? That comes through on social media too. And don't worry that followers will find something boring, because if it's interesting to you then it's bound to be interesting for someone else. And if you're passionate about it that will shine through.

Katie: That's a good point, it's about your tone of voice. If you're academic in the way you're reaching out it's not as engaging for people when they're browsing their feeds. Rather than saying "This photograph of a man and his dog...", try saying "Check out this photo from the collection!".

Jillian: The Museum of English Rural Life have a great Twitter account [@TheMERL]. They shared a workbook from their collection that belonged to a schoolboy, and he had drawn these little sketches all through it – pictures of his dog and family, and inexplicably, a chicken wearing trousers. The person who wrote the thread had a dry sense of humour; it was really funny. And then there was the one about a mouse that got stuck in a historic mouse trap and died. The story was really entertaining, and it was the way they told it, the irony. I think they ended up treating it and



The Museum of English Rural Life use Twitter to tell funny stories from their collections.

Source: Museum of English Rural Life (@TheMERL), Twitter

putting the taxidermy mouse back in the mouse trap.

Sophie: I think 'reinstated her in her tomb' was the exact phrase. That Twitter account is the best example of engagement by museums on social media that I've ever seen. It's the way they tell the stories that is really funny. They could have just put up the photo, but it was a whole thread.

Jessica: Historical societies have the capacity to do that well – they're made of people who are so engaged with history. We've got the stories and we want to share them.

Jillian: Yes, you've all got really good experiences and stories.

Audience member: I try not to get bogged down in 'black and white history'. I gave a talk to some fifteen year olds and was worried that it would be a bit boring for them, but their teacher said not to worry – they weren't even born when the planes hit the Twin Towers. What seems like recent history to us is outside the lifetime of some of our audience. We need to keep bringing more history to them.

Audience member: I think schools are underestimated as well. We have 25,000 hits on our website, mostly from school children. Our aim was to engage with younger people – Facebook is the older generation and our website is for the younger generation. Our magazine isn't academic, it's about stories – stories of the town. Primary schools are booking in now because we looked at the curriculum, and work out how we can make our content relevant to the students.

Jessica: I got excited when you said it's about stories because that is what engages people. You don't need to be a writer, you've just got to let the story tell itself.

Sophie: Katie, you have a lot to do with schools at the Old Treasury Building, can you talk a bit about how to loop them in and use the curriculum?

Katie: Each school is different. Each topic is different. We go to education conferences, where I talk to teachers about what they need, and then tell the team that we need new projects on those subjects. A

lot of it is about social media for the teachers, teacher Instagram is a huge thing.

Jessica: #HistEd is the hashtag.

Sophie: These are all great ideas, but I think there are often concerns that time is stretched enough as it is. Do you have any tips for how tools actually save time for social media or other online activities?

Jessica: There are some tools that can schedule your social media posts. There's Buffer, Hootsuite, or Facebook itself, Planoly for Instagram, Sprout. Each of them does basically the same thing. You can take your time writing the posts, and schedule them instead of having to write them at the time you want them to publish. And most of them have a free version.

Jillian: For producing content, Canva is a tool which allows you to create images and posters. They have different sized documents based on the optimal size for a Facebook post, or Instagram, or a poster, or business card.

Jessica: It's a lot easier to use than PhotoShop, and a lot cheaper. Graphic designers have designed the templates.

Jillian: Yes the designs are good but you can fiddle with them, and put your own images in if you like. The end product is really professional. I've used it and I've got really low tolerance for online applications!

Sophie: What about for collection management? Jillian I think there was a change in our enquiries when the RHSV collection was harvested by Trove?

Jillian: Yes, people used to ask to browse a subject, but what I've noticed is that now our research enquiries are about specific objects in the collection, which saves us so much time. Being visible on Trove means that people start to link across to other collections, and it gives us a better idea for how our collection is being used for research. We also need to make sure that younger people use our collections, and I think they are more comfortable in the digital space.

Sophie: In terms of the people who are managing the back end of

collection management systems, or social media, do you think it really makes a difference whether you're a digital native or not?

Jillian, Katie, Jessica: No.

Sophie: I've always thought the biggest difference is the attitude when something goes wrong. If something goes wrong for a digital native, they might say "Oh, that was weird. I wonder why that happened" whereas someone from an older generation will panic and say "Oh no I broke it!".

Katie: And if that happens, just Google it! You'll always get an answer from Googling.

