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# Newsletter



## Disruption

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The loss of the Genoa School museum in the New Year fires (above) was a blow to the district and to all who had a connection to the site both as a school and as a museum.

2020 has presented disruption and challenges across the country with COVID-19 and various restrictions impacting on most Historical Societies.

While we can be grateful for the electronic advances which have made keeping in touch much more practical for most, there has been a grinding halt to many activities, from research to fundraising (but little cessation of bills to be paid).

In addition to these challenges, there have been questions raised about our interpretation

of history and the potential and often real bias to be found in the presentation of many of our stories.

This Newsletter explores many of these issues and how they have been dealt with across the country.

As the COVID threat appears to have lifted with most restrictions easing, there will be ongoing impacts on activities and membership - some positive but most providing yet more challenges for the volunteers in charge of caring for and presenting our history.

We have shown our strengths and tenacity: it's really just another battle to be fought!

*Pauline Hitchins, RHSV*



FROM THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY TO YOUR LOCAL MUSEUM, ONLINE INFORMATION ALLOWING YOU TO TOUR A MUSEUM WITHOUT THE CROWDS HAS BECOME MUCH MORE COMMONPLACE DURING 2020 AND THE COVID RESTRICTIONS.

Source: Alex Proimos, Sydney, CC BY 2.0.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/index.php?curid=25648976>

## Resilience during COVID

The impacts of the COVID pandemic on community history and heritage associations across the nation have been somewhat uneven. I have spoken with or written to representatives of many societies during the year and this is a synthesis of what I have been learning.

In the early weeks most seem to have had similar experiences, but as time has gone on both their location and their capacity for resilience have shaped their experiences and possibly their future.

The initial impact and the negative effects of lockdown are common across our sector. Everybody was forced to close their doors and there was a sudden decline in the capacity to undertake normal activities of research, digitisation of collections, mounting of exhibitions, holding of lectures, etc. Income plummeted or disappeared.

In the worst examples, because societies were blocked from access to their premises, equipment and collections, they were unable to continue even the most fundamental of collection management.

There are examples of societies in which membership

slightly declined because of disconnection with members, and there was (and is) concern that the loss of momentum will result in some volunteers not returning, and that replacement recruitment will become more difficult.

More positively, some organisations have exhibited a resilience that has enabled them to modify their operations in such a way that they have not only continued to operate but, in a number of cases, to thrive. To a large extent this has come about as a result of further adoption of digital media.

It is worth noting that FAHS has been promoting the development of digital skills through cooperation with the GLAM Peak Digital Access to Collections Toolkit (<http://www.digitalcollections.org.au/toolkit>) and through our partnership in the Be Connected project (<https://www.history.org.au/be-connected/>).

Where access to collections has been possible, in the absence of other activities a renewed focus on digitisation has often taken place. Many historical societies are already having their collection catalogues harvested by Trove but a good number have taken advantage of the lockdown to

move this work ahead. The Sandringham and District Historical Society (Victoria) is a prime example.

Zoom and similar communication platforms have, of course, revolutionised how we speak to each other. Committee meetings have been organised online and numerous societies have arranged the presentation of lectures, seminars and other activities online.

In an unexpected result, many organisations have reported that they have had greater attendances at lectures and AGM's than they would normally achieve face to face.

Maybe, in part, this is because of the novelty but I suspect that it is so much easier to sit at home in comfort rather than going out on a cold and wet winter night.

In accord with this trend, more societies are distributing their publications online, although they still cater for the minority of members who do not have computers by distributing hard copies.

It has been interesting to see that there has been a notable expansion of the social media presence of voluntary organisations. Websites and



SOCIAL DISTANCING AT MEETINGS (page 4).

THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION MADE APPROPRIATE ADJUSTMENTS FOR ITS FIRST MEETING PROVIDING HAND SANITISER AT THE ENTRY, CHANGING THE LAYOUT, SPACING CHAIRS AND PROVIDING A CHOCOLATE ON EACH CHAIR TO REPLACE SUPPER.

Source: THRA

members, apply for grants, and hold our Committee of Management meetings using Zoom. We have continued to communicate on various issues via email and also respond to research queries.

In addition, we have participated in online training, provided an online link to our current exhibition for public viewing, and are rewriting our records on the Collections database.

In summary, we have lost income as a result of the restrictions; we are conscious of maintaining regular contact with our members to keep them informed and socially engaged as best we can electronically; importantly we want to maintain our membership and the interest of members in the KHS; and continue to plan for the future return of face to face activities.

One question everyone is asking, is how far these trends are transitory or are pretty much here to stay?

We are social beings and one of the many benefits offered by membership of a society is the chance to meet, work and socialise with others.

That need will remain, but I suspect that now we have taken two steps forward with adoption of digital media, there will be only one step back, at most.

**Don Garden, FAHS President**

Facebook pages have been developed, and societies have recorded an increase in 'hits' which has led at times to more 'friends', more frequent requests for information and research, and this, at times, translates into new memberships.

Innumerable societies have shown flexibility and resilience. The following reply, which was received in May from Judith Voce, the President of the Kew Historical Society in Victoria, is an excellent example:

In response to the restrictions imposed under COVID-19, the Boroondara City Council has implemented lockdown to their premises which has prevented us from accessing our office, the Kew Courthouse, Phyllis Hore room and the Hawthorn Arts Centre.

As a consequence we have been unable to hold face-to-face meetings, activities, and

exhibitions. In fact we had just financed an exhibition and opened it when we had to close it to the public. Additionally, we have lost income from not being able to hold our quarterly book sales. Of course there have been no working groups' activities and we are limited in the exchange of collection items.

However, we have continued to provide newsletters to our



FIRST EXCURSION  
FOR 2020 TO  
THE CENOTAPH,  
QUEENS DOMAIN

Source: THRA



## Coping with COVID in Tasmania

Resilient, agile, flexible, supportive, teamwork and technology are all words to describe the qualities and approach taken by the Tasmanian Historical Research Association (THRA) over the past eight months.

