

MORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

published monthly, except December

Meetings: 3rd Tuesday of the month at 7.30 pm

in St. Andrews Presbyterian Church Hall

Vol. 9 No. 2

FEBRUARY 1993

WELCOME TO THE FEBRUARY NEWSLETTER

This month we continue our look at "La Belle Epoque" with some notes on the decade 1911 - 1920.

February being "bushfire month" (though not, we trust, this year!) we reprint a series of articles written by Mr. Ivan Maddern for the Society in 1964.

We are hopeful of gaining use of part of the Old Town Hall for meetings, storage and displays. A meeting between committee members and Morwell City Council officers has led to the proposal being put to Council for approval. We await the outcome with bated breath!

The Society has received a copy of the history of Australian Paper Manufacturers Maryvale Mill, compiled by John Davidson. Consisting of newspaper reports, newsletters, documents, brochures as well as historical comments and with many photographic illustrations, it is a most absorbing book and well worth a read. Our copy was bound by the Centre for Gippsland Studies and we thank both Mr. Davidson and the Centre for their donation.

NEXT MEETING: TUESDAY FEBRUARY 16, 1993 - Hope to see you there.

STOP PRESS !!
See "Express" 11-2-93 p. 11



PERHAPS WE CAN HELP YOU TOO!

The following was written to RHSV Councillor Judith Bilszta after the visit of a group from the Werribee District Historical Society by Gwen Hames, Hon. Sec., who has given permission for her letter to be reproduced here.

Dear Judith,

On behalf of the members who made it to tour the RHSV and old Mint, I offer our grateful thanks to you and the other members of the RHSV for your time.

Your knowledge and memory is incredible! Everything so well organised and in its place. Will we ever get to that happy state?

I don't know what I expected, but I was truly impressed. We all were.

In future I shall suggest to enquirers they approach the RHSV first, they will be surprised how much you have to offer.

Thanking you again

Yours most sincerely,

(signed) Gwen (Hames)

In the November issue of *History News* the President invited requests from country societies for special Sunday openings of the Old Royal Mint. What was done for the Werribee District Historical Society can be arranged for your society too.

HISTORY NEWS

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS

Professor AGL Shaw (Monash University of Melbourne) will take you through Ireland, Scotland and England to areas from whence convicts were sent out to Australia and where significant political, economic and social issues developed, leading to the creation of this convict class. At the same time, you will be travelling through some delightful country and of course, add-on travel before or after the organised part of the tour, is easily arranged.

The tour will leave Australia in September and will include Dublin, Wexford, Cork, Killarney, Limerick, Chester, Lancaster, Lakes District, Glasgow, Mull, Edinburgh, York and Salisbury.

Tour cost per person for this fully escorted 27 day tour is \$9,755.00 and further information may be obtained from ALUM TRAVEL, PO BOX C235 CLARENCE STREET, SYDN. 2000 or by PHONING (02) 290-3856.

EXHIBITIONS

“WILL YOU COME FOR A DRIVE IN THE TALBOT?”
- THE EDWARDIAN ERA: AN EXHIBITION', 19 March - 7 May 1993.

This will take up the themes of this year's Victorian Heritage Festival and Senior Citizens' Week.

PERMANENT ROYAL MINT EXHIBITION

Entitled 'History of the Old Royal Mint, this permanent exhibition is now in place. Although no funding has been provided by our landlord, the Ministry for Finance, the project has its approval. The RHSV receives many enquiries on the history of the building and an exhibition drawn from our own collections and from objects on loan from the Mint in Canberra should prove an attraction to the large numbers of visitors who pass through the building. Our curator, Lorenzo Iozzi, is to be congratulated on this achievement and the thanks of the Society go to volunteers Peter Morgan and John Knight who have assisted in assembling the display panels and cases.

WHO WILL ANSWER OUR PLEA FOR AN ANSWERING MACHINE?

The donation of an answering machine would help improve our service to members and others by recording messages when the office is unattended. If you can help the RHSV in this way, please contact the Director, 670 1219.

GRANT FROM ARTS VICTORIA

The Minister for the Arts, the Hon. Haddon Storey, has approved a grant of \$49,300 to the RHSV to assist in meeting operating, project and equipment expenses for 1993. This sum will be of considerable assistance in meeting the many commitments of the Society.

THE DECADE 1911 - 1920

"This was a decade dominated by one great and hideous event: the First World War." (Peter Luck - 'This Fabulous Century')

The years 1914-1920 were consumed by war and its consequences but the first few years of the decade were unshadowed by the looming conflict.