Sophie: Yes! Google and YouTube are great for that! What about some tools to make professional-looking websites? What have you all used before?

Katie: I built the Old Treasury Building website in WordPress. It was so much easier than I thought it would be. There are tools you can download to the WordPress dashboard to help you, like the SEO ones that will tell you when your page could be written better to get higher rankings on Google. And if you use WordPress, your page should automatically change and rearrange depending on the size of the screen.

Jillian: And those website builders will have design suggestions based on the way people view a webpage. There was a study where people had their eyes tracked, looking at where their eyes went when they open a web page. They look along the top, then down the left side for the menu, then about halfway down the page across to the right; it's a sort of F-shape. So think about the most important real estate on the page, and where people expect to find things. Avoid cluttered pages; don't try and put everything on to one page. Website visitors are looking for basics to start with and will browse further if they need. We also need to make websites accessible for everyone – things like alt-text should be used, and they should be compatible with screenreaders.

Jessica: I totally agree – less is more. Start off with contact details, a description of what you do. You

want to make it obvious for people where they should find what they need.

Bernadette: If a society doesn't want to build a whole website, they can simply make an account in eHive. That way they have an online presence that is easier to manage than a website.

Sophie: So after covering off the basics, societies might want to put collections on their website or elsewhere online, do you have any advice for them?

Katie: We find at The Old Treasury Building that we can tell a lot more online. For example the Wayward Women exhibition – we made all of the research available online. It's a way to share more than you can on a wall.

Sophie: Making connections between different collections can be really valuable too. Bernadette started up Australian Community History Collections on eHive – how does that work?

Bernadette: The FAHS found a way to connect the collections of historical societies by creating a 'Community' on eHive – called Australian Community History Collections. So any society with a collection on eHive can be part of it. I started Coober Pedy Historical Society on eHive a couple of years ago with ten image records – I think that's a good number because it doesn't cost anything, and it's a pretty good online presence to start with.

Sophie: What about those who are apprehensive about putting images online?

Jessica: I think the fear that people won't visit your physical space if your collection is online is totally unfounded. Some people may be able to only view online, but you know yourself that if you see something interesting you do want to find out about it and see it in-person.

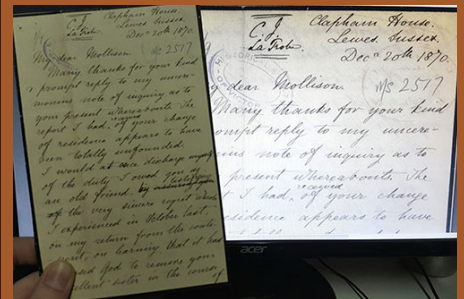
Katie: And if you've digitised objects it saves the originals.

Jillian: And we know that some historical societies have lost their collections due to bushfires. If you've got digitised copies,



UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AT THE ROYAL WESTERN AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Source: Royal Western Australian Historical Society.



HISTORICAL SOCIETIES ARE DIGITISING THEIR COLLECTIONS TO INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY AND SAVE THE ORIGINALS.

Source: Sophie Shilling, Royal Historical Society of Victoria.



SLIDE BOX DAMAGED BY BUSHFIRE, MARYSVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Source: Museums Victoria.

you've got your records in a digital form which gives you something if anything ever happens to the originals. For years I was used to sharing everything, but historical societies are different. Often you're making money off your collection so you can't put it out there where someone can just take a copy. But we've just started to put thumbnail images in catalogue records for the first time. Part of our *raison d'être* is to provide resources so that people can understand history and make it easy for them to gather information about how history happened, and who was involved. I suppose we have to walk that line of being open as well as making sure that we meet the needs of protecting the collection for copyright reasons. And protecting it if it's a revenue source.

Sophie: Sure, you might make some money from selling images, but it might be a good idea to assess how much value you're getting from selling images, versus how much value you can get from attracting people to your society, maybe becoming members, or donating their time as volunteers; a more long-term value gain. There are different types of value. I know that there will be people itching to know what software they should be using to get their collection online – Jillian, we've had a lot of conversations about this, haven't we?

Jillian: Yes, we've been talking lately about what's on the market, and how what you end up with will depend on what you have in the collection, budget, skills, hardware, whether you want to stay in-house, if you want it to be accessible online, or harvested by Trove. There are cheap and cheerful systems, then there are systems that are \$20K and more. There is no perfect product for everyone.

