

WILLOUGHBY HISTORY CHATTERS

APRIL 2016

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COMING EVENTS

Saturday 9 April: WDHS
general meeting with
Doug Zihrl as guest
speaker: 'Is your print
an original?' (see p6).

Sunday 17 April:
Formal opening of the
'Rediscovering
Willoughby's Rural
Heritage' exhibition at
the Museum from 2pm.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2015

Times and circumstances are changing both for me and for the Society. The change becomes more apparent with each year, and causes me to reflect on the different circumstances we have faced over my time with the Society. I must continue to reassure myself that change does not necessarily imply either degradation or improvement. Change happens and organisations that do not respond can fall by the wayside, but change can be a challenge, or an opportunity, or both. I find this situation applies to me personally and to the Society as a whole. This gives me constant cause to dwell on coming issues for myself and the Society.

Today's agenda will lead us to consider several issues governing our future. We seek your involvement in these changes. The circumstance of early years with often large attendances, a welcome line of speakers, regular tours and few administrative challenges have been balanced by today's increasing activity in information gathering and dissemination, such as displays at our museum, newsletters, on-line service and in-tours. We must not allow regret for past meeting attendances of 40 or 50 members to detract from our sense of satisfaction and pleasure in the true advances being made by the Society and its museum. We are now delivering information about our history in an attractive manner for today's audiences and it seems incumbent on us all to accept and nurture these changes.

I must now thank the magnificent efforts of our volunteer committee. Without the leadership of your museum curator/editor/*pro-tem* treasurer, your secretary, and the committee with Mary, Joan and Don, this Society would not be functional. For the record I must be specific about the work done by these people.

Bob leads us through the information field by recording the museum contents, researching the history of Willoughby and writing it up to be easily accessed; setting up our constantly-changing displays, and gently leading us through our challenges. Mary as

vice-president, keeps a watchful eye over us all, and thankfully brings to our attention matters small and large for our consideration; Terry, our secretary, handles the routine tasks of managing email and other formal contacts with outside bodies and researchers, and performs various other secretarial aspects of museum business. Joan is ever ready to parry and research enquiries from the public, while pursuing her own research. Don takes practical steps for us in maintaining the museum and grounds, and entertaining as well as educating the troops at meetings and on tours. Additionally Margaret McNaught, Rob Wilson, Alexis Tay and our student volunteer James have given us happy and willing assistance during the year.

The proud efforts of the Society are presented in our newsletter and through both permanent and temporary displays in the museum. Bob will also refer to membership and financial conditions, and the fortunate associations we have had with outside short term volunteers from Council and elsewhere. I can happily report to you the many in-tours from Willoughby-based and outside bodies keen to tour the Museum, as well as gaining an appreciation of Chatswood heritage, Willoughby bushland and the Griffin Estate at Castlecrag.

2015 saw a four-fold increase in visitors to our museum, primarily due to visits by young people from Willoughby Girls' High School and Willoughby Public School, as well as a local pre-school centre, who are keen to return. These are activities which will be maintained and expanded in the future.

Paul Storm

MUSEUM ANNUAL REPORT 2015

Overall 2015 was a year of advancement for the Willoughby Museum, particularly in comparison with the two previous years. In part, this improvement reflects the two new exhibitions we initiated during 2015. For the National Trust Heritage festival we mounted a new exhibition, *'The Home Front, 1913–1920: How Willoughby families coped'* which explored the stories of Willoughby men and women who had served overseas during the war (the latter as nurses or matrons), but the main focus was on the impact of the conflict on local families, particularly the role of women in supporting those on the battle fronts, particularly the role of the Chatswood Red Cross volunteers.