In 1911 Roald Amundsen became the first man at the South Pole and racing driver Louis Chevrolet founded the Chevrolet Motor Co. which built a bargain-priced car to challenge Ford. George V was crowned in Britain and Walter Burley Griffin won a prize for designing Australia's future capital.

1912 saw President Woodrow Wilson elected in U.S.A., the sinking of the 'Titanic' with the loss of 1,513 people, and the building of the first monoplane with an enclosed cabin, by A.V. Roe in England. Chicago physician James Herrick also documented the first heart attack diagnosed in a living patient, and the S.O.S. Morse signal was adopted as the international distress call.

In 1913 Decca produced the first portable gramophone and the first electric domestic refrigerator went on sale in Chicago.

In Australia, in 1914, Nat Phillips and Roy Rene formed their famous 'Stiffy and Mo' partnership and brothers George and Jim Coles started a store with the motto "nothing over a shilling". George, Jim and their brothers Arthur and Dave all served in the A.I.F. in World War 1. Jim and Dave were killed in France but after the War George and Arthur started another store, this time with the motto "nothing over two and six" and this remained true until the next world war.

4th August 1914 saw the British declaration of war on Germany and Australia's entry into the conflict. The British Foreign Secretary said: "The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit in our lifetime." Almost 60,000 Australians would be killed in action. Nearly 70% of our troops would be killed or wounded, the highest casualty rate of the Empire.

In 1915, Australia's 'six-bob-a-day tourists' created the Anzac legend at Gallipoli and in various other theatres of war.

A referendum in 1916 and another in 1917 failed to support conscription but Australians supported the war effort whether on active service or on the home front.

In 1916 the leaders of the Easter Uprising were executed in Ireland and 1½ million people died in the world's bloodiest battle on the Somme.

Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917 and the United States entered the War.

THE DECADE 1911 - 1920

In 1918 the 'War to End All Wars' finally came to an end. 8 million people had been killed, 21 million had been wounded and 7½ million were missing. The map of Europe was redrawn the following year at the Treaty of Versailles.

Following the War in 1918 came the world-wide 'Spanish Flu' epidemic, a pneumonic 'flu which killed a further 21 million people. In this year also, propertied British women over thirty were allowed the vote for the first time - a partial victory for the suffragettes.

1919 saw the beginning of world reconstruction. The League of Nations was set up and the Weimar Republic was established in Germany. Also in this year a single foot pedal was used to operate coupled 4-wheel brakes on cars for the first time. The driver no longer had to apply a hand brake and a foot brake simultaneously. In this year also, Ross and Keith Smith made the first flight from England to Australia.

In Morwell the decade was naturally dominated by the war years. In 1912 Morwell's first telephone exchange, with six subscribers, was set up and the Shire purchased its first horse-drawn grader.

1912 was a bad year for Commercial Road traders. Two disastrous fires, on July 31st and December 31st destroyed a total of nine shops and the need for a reticulated water supply was underlined. Morwell Waterworks Trust was formed in September 1912 and in 1913, water from Billy's Creek spurted from a hydrant in front of the Post Office in Commercial Road.

November 1914 saw the formation of Morwell's Volunteer Fire Brigade. The war years in Morwell were much the same as for most other country towns with women struggling to keep farms and businesses going in the absence of their menfolk and those men in protected industries working longer hours. 64 townsmen enlisted - 8 did not return home.

In April 1916 the Commercial Road school was closed because of an outbreak of diphtheria in the town and in 1919 Morwell succumbed as did most other towns, to the deadly pneumonic 'flu which was sweeping the world. People sprinkled eucalyptus on handkerchiefs and covered their noses as they went about their business, hoping to ward off the virus. Commercial Road School became a temporary hospital staffed by volunteers to nurse 'flu victims

In 1919 State Electricity Commissioners recommended the development of the Morwell brown coal field and excavation of an open cut began at a site later to be known as Yallourn. Thus the scene was set for Morwell and surrounding areas to move into the industrial age during the coming decades.

SOURCES This Fabulous Century - Peter Luck
 Timetable of Technology - Edward Ayensu
 Heart of the Valley - Stephen Hegg

Every few years since the beginnings of settlement, Victoria and other parts of Australia have suffered from serious bushfires. The greatest bushfire disasters in Australia have occurred in Victoria, and the greatest bushfire disasters in Victoria have occurred in Gippsland. The reasons for this are firstly our climate, then our vegetation, and finally our geography, both physical and human.