Sophie: Exactly, because historical societies represent each letter of that GLAM acronym [Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums], but in different proportions, so there's no such thing as the 'best' program for everyone.

Jillian: Yes – there's a range of products that you need to assess

against your needs to manage your collection. The imperative thing is that you keep your records consistent. Use subject heading lists, use standard naming for authors. Then if you have to change

Entire Collection - [View All \(9532\)](#)

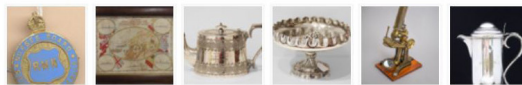
Archives - [View All \(1312\)](#)



Art - [View All \(28\)](#)



History - [View All \(4007\)](#)



Library - [View All \(1923\)](#)



Photography and Multimedia - [View All \(2262\)](#)



AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY HISTORY
COLLECTIONS ON eHIVE.

down the track, all of that data is movable. If you change the way you use fields, it will be an awful job.

Bernadette: Dublin Core metadata is critical if you want your collection to be harvested by Trove. A simple starting point could be downloading eHive's spreadsheet, because it uses Dublin Core – so you don't have to understand what it is or how it works. It uses the fields that Dublin Core needs. And eHive is a Trove partner; as soon as you put something new up on eHive if you're set up to be harvested by Trove it will appear there the next day. Take consideration of those before you start out. The good thing is that their spreadsheet is a free download. You can also adapt what you have to fit in with that.

Sophie: I agree. You would need to have your CMS sorted before Trove will deal with you. And there's no silver bullet. It's not an easy

process. You could estimate how long, triple it, and it will still take longer. But it's about consistency rather than accuracy. It's better to be consistently wrong, then you can use find and replace to correct mistakes. There are best practice ways to express names, for example – but if you find out halfway through describing your collection, don't change, just keep it consistent. And make sure everything is described a little rather than having a quarter of your collection described really well and the rest completely undescribed.

Jillian: Yes, I agree with what you've said about consistency and standardisation. We check if other people have a record for a similar object, like the NLA because then we can base our record on theirs. Don't try to start from scratch if someone else has already done the work.

Sophie: There's a good resource on the RHSV website called the Victorian Community History Thesaurus. It's a controlled vocabulary of subjects to do with Victorian history and its useful because if you find something on Trove described by an organisation in another state they might use subject heading 'Victoria – History', but that subject heading is useless to us because every one of the objects we have are about history in Victoria. So you'll need to go a little more detail. Equally, for RHSV a book about hand tools might have the subject heading 'Hand tools', but the Hand Tool Preservation Association won't use it because everything they collect has something to do with hand tools. It needs to be good for your society and it needs to be consistent – the thesaurus on the RHSV website is a good place to start. Don't reinvent the wheel. You can find resources like that on all the state historical society websites, plus the Federation of Australian Historical Society website. If you've not had a look at those sites, I'd recommend having a browse.

Sophie: That brings us to the end of our conversation today. Thank you everyone for coming. If you've heard something today that sparks an idea, or you have more questions, you can go to History Clinic on the FAHS website for assistance.

Vale Jeffrey O'Mara

15th June 1952 - 30th August 2019

On 6 September 2019 members of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland farewelled Jeffrey Lyle O'Mara, long-standing member, volunteer and Councillor of the Society at a funeral service in Brisbane. Jeff passed away at the Princess Alexander Hospital on the evening of Friday 30 August 2019 aged 67 years after a short illness.

Jeff was born in Brisbane on 15 June 1952, the youngest of four children. After leaving school he worked in the banking industry, during which time he was transferred to Mt Morgan. In 1977 he travelled overseas and upon returning to Australia he completed a computer course. This education paved the way for his future career as information technology support to the accounts department at Colorado Group.

Jeff was a generous and good humoured person. At his funeral, close friends remembered charming moments that he created, including lovely dinners for birthdays and special occasions; and his brother recalled witty and quirky activities, including dressing up and playing vinyl records on the lawn at Fernberg, Queensland's Government House, on one of their many open days. Jeff was

remembered by RHSQ President Stephen Sheaffe for his diligence and enthusiasm for the Society's activities, particularly the Commissariat Store Museum and its collections.