The Association ceased meeting face-to-face in April due to Public Health guidelines, which prompted a re-think of how to continue delivering historical talks to members.

THRA's existing use of the SoundCloud platform to publish recordings of our monthly talks proved invaluable. Speakers agreed to be recorded at home without an audience, with one even recording their talk from interstate.  
<https://soundcloud.com/thra1951>

The program needed adjustment because some speakers were unable to finish their research due to the closure of libraries and archives around the country.

This is where our agile Committee members helped fill the gap. Dr Alison Alexander recorded a talk and Dr Elisabeth Wilson and Brian Rieusset stepped in when face-to-

face meetings resumed. Speakers were also prepared to change months and venues, enabling THRA to maintain a full program for the year.

The annual 'Tasmanian Life' lecture was presented by Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner, Governor of Tasmania. Originally planned to be held at Government House, Her Excellency agreed to relocate to the Hobart Town Hall to allow a larger number of people to attend and comply with public gathering requirements.

Adjustments also needed to be made too for THRA to return to our regular meeting place at Legacy House: hand sanitiser at the entry, a re-oriented layout to allow maximum numbers, chairs suitably spaced with a chocolate on each one to replace supper.

The Committee has borrowed screens and equipment to make the new set-up work and, along with our supportive membership, have pitched in to wipe down and sanitise chairs at the end of the evening.

The relaxation of public gathering

restrictions has also enabled us to hold our first excursion for the year. A small group visited the Queens Domain in September, led by Committee members Stefan Petrow and Ian Terry.

The group was given a guided walking tour of some of the less well-known sites of this treasured area of public open space that has been enjoyed by Hobartians since the 1810s.

The Committee has continued to meet throughout the year, online through Zoom for several months and now face-to-face again. Using Zoom was a new experience for some but, with support from one another, we made it work.

THRA has continued to produce Papers and Proceedings, our beautifully presented journal full of well researched and written articles.

Although the year has thrown up some challenges, THRA has achieved its objective 'to promote research into and publication of Tasmanian history'.

Caroline Homer, President, THRA

# Loss of Genoa School Museum impacts in many ways



Top: 1953 opening of Genoa school by Sir Albert Lind.

Centre and bottom: Remnants from the Genoa school fire - ceramic vessels including (top left) a gold smelting pot, a brewed ginger beer bottle and melted ornaments.

Source: Top M&DHS, above and P1, Chris Parker, M&DHS

The destruction of the Genoa School has been a huge loss, both as the Genoa School Museum, with its artefacts and original school documents, and from an emotional viewpoint.

The school was owned by Mallacoota P-12 College and the Mallacoota and District Historical Society had shared use of the site and buildings through a Memorandum of Understanding.

The site itself was acquired from Allan Peisley in the 1950s and was part of the original Old Genore Home Station, one of the three oldest leaseholds in Victoria (occupied by William Turney Morris from 1835).

It was the third building used as a school. The first was about 5 kms south along the Mallacoota Road, the 'Genoa River' school which used to run along the top of the ridge. When that fell into disrepair, the old Genoa Hall, which was situated next to the Genoa Hotel was utilised until the completion of the now burnt down building in 1953, closed in 1990.

A school is the lifeblood of any small community and pivotal to its identity and survival.

What the school housed was much more than written records and irreplaceable artefacts that belonged to past generations. It held the essence or heart of the stories of the people to which they belonged; a coming together of spirits.

Genoa is the link, part of a web of interconnecting threads that linked people to land and land to families and present generations to past European settlement and Aboriginal families to murder and displacement.

It was also the centre of education, with the teacher time-shared with Mallacoota, Wangrabelle and Wallagarragh.

This followed the changing population and industry of those times from wattle bark, subsistence farming, gold, dairy and beef cattle and from leasehold to freehold.

Genoa museum also housed the last remnants of Yambulla gold mining town; mostly broken but irreplaceable: locks, and crockery and harmonicas, a brooch, cufflinks and a small gold smelting crucible. My children's great grandmother went to school at Yambulla.

It also housed the last few bits and pieces of the Wangarabell School. A brick, a piece of old chimney flue; as well as photos of day M&DHS visited the site and collected these precious items.

There were also portions of the huge bridge timbers from the Heritage-registered Genoa bridge, the third to cross the Genoa River, and the stories of new roads, and the development of a town enabled by the construction of the bridge.

This was a bridge saved by the community from demolition by VicRoads to also be destroyed in the fires for want of one firetruck to protect our town.

So how do we record or capture that feelings of total desertion by Incident Controllers that left Genoa to burn, resulting in the loss of the school museum and the heritage bridge.

Clearly what is lost is measured so much more by what it represented, the people and the stories attached to them and the interconnecting threads that link them to every other aspect of life that was and is Genoa.

Clearly the loss of the school is a personal one for me. My children are descendants from Captain John Stevenson, James Allan, Alexander Weatherhead and their large families and

the intermarriages with a great proportion of other early families. And the parents and indeed the children of the present local community went to the Genoa School.

So how do you record the measure of that loss in history? My husband and his father went to the various Genoa schools. Words can describe it but the heart of stories, the essence of the people, their warmth, their sometimes colourful characters, successes and losses and daily lives can be lost in the retelling - a mere cold fact.

At Genoa we tried to capture that essence. Every person who was somehow connected to Genoa was important to us.