With wonderful assistance from Jacky Talbot, Willoughby Council's Arts & Cultural Services Manager, our museum mounted a special exhibition for the Inaugural Willoughby Visual Arts Biennial during the Spring Fair in September. This was developed by artist-in-residence Rhonda Pryor, who used our extensive lace collection to develop art works displayed both in our main exhibition room and at the front of the museum building. With assistance from Willoughby Council, a team of volunteers was brought together for the duration of the exhibition **'Place Marking'**, which required the museum to be open five days a week between 5 and 27 September. There were also two public workshops hosted by Rhonda Pryor during this period. While the public response to this event was disappointing, it represented a new dimension for our museum and its volunteers which, we believe, will be beneficial in the longer term. Sadly Jacky Talbot is no longer with Council, but our good fortune is that she became a member of the society following the completion of her council employment.

Outside the preparation tasks for these two exhibitions, our small band of volunteers has made considerable progress in enhancing the presentation of our permanent displays. An introductory history of Willoughby from pre-European settlement to the present day is now presented in the main hall though 15 A2 size panels featuring key elements of our history. Steady progress has also been made in updat-

ing the displays relating to the tanning industry, coach-building and other trade tools in the Eric Wilksch Room, with seven new panels on the tanneries of Willoughby and their processes now displayed. With these enhancements now in place, we were able to acquit the Museums & Galleries Project Development Grant at the end of year 2015.

Visitation to the museum showed a dramatic four-fold increase over the 2014 figure, namely 780, compared with 190 the previous year. Moreover, 44.5% of our visitors were under 19 years old (compared with just 7.4% in 2014). This was primarily due to visits by pupils of Willoughby Girls' High School in April and Willoughby Public School in May.

Basic assessment and accessioning of collection objects was maintained throughout the year by a small band of volunteers. Particular thanks are extended to Terry Fogarty, Margaret McNaught, Mary Thom and Mary Green for their assistance in this task, while we were also supported by Alexis Tay, who joined us as an intern under her Post-graduate Diploma in Museum Administration studies at the University of NSW in December 2014.

Our website continues to provide an

important promotional vehicle for the museum and the society's activities. Throughout 2015 it has had between 1400 and 2500 visitors per month and between 37,000 and 57,000 'hits' a months, with an average of 49,020. Through this medium, a delegation to Willoughby City Council from its sister city of Sugunami in Japan learnt of our museum and requested a visit to the museum. We hosted the 15 member delegation led by mayor Ryo Tanaka on 21 June. The opportunity to see the layout of a typical Australian house of its period and particularly our restored kitchen, were highlights for the visitors.

While there is still much to be done in documenting the history of Willoughby City and recording our collection items in the database. Our website serves as our window to the world and is gaining recognition as a valuable site in terms of promoting the history of Willoughby City and the lives of the people who shaped its destiny, for the benefit of future generations. While resources to maintain the collection are limited, we look forward to 2016 with some optimism, particularly the opening of a new exhibition for the National Trust Heritage Festival.

Bob McKillop



New tanneries display in the Eric Wilksch Room at the museum. Bob McKillop

MEMBERS' CORNER

Thanks are extended to those members who have paid their membership fees for 2016.

We currently have 36 members and five life/honorary members for a total of 41. Thelma MacGowan, our former auditor who has been an honorary member since stepping down from this role, has joined as a regular

member this year. Welcome Thelma and we hope to see you at some of our functions.

We welcomed many members and friends to our Annual General Meeting on 13 February (including Mayor Gail Giles-Gidney and Cr Wendy Norton). Following the meeting, Dr Ian Hoskins delivered his fascinating

presentation (see below). The event in the Willoughby Room at Willoughby City Library wrapped up with discussion over refreshments.

A new group, the Nascent Poets' PoetryCircle meets monthly (7pm on the fourth Tuesday) at the Willoughby Museum for poetry readings and conversations. See page 6 for details.

IAN HOSKINS PRESENTATION

Dr Ian Hoskins, the historian at North Sydney Council, delivered a fascinating presentation at our AGM meeting on 13 February on the new online feature: 'At Home in North Sydney: an architectural history of a locality', which he recently developed.