From an early age, Jeff maintained an interest in history, and throughout his life he collected history texts and maps. He began his life at the Society as a volunteer, selling books at conferences and other Society events. He regularly attended the History Alive weekends at Fort Lytton with other volunteers, where he promoted the Society's objectives and the Commissariat Store Museum's displays relating to early life in Queensland. At the Commissariat Store Museum, Jeff guided visitors young and old alike through the exhibits. His interest and enthusiasm for history was palpable.

Undeniably, Jeff's most significant contribution to the RHSQ's objectives was his vital work with the Society's museum collections. He served as Chair of the Society's Museum Committee, and spent many hours preparing and maintaining the museum's displays, including assisting the curation of the Shipwrecks in Queensland exhibition, setting up the Ties that Bind exhibition in 2017, and curating the Edison Tubes display, acquired by the Society in 2018.

In 2016, Jeff played a central role in moving several hundred items in the Society's collections from the former

Immigration Depot to a facility at Woolloongabba as a part of the Queen's Wharf precinct redevelopment. His careful management of the move ensured that the Society's collections – which range from delicate linen handkerchiefs to an oversized ship's wheel – were carted safely and accounted for upon their arrival. When the Society was forced to again move the collection to another location due to public works priorities, Jeff again coordinated the packing, movement and rehousing of the collection. He facilitated collection access to visiting researchers, maintained the museum collection database, and identified conservation requirements for items in the collection.

Jeff was appointed to the Society's Council in 2015, a post that he held until his death. The dedication and commitment he gave to the Society was of the highest order, and he was held in the highest of esteem by all who knew him. For his distinguished service, in 2017 he was presented the McGregor Medal for conspicuous service to the Society.

The Royal Historical Society of Queensland expresses condolences to Jeff's family and thank him for his significant and transformative contribution over many years. He will be sadly missed.

Stephen Sheaffe,
President RHSQ, and
Timothy Roberts,
Councillor RHSQ

JEFF O'MARA INSTALLING
SHIPWRECKS EXHIBITION.

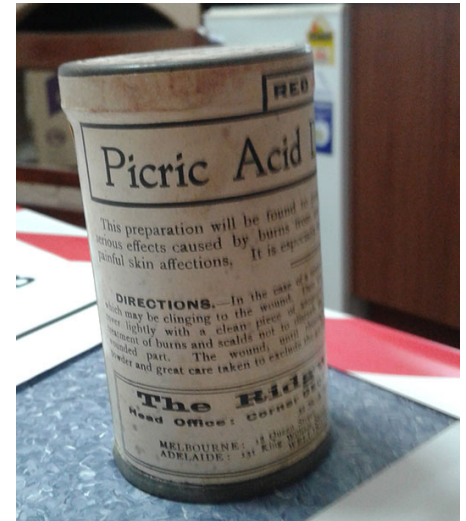
Source: Royal Historical
Society of Queensland.

RHSQ COUNCIL IN 2019.
JEFF O'MARA - BACK ROW,
3RD FROM LEFT.

Source: Royal Historical
Society of Queensland.



A Cautionary Tale: Narrogin Old Courthouse Museum



On a Friday morning in March, the small town of Narrogin in Western Australia was abuzz as the WA Police TRG Bomb Disposal officers arrived at Narrogin Old Courthouse Museum.

Two days earlier, volunteer curator Helen Elliot heard a story of a bomb squad being called to a country museum to detonate picric acid in the collection. She carried out some research to find out under what sort of circumstances picric acid might enter a historical collection, and discovered that picric acid was commonly used to dress wounds and burns, as well as to make grenades up until the Second World War. She then searched the collection for medical kits and found a WWI-era kit.

Inside the kit, a small tin of picric acid.

Upon locating the tin, she set it down on the work table in the Museum's back of house area, evacuated the building, and closed the Museum, before reporting the find to local police and fire services.

The building and immediate surrounds were cordoned off by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services until Bomb Disposal Officers arrived two days later. They assessed the tin and the site, and called the Department of Fire and Emergency Services to attend. Narrogin Police closed the road as

well as a nearby service station, and temporary fencing was installed around the site.

The tin was buried in a deep hole in the Museum's garden, covered with water, and detonated.

The remains of the tin were recovered and are now on display in the Museum.

The advice from Narrogin Old Courthouse Museum? Check your collection for hazards... you never know what you'll find.

M&G NSW has a resource about hazards in collections. You can find the infosheet [here](#).