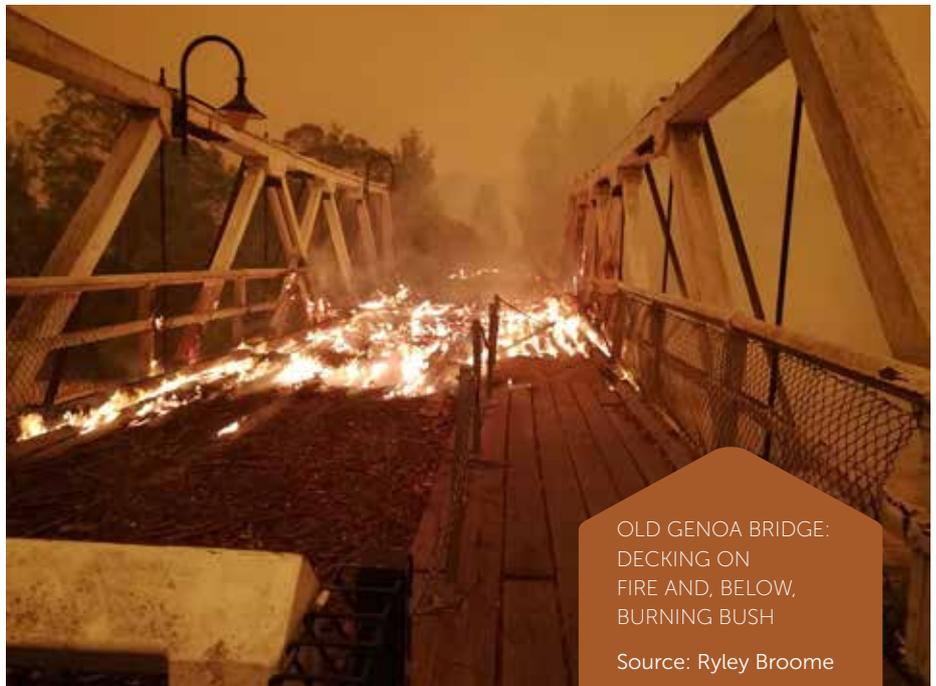
Due to time constraints, most of those files were uncopied and included private material and collections and snippets of information gathered over lifetimes - all lost.

Some of the best stories endure when re-told around a campfire at night, when the warmth of the fire and the darkness of the night somehow works its magic and people want to listen and feel, and wonder at and in some tiny way share or be a part of the story or taken on a journey back in time: the Genoa school was our campfire.

### Annette Peisley, Genoa Museum

Other significant heritage landmarks lost in the Victorian bushfires included:

- The 1928 Genoa bridge on the Old Princes Highway.
- Around half of the 1919 O'Grady's Creek rail bridge (over the Wairewa Road)
- The 1927 Murrindal River Truss Bridge on Basin Road north of Buchan
- Stringers Knob Fire Tower on Monument Track, Bete Bolong North, constructed in 1941 following the devastating 1939 fires
- 1926 Mt Nowa Nowa timber Fire Tower.



OLD GENOA BRIDGE:  
DECKING ON  
FIRE AND, BELOW,  
BURNING BUSH

Source: Ryley Broome



## Queensland

In Queensland's 2019-2020 bushfire season, fires across the state were ignited by lightning strikes, arsonists and persons using invalid or outdated fire permits.

The fire at Peregian south of Noosa Heads was started by teenagers. They are now progressing through the juvenile justice system.

The fire at North Shore north of Noosa heads was started by a man who lit it in the belief that his fire permit was valid. It was not valid because all permits had been cancelled because of a total fire ban. The fire progressed west to Lake Cootharaba and Lake Cooribah. Fire Fighters prevented it crossing Mackinnon Drive (from Tewantin to Boreen Point). If it had crossed that

road it would have entered two National Parks (former timber reserves) for which there had been no controlled burns although a faded sign beside the road indicated there would be.

In all more than 7,000 people (including Carramah Retirement Home) were evacuated as a result of these two fires.

The fire west of Yeppoon was also lit by arsonists and destroyed homes in rural residential areas but not public buildings.

These and a multitude of other Queensland fires illustrate the effect of them on society.

For more bushfire information and recovery plans see: <https://www.gra.qld.gov.au/2019-queensland-bushfires>

Ruth Kerr, RHSQ

# Bushfires and COVID in NSW

The bushfires that ravaged many parts of Australia in late 2019 and early 2020 were directly responsible for the deaths of 34 people.

In addition, an estimated 445 people died from smoke-induced respiratory problems. The fires devastated more than 8 million hectares of land along the south-eastern margin of Australia. It may take decades for the landscape and the native animals to recover from the impact of the fires.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the area destroyed by the fires was in national parks and areas where thousands of important Aboriginal sites and artefacts are estimated to be located. Indigenous communities and archaeologists fear that the fires damaged or destroyed them.<sup>2</sup>

The fires also brought desolation and grief to many regional towns and centres across NSW. People lost homes and often their livelihood. The damage and loss of buildings and sites of local heritage importance, was a further blow for many local communities already affected by prolonged drought.

The damage to the buildings, locomotives and rolling stock of the historic Zig Zag Railway is just one example. It was caught in the Gospers Mountain bushfire that spread into Lithgow and surrounding villages in the weekend before Christmas 2019, destroying much of its infrastructure. Some eight months later, largely through the efforts of dedicated volunteers, the site has been made safe and debris has been cleared, making it accessible for tourists and visitors.

Thankfully, there are no known examples of local societies in NSW losing their collections in the bushfires. Nevertheless, the intensity of what some have called the Black Summer is a critical reminder to our local societies of the need to prepare

for disasters, whether from water, fire or the atmosphere.

As nobody can predict when or how a disaster will strike, it is a timely reminder to local societies and museums to turn their attention to their level of disaster preparedness - counter disaster planning - and recovery plans they have in place. The objectives of these plans are to:

- mitigate risks affecting records
- prioritise records for protection and salvage, and
- outline what to do in different disaster situations as quick and decisive action is needed to get salvage efforts underway, before circumstances result in further damage to the collection.<sup>3</sup>

The Royal Australian Historical Society (RAHS) can offer its members and affiliates advice on the preparation of these plans.