Ian explained the background to the project and the advantages of an online presentation over a traditional book, before working through individual elements of the website projected

onto the wall of the Willoughby Room. These commenced with a timeline on the home page setting out the history of North Sydney. Ian then presented key sections of the website, notably Architects, House Design, Lost Houses and Social Trends, wrapping up with 'My House', the stories of four prominent North Sydney residents. Throughout the presentation Ian explored individual images of house plans and photographs, as well as playing a selection

of interviews he had recorded with key contributors to the project.

It was one of the most stimulating presentations we have had at our general meetings and most of those present stayed on for discussion on the subject over refreshments.

You will find 'At Home in North Sydney' at: <http://www.athomeinnorthsydney.com.au>



ABOVE: The audience at the start of the 2016 WDHS AGM. Others came later. RIGHT: Paul Storm introduces Dr Ian Hoskins.

NEW PHOTO COLLECTION

Peter Bidence has recently donated a collection of images to our photo collection at the museum. Most of them (43 images) are scans from Peter's b&w negatives taken during Willoughby Municipal Council's Centenary celebrations in 1965. They are mainly taken around Chatswood railway station, though there is one of shops on the north end of Willoughby Road with Willoughby Girls' High School in the background. Unfortunately the scans for the negatives are low resolution, although some work on these in Photoshop has improved them somewhat.

The remainder are more recent colour images taken with a small digital camera or phone. Some of these show construction work on the new Chatswood Railway Station and bus interchange circa 2007, together with the completed station facilities in 2014.

We have formally thanked Peter for this donation and a selection of the images is presented here.



TOP: The eastern entrance to Chatswood railway station in 1965 with the White Elephant shop prominent on the left and the taxi rank centre. ABOVE The Heritage Train at Chatswood Station, 23 October 1965. The Governor's carriage is in the foreground.



RIGHT: The shops at the northern end of Willoughby Road presented a very different scene to this site today. The main Willoughby Girls' High School building, on the other hand, has seen little change.

THE XYLONITE STORY

Today we live in an age of plastics, much to the detriment of our environment. At the Willoughby museum, one type of plastic in our collection, Xylonite, offers a fascinating insight into the social aspirations of many in our community in the 1920s and 1930s.

History

Cellulosic plastic—based on cellulose, the basic structure of plants—was invented in 1852 by Alexander Parkes, who developed cellulose nitrate into a mouldable dough he called Parkesine. Parkes exhibited his plastic and the Great London Exhibition of 1862 and was awarded a bronze medal. The new product also caught the eye of Daniel Spell who worked for a company that manufactured rubberised cloth. Spell approached Parkes and they jointly established the Parkesine Company Limited in 1866, to manufacture the new product. The company went through two bankruptcies and in 1877 it was re-established as the Xylonite Company (later the British Xylonite Company).

A key problem with the early Xylonite cellulosic plastics was that they were highly inflammable. Nevertheless, the Xylonite Company used the product in a wide variety of that mass-produced vanity sets that were marketed to Victorian households at trade fairs and through department store catalogues.

The 20th century

1907, when Leon Bakeland developed the first synthetic plastic, Bakelite, was the start of the modern plastic era. Although widely used in automobiles and radios, it only came in a dark brown colour.

The big advance was in the 1920s, when German scientists developed dyed phenol-formaldehyde plastic (Vulcanite), which enabled the manufacture of colourful plastic products for home use.

The British Xylonite Company profited during World War I when the British Government commissioned celluloid items such as combs and shaving equipment to assist with the war effort. Its American counterpart, the DuPont Corporation did rather better from selling ammunition to the Allies and post-war it promoted its 'fake ivory' plastic products, under the name Pyralin, to an upwardly mobile public. DuPont also profited from the decision of the US Government to introduce an 'Excess Profits' tax in 1917, enabling larger existing businesses to reduce their tax by deducting advertising costs.

The outcome was a golden age for American advertising as manufacturers and advertising agencies embraced dramatic new tactics for stimulating desire. Rather than selling the Victorian values of the inherent quality of their products, advertisers began to sell feelings, benefits and experiences.