ABOVE: THE IMMEDIATE AREA WAS CORDONED OFF AND THE BUILDING EVACUATED. Source: Helen Elliot.

BELOW: THE REMNANTS OF THE PICRIC ACID TIN ARE NOW ON DISPLAY IN THE MUSEUM. Source: Sophie Shilling



Helping historical societies Be Connected

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies has partnered with Good Things Foundation to help historical societies secure funding for digital projects. Historical societies who can register 30 people (or 15 in outer regional areas) will receive a \$2,000 grant that can be spent on anything relating to teaching people that is not building or capital works. We receive lots of questions about the program - so if you have any concerns, read through our most frequently asked questions.



DIGITAL MENTORS IN TRAINING AT HISTORY HOUSE, SYDNEY.

Source: Sophie Shilling

What grants are available in this program?

The first grant is the \$2,000 Activation Grant to register 30 people (or 15 in outer regional areas). After this grant, organisations can apply for a \$1,500 Community Engagement Grant to hold an event to promote the program. Once an organisation has registered 26 learners, they can apply for funding to register more learners, up to \$15,000. And don't forget Get Online Week 2020 - there are \$1,500 grants available to hold an event during that week.

We would like to join the Be Connected Network but it just seems like so much work.

Check out the resources page on the Be Connected website to see just how much has already been done for you. They've got lesson plans that complement the Learning Portal courses if you'd like to teach in groups, social media graphics designed for different social media platforms,

downloadable posters and flyers, worksheets, guides for hosting events, and online games for learners to practice their skills.

We've needed to purchase a projector/screen/computer for a while now. Can we use part of the \$2,000 grant for that?

If you will be using the device to help your learners, yes you can! And you can keep the device afterwards. Your \$2,000 grant can be spent on anything you'll be using to help learners, as long as it's not construction.

We don't have the space at our historical society to help learners.

Teaching does not have to be carried out at a historical society premises. You could use the local library, or even teach remotely! If your learners are intermediate they may not require any face-to-face assistance at all.

This isn't what historical societies are for! Starting something like this would keep us from our core business.

It is very difficult for historical societies to receive funding, so we recommend prioritising the activities that will earn income. That might mean running fewer tours or postponing a project temporarily in order to sign learners up to the Learning Portal. The course list on the Learning Portal includes many courses that are relevant to historical societies, such as searching online, using online forms (useful for requesting documents from National Archives of Australia, Births Deaths & Marriages, etc).

What do we need to do to acquire the grant?

You need to have 30 learners (or 15 if you're in a regional area) registered on the Learning Portal. There is no minimum course requirement for your learners.

Our volunteer's time is already stretched – how will we find the time to teach people?

Each learner's time requirements will be different. Perhaps your volunteers or members have intermediate digital skills and you would like to teach them how to use Google Earth, or more advanced search skills. The Learning Portal is not just for beginners!

Our digital skills aren't good enough for us to be able to teach others.

To be a Digital Mentor you don't have to have excellent digital skills – your skills just have to be slightly better than the people you're teaching!

The grant conditions specify that organisations in outer regional, remote, and very remote areas only have to register 15 learners instead of 30. How can we find out if we're in an outer regional, remote, or very remote area?

To determine if you fall within outer regional, remote and very remote areas, please use the Doctor Connect website. Select the tickbox "Australian

Statistical Geographic Standard Remoteness Areas", then select 2016 from the drop-down menu and enter your organisation's address in the "Address" field and click "Search location".

We already run classes about researching family history/ digitisation/accessing our collections so we don't have the time or resources to do any more training!

Have a look at the full course list – can you use these in your existing classes? Your participants could benefit from viewing some of the courses as an introduction to your topics. Just make sure they register and log in so that they count as your learners!

There is a way for every historical society in Australia to take advantage of this project – contact us and we can help you figure out how to get involved!

Sophie Shilling
FAHS Online Outreach Officer
OutreachOfficer@history.org.au



DIGITAL SKILLS
WORKSHOP,
BAIRNSDALE VICTORIA.

Source: Sophie Shilling

Grant spending ideas from local historical societies

"Our tables and chairs are old and mismatched so we're going to use the grant to purchase new ones, so that our learners can be comfortable in the digital skills classes we're running."

"We would like to buy a projector to use for digital skills classes, then we can also use it for events like lectures and exhibition openings."

"Our computers are very old so they're not suitable for beginners. We're going to use the grant to purchase some new ones for our learners to use, plus we can use them for cataloguing afterwards!"