Following in the wake of the Black Summer COVID-19 has threatened the future of museums and research spaces operated by local societies across the State. Many societies are facing significant financial hardship because they can no longer open owing to social distancing requirements. These restrictions have also affected their speaker and lecture programs, further inhibiting their operations and capacity attract new members.

While restrictions are gradually being lifted in some areas, for many societies run by older volunteers remaining closed for the present is considered the safest option.

Even when the doors are open to visitors the decline in tourist numbers to NSW regional centres means falling revenue and concern about future viability. The need to meet ongoing rental and insurance costs during the COVID-19 pandemic is a common issue of concern for many local museums in the regions.

However, there is also some positive news. Many societies have adapted to the COVID-19 environment and are taking advantage of video communication platforms that are now available. They are holding online committee and other meetings, as well as providing virtual talks and lectures. Zoom appears to be one of the most popular platforms and it has been a boon for many societies, keeping members in contact with each other and allowing societies to continue running their formal business operations.

Some societies have taken this time to turn their attention to sorting, arranging and tidying their collections in readiness for the time when visitors will again be welcome. Others have used the opportunity to review some of their policies, procedures and governance documents, as well as assessing their disaster preparedness.

The bushfire season was a frightening reminder of the fragility of our world. The challenges faced by many local societies and their communities - prolonged drought, bushfires and COVID-19 - are significant. Local family and local history societies, bound by an ongoing commitment to their communities and their contribution to our understanding and appreciation of people, place and our shared history, appear to be meeting these challenges.

## Christine Yeats, President, RAHS

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Tolhurst, 'It's 12 months since the last bushfire season began, but don't expect the same this year', *The Conversation*, 10 June 2020 (<https://theconversation.com/its-12-months-since-the-last-bushfire-season-began-but-dont-expect-the-same-this-year-139757>).

<sup>2</sup> John Pickrell, 'Thousands of ancient Aboriginal sites probably damaged in Australian fires', *Nature*, 23 January 2020, (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00164-8>).

<sup>3</sup> NSW State Archives & Records, 'Before a disaster: Counter disaster planning', (<https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/recordkeeping/advice/counter-disaster-reaction-and-recovery-plans/2-before-a-disaster>)

# Developments impacting on heritage

As the nation embraces development at an ever increasing pace, our heritage is being left behind: neglected, overlooked or demolished 'for the public good'.

Four heritage sites and the impact of development on them, all in the city of Parramatta, illustrate how little our history and heritage has meaning when in the way of developers. Brief histories reveal why these places are special, firstly to Parramatta and then to the wider community.

It shows also why there is an increasing groundswell of community voices in protest of these developments. The call of small local groups about loss of heritage has been taken up by radio and television to a degree. But many are concerned that development by government is big business and local groups may not prevail in their aims of saving our heritage.



ROYAL OAK HOTEL

Source: RAHS

**THE ROYAL OAK HOTEL**, Church Street, Parramatta has had a long and varied history. The original inn on the site, built in 1824 and named Shamrock, Rose and Thistle was rebuilt in 1839 by John Tunks. He was the son of William Tunks, a marine on the First Fleet vessel Sirius, and Sarah Lyons, a convict aboard Lady Juliana, 1790. John Tunks was born of this liaison on Norfolk Island and his home, which is still standing further along Church Street, was named Norfolk House

in honour of his birthplace.

As with many early inns, The Royal Oak has had many owners and been much altered over time. But the core was still visible. There have also been lengthy court battles and intrigue over the site. John Tunks lost the licence at some time but regained the inn by 1848. Unfortunately he died in that same year and his wife, Phoebe ran the hotel.

Sold out of the family from 1849, the Tunks family bought it once more in 1872 for £910, a substantial amount in those days, showing it was a promising business, situated as it was on the north end of Parramatta. Besides workers from local industry, traffic passing between Parramatta and Windsor would have been lucrative.

In 1900 extensive renovations were carried out, adding a parapet that hid the roofline. 1930s tiles covered the outside walls and some windows were changed but the 12 paned windows along Church Street were still intact – until recently. Sadly this well known and loved inn was in the way of development – the light rail has come to Parramatta and the 180 year old Royal Oak was in the way.

Despite much local opposition, alternative ideas for the light rail route and many ideas how to save the old building, it was demolished this year. Press releases from Light Rail proudly proclaim they have saved the stable block which was behind the inn. But a dislocated stable block has lost its meaning and as passengers look out on the stables as they pass by rail, how many of them will understand its significance?

## THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM IS COMING TO PARRAMATTA.

Now this is a much needed facility in a large city which has no museum at all. It should be



PARAMATTA RIVER IN FLOOD. PROPOSED MUSEUM IN BUILDINGS ON RIGHT.

Source: RAHS

welcomed by all and would be but for two things.

The Powerhouse Museum was not just slated to be a branch of the wonderful Powerhouse Museum in Sydney but the proposal was to close Sydney's museum and build a new one in Parramatta.

Secondly the site chosen for the new museum is on the banks of the Parramatta River which floods quite badly and there are two heritage listed buildings in the way, Willow Grove and St Georges Terrace, which would have to be demolished to make way for the new building.

From the first announcement of the project there has been noisy opposition from many individuals and groups and eventually there has been a decision to keep the Powerhouse in Sydney and build a new one at Parramatta – but still on the inappropriate site which is both too small and flood prone. Too small that is – until the two aforementioned heritage buildings are demolished. Proposals to incorporate the buildings within the museum have been rejected and the groundswell of opposition has become deafening.