The downside was that retailers' catalogues and advertisements in women's magazines promoted Xylonite and Pyralin based products alongside similar items that used silver, ivory, ebony and

other premium timbers. Their aim was to sell imitation ivory (Xylonite or Pyralin) to consumers of more modest means who could see themselves owning an article once enjoyed only by the wealthy.

Thus, the principal audience in both Britain and America for celluloid ivory became those who considered themselves to be upwardly mobile and as a whole, they sought to emulate their social betters, leaving them susceptible to advertising of goods that remained just beyond their reach.

Our Xylonite collection at the museum covers a range of predominantly women's accessories of British or Australian manufacture dating from 1925 to the late 1930s. They have largely been donated by local families. Several are shown here, but a much larger range of items will shortly be posted on the WDHS website.



Xylonite items at Willoughby Museum: Dressing table alarm clock (top-left), XYL.1994.35T; Stand with buffer, powder containers and manicure set (right), XYL-1993.26T; and powder holder from a three-piece dressing-table set (bottom-left),



Council roadworks were a major means of generating employment for Willoughby men during the Great Depression. In this scene, employment relief workers are excavating Market Street, Naremburn on 25 July 1935 in order to construct a stone base. David Warner collection, WAR.0595.1993

CONTACTS

WDHS Management Committee:

President: Paul Storm (9419 7354)

Vice-President: Mary Thom

Secretary: Terry Fogarty

Treasurer: Bob McKillop

Committee Members: Joan Antarakis, Margaret McNaught, Don Swonnell, Rob Wilson

Patron: Gail Giles-Gidney, Mayor of Willoughby City

Newsletter Editor: Bob McKillop

Willoughby Museum

Our museum is located at *Boronia*, 58 Johnson Street, Chatswood.

Opening hours: 1-4pm each Sunday.

Admission \$5 adults; \$4 concession; \$2 child, \$10 family.

COMING EVENTS

Members' Meetings

Held at the Willoughby Room, Willoughby City Library at The Concourse, commencing at 2pm on the second Saturday of even months (except December).

Saturday 9 April 2016: Members' meeting with Doug Zihrl speaking on 'Is your print an original?' He will cover how to identify original prints, such as etchings, silk screen and lithographs. Doug will use actual prints, including some from the museum collection, to explore how a print can be identified as an original or a later reproduction.

Tours & Events

Poetry Circle at the Museum:

The Nascent Poets' 'PoetryCircle' meets monthly (7pm on the fourth Tuesday) at the Museum for poetry readings and conversations. For details, please contact:

nascentpoets@gmail.com

Griffin walks in Castlecrag, Saturday 16 April:

The popular Walter Burley Griffin Society guided walks will be held from 10.00am to 12.30pm. Adults \$20, children \$10, family \$50, concession \$15.

Booking essential at: <http://www.trybooking.com/JZGG>

From 2.30pm on the same day, there will be a presentation by former residents backed by slides of 'The Crag' in the 1920s-30s, at the Marion Mahony Griffin Hall, 121 Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag. Prices and booking as above.

Sunday 17 April 2016: Formal opening of the exhibition 'Rediscovering Willoughby's Rural Heritage' at the Museum by Mayor Gail Giles-Gidney at 2pm.

The new exhibition focuses on the Chinese market gardeners who operated in the municipality from the 1870s, together with an exploration of the food styles and eating habits of the local community from the 1870s to the multicultural world of Willoughby City today. The exhibition is open each Sunday from 1.00-4.00pm and on other days by appointment. See address and entry details above right.

WILLOUGHBY DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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FUTURE MEETING TIMES

The question has been raised whether we should change the day and/or the time of our general meetings at the Willoughby City Library, as 2pm Saturday is a busy time in Chatswood. Members attending the October general meeting voted to leave the date as the Saturday. We are seeking feedback from the wider body of members on the following alternatives:

- Saturday at 2.00pm;
- Wednesday at 6.00pm;
- Tuesday at 2.00pm; or any other suggestions.

Please advise your thoughts by phone or by email