"People often say that our building is hard to find, so we're going to spend our grant on better signage that shows we provide guidance to people wanting to get online."



HOW CAN WE DEFINE A MUSEUM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

Clockwise from top right: Broomhill Museum, Torquay Museum Without Walls, Natural History Museum London, Carnamah Museum.



Definition of Museums

We all know what museums are – right? But if we had to define the ‘museum’ precisely would we be so sure? This is the exercise currently underway within ICOM – the International Council of Museums. ICOM is the international organisation, within UNESCO, that represents the world’s museums. Its definition of what constitutes a ‘museum’ is widely cited and even used in the legislation of some countries, so modifying the definition is not an exercise to be undertaken lightly. On the other hand, if the definition is seen to be out of step with contemporary practice in member museums, that will also reflect poorly on the international body. It is all a matter of balance and careful reflection.

In 2016 the Executive Board of ICOM decided that it was time to review the current definition, to ensure that it resonated with global practice. The

existing definition was last amended in 2007, but the amendments then were minor. In its essentials, the current definition dates from 1974. A great deal has changed, in the world and in museums, since then. The current definition reads:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.
(ICOM Statutes, 2007)

Those critical of the definition pointed to problematic phrases like ‘society and its development’, or ‘humanity and its environment’. There was also a strong sense that the changing practice of museums

in diversity of representation, in complex story-telling and in debating complex, contemporary issues, should be captured.

None of this will come as any surprise to historians. Our own discipline has pursued these new directions vigorously over the past four decades and has been instrumental in introducing those perspectives to museums. Museums have also responded to external demands for change – from First Nations groups in particular, but also from women’s groups, from diverse communities in many nations, and most importantly in this post-colonial world, from former colonial nations (and others) seeking the restitution of their cultural property. All of these issues demand that museums approach their core tasks of collecting, interpreting and exhibiting very differently.

At the same time, we acknowledge that we live in a time of significant global change – even global crisis. The spectre of global warming looms large. In these circumstances, the scientific role of museums in documenting and interpreting the natural environment has heightened significance. As trusted purveyors of scientific information, many argue that museums have a responsibility to engage with contemporary issues and encourage informed debate. They also remind us that however hard we may try to be objective, 'museums are not neutral' spaces. (See #MuseumsAreNotNeutral)

In the period since 2016 ICOM has overseen a process of investigation, and consultation with its members, to define those elements that might be captured in a new definition of the museum. This culminated in a direct invitation to ICOM members to draft new definitions, which resulted in more than 260 submissions, from just about every country in the world. It fell to ICOM's International Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (of which I am a member) to try to distil these suggestions into a new proposal. Earlier this year that Standing Committee completed its work and proposed five possible new definitions to the Executive Board

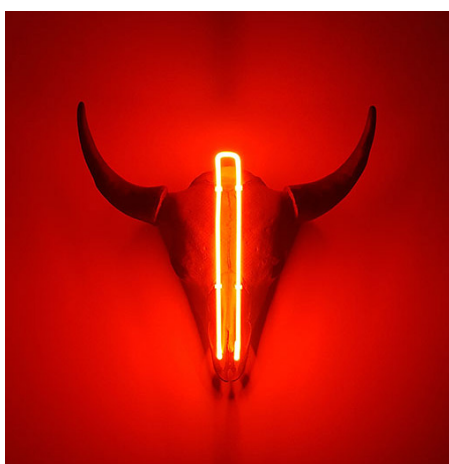
of ICOM. The Board eventually chose just one of these proposals and suggested its adoption at the approaching General Assembly of ICOM in Kyoto in September 2019. Unfortunately, the decision-making process had been slow and there was nowhere near enough time for member bodies, including national and other international committees, to consider the new proposal. The wording of the proposal was also somewhat awkward in English (ICOM works in three languages). It read as follows:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in partnership with and for communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and wellbeing.

Even before the release of the new proposal, conservatives within ICOM (many based in Europe) campaigned vigorously against change. Once the proposal was released they were joined by others who, while supporting the need for change, found elements of the proposal difficult and/or too long. In the end, the Kyoto Assembly voted to defer a decision while the process was debated further. And that is where the issue still stands. At this stage it is unclear whether the Committee will continue its work, and if it does, whether it will try to finesse this proposal, or seek alternatives. I will keep you all posted. In the meantime, any of us working in Australian museums can take heart from the knowledge that our work continues to be in the forefront of museum practice, well in line with the spirit of this new definition, or any revisions along similar lines.