Recently it was announced that Willow Grove, previously a private home and a maternity hospital is to be demolished and transferred to the Female Factory site in north Parramatta. Just how this

## Royal Australian Historical Society (NSW)

late 19<sup>th</sup> century building – to be removed and re-built at a cost of \$10 million – will fit in with the oldest convict women’s site in Australia is yet to be determined although the actual site has not so far been disclosed. When re-erected, the building will be totally out of context with its new surroundings and how much of the glass, brickwork, timber and ceramics will survive the move is also a moot point. The accompanying picture of the Parramatta River in flood shows the unsuitability of the site for a museum. In a small gain, St Georges Terrace is to be incorporated in some way with the new museum.

### ADAPTIVE RE-USE OF THE FEMALE FACTORY SITE

For eight years the Friends of the Female Factory have been trying to raise the profile of the Female Factory, the oldest convict women’s site in Australia instigated by Governor Lachlan Macquarie and designed by Francis Greenway.

Begun in 1818 and fully functional by 1821 it had many functions, convict women’s gaol, workplace (hence Female factory), asylum for old or sick convict women and it contained the first female health services – a lying-in hospital. Unfortunately this is part of a very large site, ripe for development, and the first proposal was for 30 storey housing units on most of the

open space. The site has gained National Heritage Listing during the last few years but the average person on the street thinks that will save it from inappropriate adaptive re-use. There is a central core of buildings designated as having outstanding historical significance and into these very buildings a start-up hub has been proposed by the government. This includes putting in a mezzanine floor and lift, along with restoration. Another building is to be adapted as a greeting place with coffee shop which makes the core look more like a shopping mall, blocking the aspect of beautifully simple, warm sandstone walls of the original buildings.

The Female Factory Friends have put together an alternative use of the site for museum and interpretive centre to be presented to NSW Government in the near future. A total of 35 submissions of objection have been received by the Sydney City Central Planning Panel and the alternative re-use will be raised there.

**ST JOHNS CEMETERY** is the oldest remaining cemetery in Australia, the first graves dating from 1790. It is the last resting place of 17 first fleeters with headstones and 65 without, besides many of the major players in colonial history. Two Governor’s wives, commissaries, the Wentworth family and nine colonists whose grants are

now NSW suburbs. Built on what was then the outskirts of town, it is now surrounded by two and three storey units and overlooked by a six level car park for Westfields shopping centre. With the ever quickening pace of development the sight line from the cemetery to St Johns Church (now Cathedral) has been lost. The spires were visible between buildings but now they are completely disconnected by high rise office blocks. A major local business has tried to buy the airspace above the cemetery which of course they cannot directly use. But this gives the right for the business to add extra floor space on another building being erected in the local government area.

The cemetery still belongs to Anglican Church Property Trust and they have resisted the idea of selling air space. Currently there is a development application for a 60 storey building to be erected across the road from the cemetery which will both completely overshadow and dominate this important historic site.

Just four sites in the City of Parramatta: but many more could have been chosen to represent how developers ignore the heritage that makes the city living place a livable, interesting and informative area.

Judith Dunn, RAHS



1818 FEMALE FACTORY BUILDINGS (left). CRANES IN THE SKY OUTSIDE ST JOHNS CEMETERY. Source: RAHS

# Development encroaching on a significant national heritage landscape



WEST BASIN WITH SILT CURTAINS INSTALLED. THE RED LINE ADDED TO CLARIFY THE LOCATION OF THE DOUBLE ROW OF CURTAINS. THE FOREGROUND LANDSCAPE IS PLANNED TO BE COVERED IN HIGH RISE DEVELOPMENT.

Image: M Lawson

Heritage cultural landscapes are extremely vulnerable to development but so are the setting of buildings and the landscapes of towns.

Cultural landscapes of precious vistas, green spaces for recreation, street trees for canopy cooling and bird habitats are gobbled up daily.

Now we are facing debilitating battles to keep our heritage - those places we want to keep for future generations.

As development corporations are generally financially well resourced, they have systemised a process of obtaining real estate by influencing politicians to support planning in keeping with their intentions, ensuring government agency boards are sympathetic to their proposals, encouraging relentless spin in favour of development, fudging community consultation, and riding roughshod over community groups trying to protect heritage and community values.

The days of Jack Munday and Builders Labourers Federation

winning the battles to protect Sydney's heritage in the 1960s and 1970s are long gone as are those halcyon days of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century when heritage was well supported and treasured. When corporations want prime real estate, the odds for heritage protection now appear to be zero.

We have our heritage registers in the States, Territories and the Commonwealth, as well as the National Heritage List (NHL) that supports World Heritage recognition and a collection of nationally significant properties. With respect to cultural heritage landscapes, there are some successful challenging listings such as the City of Broken Hill or the Adelaide Park Lands and City Layout.

Public notices for the National Heritage List and the Commonwealth Heritage List in 2020 are lengthy but not with listed places.<sup>1</sup> There are countless nominations, many expired nominations and numerous assessments under consideration by the Minister, some of which have been sitting at the same

status for up to 15 years. The last decade demonstrates diminishing financial and political support for heritage and it is only when well-connected individuals are concerned about the loss of a valued place that something is done as evidenced by the listing of Melbourne's Domain Parkland and Memorial Precinct, that appears, nominated in 2017 and listed in 2018.

The major example of this discussion is the cultural lake landscape system of Lake Burley Griffin and its parklands, initially researched and constructed by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) to harmonise with the original concept plan by the Griffins. The resulting lake landscape system retained the Griffins' central three-basin concept but modified the lake delineation to align with natural contours, achieving national awards for landscape architecture and engineering.<sup>2</sup>

With ACT self-government in 1988, the rush of private developers into Canberra put pressure on the Lake and other

# Lake Burley Griffin Guardians

A TRANQUIL WEST  
BASIN WITH CYCLIST  
IN ACTON PARK (2016)

Source: Juliet Ramsay



central city locations. The National Capital Authority (NCA), established in 1989 to manage the nationally significant areas, produced a highly illustrated report the — Griffin Legacy in 2004 (NCA 2004) to provide a blueprint for development to meet demand.

West Basin, a major component of the lake, was targeted with an amendment to the National Capital Plan in 2006 (Amendment 61) outlining the development intention (NCA 2016: 99-114). However, the Lake waters and half of the perimeter lands are under Commonwealth custodianship and it is not unreasonable to expect that this should have at least been listed on the Commonwealth Heritage List. But despite nominations and a heritage assessment study, it must be assumed — that to facilitate development, no listing has been achieved.

Since 2015, there have been two developments on Lake parklands that adversely impact the heritage values, neither of which were as detrimental to aesthetic, historic and social values of the Lake as the current West Basin proposal.

This proposal in-fills three hectares of the basin waters to enable a high-rise mass of buildings, obliterating a public parkland (Acton Park) that was always part of the Griffins' plan and NCDC's final Lake works. By 2015, ACT Government, following the NCA's proposal,

produced a plan —the City to the Lake. But it was in 2020 that the NCA moved on the release of the lakebed land —swapping the three ha of lake bed land for 31.6 ha of horse paddocks in the suburb of Curtin to secure a diplomatic enclave.

In March 2020, within the Covid 19 lockdown period, the gazettal of the land-swap was announced in the media, followed by public consultation for the foreshore and infill works without any information on the ensuing apartment estate. Of the 187 submissions, the 75% opposing the development were refuted<sup>3</sup> and a week later during the caretaker period of the ACT Territory Election, the silt curtains were installed in the Lake to facilitate the commencement of works.

The Canberra that visitors know and love is mostly the central national area with major cultural institutions where planning is controlled by the NCA. Canberra like other cities needs its green urban spaces now more than ever with the pending effects of climate change and pandemics. The lake waters and parklands are particularly precious in a dry inland city that has no sea harbour or large river estuary.

But huge efforts by several community groups to protect the Lake and its parkland that included heritage nominations, emergency heritage nominations, public meetings, petitions and countless media articles have all been totally ignored by the NCA

and the ACT Government. It also appears no consultation for development in this significant place was undertaken in national media with the wider Australian community.

Apart from what has been happening in the National Capital, the tentacles of development over heritage landscapes, including Indigenous heritage landscapes, extend everywhere.

Indifference to the concerns of community groups by government agencies and development corporations is indeed part of the process. Community consultation on development applications is simply a process to be ticked off with no other consideration. There is little respect or support for heritage in governments and our valued cultural heritage landscapes are being blatantly mined for financial gain.

## Juliet Ramsay, Lake Burley Griffin Guardians

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### Footnotes

1 *The National and The Commonwealth Heritage Lists can be viewed at <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/epbc/heritage.ap.pl>*

2 *Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, 1986, Lake Burley Griffin, a landscape project, National Projects Awards display information <https://portal.engineersaustralia.org.au/heritage/lake-burley-griffin-scheme-molonglo-river-1964>*

3 *<https://www.nca.gov.au/consultation/block-23-section-33-acton-acton-waterfront-phase-2-boardwalk-and-land-reclamation>*

# Museums are not neutral

Do you have fond memories of visiting museums as a child? I certainly do, although the museum displays that first captivated me would probably leave most kids unmoved today. The museums they know are very different places – full of light and sound, with lots of moving parts and devices to interact with (all pre-COVID of course).

The look and feel of many museums has changed completely in the past 40-50 years. But most of this is fairly superficial. Beneath the surface glitter and the technical make-over lies a far more profound transformation in the information museums now try to convey – the stories they tell, and the 'voices' we hear. I say 'stories' and 'voices' deliberately, because as historians we know more than most that there is seldom only one 'story' to tell about any person or event in the past.

As it happens, one of those who presents this argument most powerfully in modern times is not an historian, but a writer of fiction – the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In an interview conducted in 2009 she put it this way:

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity



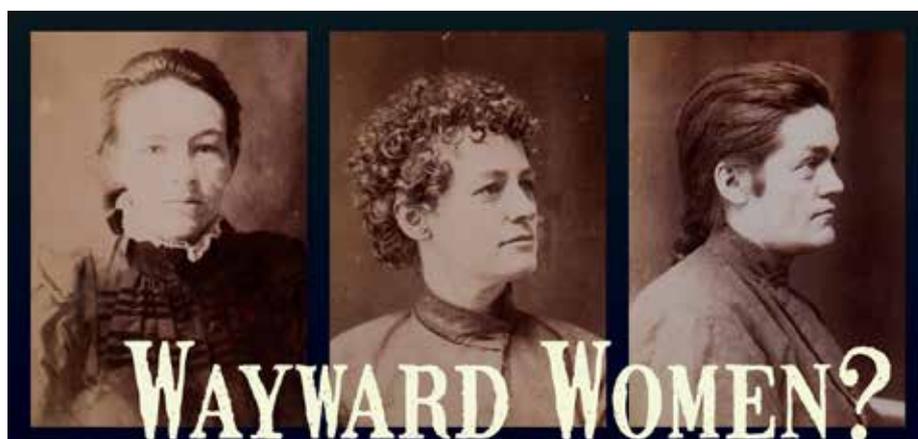
THE ENTRY TO MELBOURNE MUSEUM'S BUNJILAKA GALLERY EMPHASISING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND INDIVIDUAL STORIES. Source: Margaret Anderson

of a people, but stories can also be used to repair that broken dignity...when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise. (Adichie, 2009)

Adichie writes from the perspective of modern Nigeria, and of a people colonized first by the British and then by rival Nigerian groups. But more than that, she writes as a Nigerian woman, struggling to make her way in a patriarchal society. Her stories are not comfortable reading, but they are compelling reflections on a recent past.

Museums are also powerful story tellers. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the texts we write, the objects we select, the meanings we ascribe to them, weave compelling stories about identity, culture, environment and place. But how do we choose from the myriad stories at our disposal which ones to present in our galleries? Who makes those choices and whose voices do we allow to be heard? These are debates that now lie at the heart of our practice as museum historians.