Margaret Anderson, FAHS Councillor (Victoria) and member of the International Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials



The proposed definition seeks to emphasise representation of First Nations, women, and diverse communities in museum collections.

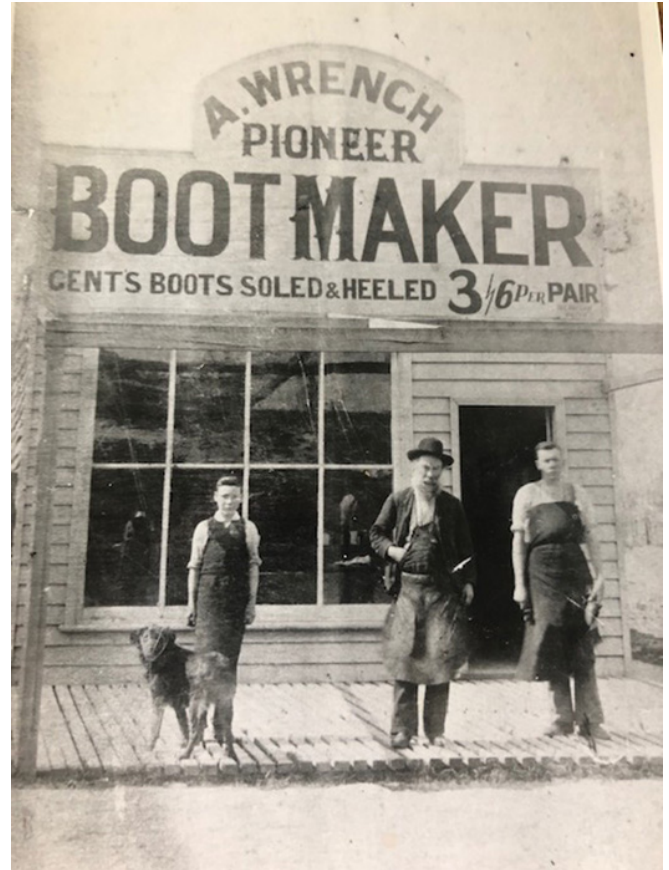
Father, Son and Holy Ghost (2015) by Kevin McKenzie at the National Museum of the American Indian, 2018; Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step Into Paradise at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 2019; Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, New York, 2019. Source: Sophie Shilling

Generations of Bootmaking



"You can't beat good handmade leather boots" – Jack Wrench – 1989

"Without the collection it would just be family history that I was interested in but not able to connect with" – Zachary Wrench Wilmot – 2019.



Coal Creek Community Park and Museum opened in 1974 on the site of an old coalmine in Korumburra, Victoria. Local residents developed the Historical Village known as "Coal Creek" in recognition of the early settler history of their town.

Extensive landscaping and regeneration work transformed the site, in preparation for the historical buildings that were re-located to the park from Korumburra and the surrounding district. A streetscape of businesses and shops winds through the centre of the re-created town, an array of historical furnishings, machinery, tools and objects complete the buildings and shops.

One particular shop located on the main street, holds a history and contents very familiar to me, the shop front painted - T. Wrench Pioneer Bootmaker, established in 1890.

The building houses a comprehensive collection of tools, patterns, materials and boots in various stages of construction made by the Wrench family for generations of local miners, timber workers, farmers and footballers.

On the wall overlooking this collection

hang two large photographs of my great grandparents Thomas Wrench and his wife Asenath.

Thomas taught his trade to his sons including my grandfather Albert who commenced his apprenticeship with his father when he was 12 years old. Albert passed the trade on to his three sons Alan, Harold and my father Jack. The family ceased making boots in the late 1940s; however, Albert continued to work alongside his sons in their shoe shop and repair business.

My familiarity with the material in Coal Creek stems from my childhood playing in my father's shop, with the retail stock housed amidst the repair business, tools and materials used during the first 75 years of the family business.

The brothers were proud of their family's history in the town; they valued their craft as evidenced in their keeping close all the material connected to their boot making identity.

When they relocated the items to the shop at Coal Creek, they viewed it as the fifth Wrench premises in Korumburra since 1890, the latest and final location for this family archive. The significance

of this collection as a Living Archive was reinforced to me in 1989 when the three brothers used the tools and materials in Coal Creek to make a miners boot for a documentary being made about their family.