Perhaps the most profound change has been seen in the way many museums now present the stories of First People. When I began as a junior museum curator in the mid-1970s 'Aboriginal' history as such was barely acknowledged, while First People themselves had no input into collections or exhibitions. It was the growing movement for Aboriginal rights that drove the process of change from the outside, with the assistance of a small number from within. And while there is, undoubtedly, still a long way to go, the stories of First People we now encounter in museums are very different: increasingly the voices we hear are their own.



WAYWARD WOMEN? AN EXHIBITION AT THE OLD TREASURY BUILDING PRESENTED STORIES OF NINE WOMEN AND TWO LITTLE GIRLS IN TROUBLE WITH THE LAW IN VICTORIA. Source: Old Treasury Building.

# The Old Treasury Building, Victoria



SCREENSHOT OF #Museumsarenotneutral SITE WITH ASSOCIATED TEE-SHIRT MODELLED. Photograph N. Zuhse.

The same might be said for many other groups – immigrant groups, women, members of other communities of interest – although substantial gaps remain. Members of LGBTIQ+ groups still struggle to find recognition in either museum collections or displays, along with recent immigrant groups and others whose stories present a more challenging perspective on our society – the growing numbers of homeless people for example.

Museums are among the most-trusted sources of information in contemporary society everywhere in the world and so it behoves us to be rigorous in our scholarship. But can we truly claim objectivity? Historians are trained to be skeptical of such claims, however we may strive to approximate it.

Other disciplines, those in science in particular, are less self-reflective, and there is considerable debate within museums internationally about the capacity of museums to present ‘objective’ information. Objectivity, or ‘neutrality’ becomes even more difficult in the face of intrusive government, the pressure of influential interest groups or substantial donors, or in local museums the often-subtle pressure exercised by prominent citizens, or collection donors.

Recent controversy wracked

several major international museums, including the British Museum, about funds accepted from companies, in the latter case BP and a major drug company. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/climate-activists-bp-british-museum-https://news.artnet.com/art-world/climate-activists-bp-british-museum-1578280>

Similar debate has surrounded museums in Australia accepting donations from major mining companies – particularly relevant after the recent scandal involving Rio Tinto’s destruction of the Juukan Gorge site. <https://www.riotinto.com/en/news/releases/2020/June-statement-on-Juukan-Gorge>

Typically, such contemporary debates will unfold online. One group of concerned museum commentators took its views to social media with great success. Its #Museumsarenotneutral site on Twitter gained many followers, later spawning a tee-shirt (and now a mask) for followers to wear at conferences.

As institutions, museums struggle to divest themselves of a history deeply embedded in the imperial/colonial endeavour. My own museum at the Old Treasury Building in Melbourne is a case in point. The Old Treasury Building is one of a handful of buildings in Melbourne that are quintessential embodiments of the gold rush, and associated colonial expansion, in Victoria. We cannot escape that history. But we can remain alert to it, interrogate it, and in the process try to incorporate as much diversity as possible in our programming. I would never claim that our museum is ‘neutral’, but we do strive to be inclusive in our storytelling.

## Margaret Anderson

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi (2009) online. ‘The danger of the single story’, TED Global (Accessed June 2020): [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)



SCHOOLS STRIKE 4 CLIMATE OUTSIDE THE OLD TREASURY BUILDING, MAY 2019. ONE IMAGE FROM A FORTHCOMING EXHIBITION, PROTEST MELBOURNE, AT THE OLD TREASURY BUILDING. Source: Katie Dunning.

# What to do with our statues and monuments?

**The Royal Historical Society of Victoria has published this Policy Statement to encourage further debate about the future of our memorials.**

The Black Lives Matter protests have highlighted the ways the past impacts heavily on us today. Our predecessors' values were in many respects appalling. Attitudes we would describe as racist, misogynist or anti-Semitic were embedded in past cultures. We are beginning to question them but we have a long way to go.

History has often been created by winners. The First Fleet landed in Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788. That much is undisputed. But was this an act of settlement or of invasion? Should it be celebrated or mourned - or both? The meaning of the past is in the eye of the beholder, but it is the winners who build memorials. What are we to do when some of these memorials offend, often in dramatic ways?

The most obvious and painful reminders of past slave-holding and massacres, racism and sexism are the monuments to those who embodied that past, like the statue of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Bristol slave-trader Edward Colston recently thrown into the River Avon. Taking such a statue out of public view may reduce the pain caused by reminders of the past, but it also erases a reminder of the colonial offence. We don't want to forget that past; we need to repair the injustices left from it.

Destroying symbols of the past doesn't repair the wrongs of today. The weight of our past will continue to press upon us until we acknowledge and correct the present injustices it has brought upon us. Until we prevent deaths in custody and police brutality; until we give our First Nations peoples a fair say in our society; until Indigenous children have just as realistic a hope for a decent life as other Australians; we are all diminished.

For 111 years, the RHSV has stood for preserving our history and heritage in order to face it and improve upon

it. We have stood for and stand today for the preservation of historic sites of all kinds because heritage keeps us in touch with our past, both positive and negative, and because destruction of heritage causes pain, as so spectacularly in the appalling recent destruction of the Juukan Gorge caves, which was perhaps Australia's most ancient heritage site.

In the years since the RHSV was founded, however, much has changed. Women having recently gained the vote entered the public sphere, nearly all nations signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, civil rights movements challenged racism, and the United Nations forged many other rights, including those of Indigenous peoples, refugees and children. These new rights have emerged because we have changed. Those in the past may have looked like us, but they thought very differently from us.

We at the RHSV are painfully aware that our organisation has in the past supported monuments which commemorate events or persons which we would now condemn. Preservation does not mean glorification. The RHSV will now research what monuments its members might have helped to create in the past and consider, after consultation, what appropriate actions might be needed. Such actions might include new or additional plaques giving alternate interpretation(s) of the memorial. This has been done in the past and it can be a positive and creative act of public and civic education.