In the years since the deaths of the brothers and the subsequent closing of their business in 1995, the family archive at Coal Creek slowly began to change into a 'historical collection'.

A story set in the past – at least that is what I thought.

The family narrative recently changed in ways that the brothers could never have predicted. Their boot making story had merely 'paused' a generation to be reawakened in 2019 by Jack's grandson Zachary. Jack died several years before my son Zachary was born, but it turns out his grandson inherited his love of handmade leather boots.

Zachary had accompanied me on several visits to the shop at Coal Creek in recent years, and unbeknown to me whilst I contemplated the changing status of the material, his interest and connection to it was awakening.



JACK, HAROLD, AND ALLAN WRENCH AT COAL CREEK.

Source: Rosemary Wrench.

The biggest challenge to restarting the family trade was of course the absence of his elders to teach him their knowledge and skills. This seemed insurmountable until we discovered the footwear design course at RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology). Andrew Robinson teaches the course and he provided a practical way to bridge the gap between Zachary and his ancestors.

Andrew taught Zachary the skills and processes required for designing and making handmade shoes and boots, he was also very engaged in the story of Zachary's family history and the unique archive he had access to. During the first semester, Zachary said, "I liked the idea of making boots and as soon as I started the course the idea grew on me that I wanted to make a pair of miner's boots using Thomas's design and patterns".

Andrew was also interested in this idea and supported Zachary in his quest to replicate the work of his great great grandfather in making a pair of bespoke Miners boots. Zachary visited Coal Creek to work out which pattern pieces and specific tools he needed. He also identified which of the partially sewn uppers he could use as a reference to assist him during the construction process. Photographs and descriptions of some of the other tools and items in the shop were also of great interest to Andrew and other students in his class.

Together they learnt about the different construction methods and functions of the old tools and the unique design of the boots. Early in the process, Andrew

explained the difficulties in manipulating and working with thick leather and described a particular type of tool that would assist. Zachary immediately remembered a 'mystery' tool that he had seen at Coal Creek. A quick trip to Korumburra provided Zachary the opportunity to revisit some of the stitched leather samples at Coal Creek and to compare these with the stages he had completed.

Andrew was impressed when Zachary turned up in class with additional ideas for the next step in making his miners boot and with the exact tool for the heavy leather that he had mentioned.

Once again, the status of the Coal Creek shop changed, turning away from being a static historical collection, to a working and teaching tool for the latest generation of Wrench bootmakers.

There have been a number of challenges to work through without one of his Wrench Boot making ancestors to assist, however the process of teaching and guidance provided by Andrew at RMIT, has assisted Zachary to unlock the knowledge and skills embedded in his extraordinary family archive at Coal Creek. He has been able to study the work of these past bootmakers and learn from them as if they were standing alongside him, teaching him in person.

When Zachary made his first pair of Miners boots, his aim was to figure out the unique design elements, the size and numbering systems; and how the patterns and pieces used by Thomas all fitted together. His focus for the second pair was to refine the preparation and

construction process, aiming to make the boots easier to construct and to create a neater finish. He was assisted in this process by rewatching the footage of the brothers making their boot and reviewing the samples from Coal Creek, this gave him the confidence to make slight modifications to the design and construction process.

Zachary's father is currently wearing the boots, testing their comfort and design to see if any changes need making in the next pair he makes. He also plans to make a pair of boots to add to the family archive in the shop at Coal Creek.

Zachary is honouring Thomas's designs as he restarts the family craft of bespoke Boot making under the name of Wrench Boots and Shoes. One unexpected result of this renewal has been the discoveries made when conducting further research into Thomas's early life. Not only did the Wrench Boot making story not end in 1995, it also started a generation and at least 70 years prior to the opening of the first Korumburra shop.

Jack and his brothers could not have foreseen the far-reaching consequences of their decision to open their shop at Coal Creek. The use of their archive 45 years later as a reference archive for Jack's grandson – in the same way these designs and skills were brought from Staffordshire to Australia in 1859 by their grandfather Thomas who at the age of 12 started his apprenticeship with his father Joseph Wrench, a bootmaker since the 1820s in Staffordshire, U.K.

Rosemary Wrench, Museums Victoria

MINER'S BOOTS, ZACHARY WRENCH WILMOT.

Source: Rosemary Wrench.