Whether or not the RHSV has past involvement, we acknowledge that, in some cases, interpretation may not be sufficient to avoid apparent glorification. In cases (like that of Edward Colston) where a monument causes such pain and in effect commemorates only past wrongs and no other value, removal (preferably to a museum, especially if the monument has aesthetic merit or heritage value) may well be appropriate, after genuine discussion. Removal may be commemorated by an historical marker, so we do not forget our

sometime grim past.

In other cases, where a monument represents an historical figure who shared the world view of his or her epoch but who also stood for or accomplished something transcending that world view, it may be appropriate to add inscriptions that explain the different aspects of their career and/or the problems we see in their legacy to maintain the conversation and help build an informed consensus about what to avoid, change or keep from the past.

How should we proceed to make decisions in such cases? We advocate public processes to ensure that. We support what the Mayor of Bristol called a 'citywide conversation' 'informed by good history', with fair representation of First Nations peoples and other concerned minorities, proceeding through agreed channels. Many of Victoria's statues and monuments are registered heritage sites and in that case the channels of conversation must include Heritage Victoria.

In general, we call for a campaign to erect appropriate monuments and memorials to those whose past has been overshadowed. Local councils and historical societies, in consultation with First Nations peoples and other affected communities, would be well placed to organise such monuments. Clearly First Nations and other concerned communities should take the lead in creating such monuments. The RHSV will seek to support such action wherever it can. By the erection of a monument, we increase awareness of history and help to right imbalances of our history. Thus, to understand our history better is preferable to attempting to erase it.

We ask all Victorians to join this conversation. By discussing and better understanding our past, together we can forge a better future.

**Richard Broome,  
Chips Sowerwine,  
RHSV**

# History told through the state's stories and collection



Recently launched online, *Collections WA* ([collectionswa.net.au](http://collectionswa.net.au)) is a free, searchable platform that aims to make readily accessible information about and representative examples from collections of libraries, galleries, museums, archives, historical societies, cultural organisations, community groups and other collecting organisations across Western Australia.

*Collections WA* is an initiative of the Collecting Sector Working Group and is overseen by the Australian Museums and Galleries Association Western Australia and the Western Australian Museum with funding provided by Lotterywest, the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development.

This central database is intended to capture 'countless shared stories' of the diverse statewide museum, gallery and archival collections. It aims to 'unite and strengthen' the stories and 'build connections' to help the community 'gain a better understanding of Western Australia's history'.

*Collections WA* enables organisations to publish all or some of their item records online for free and to have an organisation profile page which is visible to the public. Members of the public do not need a user account to view the collections.

The website graphic design is attractive. The home page provides links to a sample of stories and records covering various record categories (War and Conflict, Aboriginal and TSI, Popular Culture, Art and Design, Social History).

On the home page there are attractive images linked to lists of various types of organisation (eg. archive, community collections local government collection, historical society, museum and school/University Archive)

The database can be searched according to an organisation's name, region or organisational category (e.g. Archive, Local Government Collection, Historical Society), item type (eg. Theme, Organisation, Material, Creator, Year, with Audio, with Document, and there are further facilities to search for categories under each of these headings (for example, for Material there

are options to indicate type of material). Specific items cannot be searched.

In all there are 19 named organisational categories from which to choose and there is the provision for the user to add a category.

Organisations wishing to have a presence on *Collections WA* complete an online application form providing organisation and collection details. On acceptance of the application they are given access to the record data entry section.

The dashboard allows editing of the organisation's details (which include a link to the organisation's own website); mass import of objects; creation of a single record; and creation of stories, with the option to choose whether to make the record public.

A checkbox at the bottom of each record allows the additional options of making the record a highlight on the organisation page, of restricting public access to ID and item only, of giving notice that it contains sensitive information, or of keeping it private with no public access.

## Collections WA

Public records contain both public and private data, with identification, description, context, media files and any optional external links made public while private data includes acquisition, condition, storage and usage, valuation, rights and notes.

This new resource is still in its infancy and there are some hiccups to be overcome. For instance, there is a need to expand the options available for item names and materials, and a list of available options needs to be accessible, so that less tech-savvy small organisation users will find data entry more user-friendly.

However, the database is being constantly improved in response to user feedback and, once these early issues are overcome, it will be a great asset.

The currently listed organisations

vary considerably in the number of records and stories they upload – some provide a small sample of collection records and others provide their whole collection; some provide stories and others do not.

For small organisations which do not have the resources to provide online access to their collections, this database is a boon and the sponsors are to be congratulated on making it possible.

It is not intended that this database will include collections from major institutions. However, if the community's understanding of the history of WA is to deepen as a result of Collections WA, such organisations should have a presence on that database with stories, a sample of their items and a link to their online collections database, perhaps on their profile page.

I believe that it is a pity that the Western Australian Museum, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the J. S. Batty Library of Western Australian History and the State Records Office do not have a presence on the website with links to their online catalogues.

These organisations hold the bulk of the State's movable heritage items and, since the database does not provide access to their collections, *Collections WA* is a misnomer.

Although their online catalogues are available to all through their websites, I believe most, if not all, users would expect that a database referred to as *Collections WA* would include access to the records of the state's major collections.

**Helen Henderson AM**  
Vice-president  
Federation of Australian  
Historical Societies (Inc.)



Victoria Cross of Sergeant Martin O'Meara VC awarded for outstanding bravery over a number of days at Mouquet Farm during the 1916 Somme Offensive. Each Victoria Cross is unique in that the medal is cast and hand finished including a secret identifying mark. O'Meara's medal has a further distinction. Because it was never mounted, it still retains the original presentation clasp which allowed it to be hooked onto his uniform at the time of investiture.

Source: Australian Army Museum of Western Australia, on [Collections WA](#)