Gippsland was, and is, a very rugged area, covered with huge forests and comparatively sparsely settled. It is difficult for few people to fight huge forest fires in country that is well-nigh inaccessible in many parts. There is the further fact that our eucalyptus trees are highly inflammable vegetation, particularly at the end of a long, dry summer. All our worst fires have occurred in January and February.

Eventually, the forests will be still further reduced and their place will be taken by more farms and settlements, with a larger population exercising more control over narrower areas. The methods of preventing outbreaks and of fighting outbreaks of fire will improve, as we develop even better water supplies, and use modern equipment, but our climate will not change and it will remain as our biggest threat in this matter.

The difference between the effect of the heat of the tropics and that of the heat of our temperate zone is well illustrated in the simple matter of sunburn. It is impossible to get sunburnt in the tropics (except when there is a drying sea-breeze), because the atmosphere, already fully charged with moisture, cannot absorb the perspiration of our bodies, which forms a protective unguent for our skins. But, in our summers, the perspiration evaporates instantaneously in the dry heat. This has a cooling effect on our bodies, but it also leaves our skins unprotected from burning by the sun.

This dry heat has a similar effect on the vegetation, from which every drop of moisture is sucked out, leaving it tinder-dry and highly inflammable. After the lush growth of spring, following good winter and spring rains, Victoria may have three months, from December to February, or even longer, with little or no rain. At this time of the year, with the dry grass and undergrowth acting as kindling fuel for the forest trees, it takes only a spark from a camp fire, the careless disposal of a lighted match or cigarette, or something similar, to start a bushfire raging out of control.

Our forebears must have been completely ignorant, at first, of these new conditions and their dangers. Bushfires were occurring in the Sydney area, less than ten years after the first settlement in 1788.

5.
The Morwell Historical Society.....2/11/64.

Early Morwell.....by I. T. Maddern.

The Great Victorian Bushfire of 1851.

There have been several disastrous bushfires even in comparatively recent times, but there are three that stand out from all others in the extent of their damage to this State or this locality. They are the Great Victorian Bushfires of 1851, the Great Gippsland Bushfires of 1898, and the Great Morwell Bushfire of 1944.

The year 1851 is a particularly important one in Victorian history, since it saw not only the vast conflagration of February, but the beginnings of the gold rush with the discovery of alluvial gold at Clunes in June, and the proclamation of Victoria as a separate State on the 1st. July, 1851.

These three events are linked closely with the question of population. A population of 77,000 people in Victoria in 1851, together with the remoteness of its centre, Melbourne, from the seat of government in Sydney, made necessary the independence of Victoria. This population doubled itself in the first year after the discovery of gold. However, it was still too small and spread too thinly over the countryside, to make possible any control over the immense fires that broke out in the hot, dry months of January and February after the drought of 1850.

Victoria was only in its seventeenth year of permanent settlement at the beginning of 1851. Melbourne was a town of several thousand inhabitants, but practically the whole of the area of the State outside Melbourne was taken up with squatting stations, each from fifteen to forty square miles in area, and each occupied only by the squatter and his family and the few men he employed to herd his cattle or to shepherd his sheep.

With no water, no fire-fighting equipment, no fire-fighting organization, and with very scanty man-power, the people of Victoria could do nothing to stop the 1851 fires, and could only wait for them to burn themselves out, or to be extinguished by rain.

So little did the people of Victoria know about the dangers of bushfires, that the settlers themselves caused the disaster of 1851 by "taking the opportunity of the dry season to effect a good burn-off of the scrub on their properties". This was indeed playing with fire.

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The whole of the Western District from Barwon Heads to Mt. Gambier was ablaze, with Portland, Warrnambool and other places barely escaping destruction. Dandenong was burnt out. There were other serious fires in the Geelong area, the Ballarat area, the Plenty River-Diamond Creek area, and in the north and north-east of the State. Strangely, on this occasion, Gippsland suffered least of any part of Victoria.

The worst day, Thursday 6th. February, 1851, is known in our history as "Black Thursday". Cinders fell on ships far out at sea; a heavy haze settled over Launceston in Tasmania, and the temperature at Melbourne reached 117 degrees Fahrenheit.

The summer of 1897-1898 was very hot and dry. Fires broke out in many parts of the State but the biggest and worst, lasting over a period of six weeks, were in Gippsland. The towns of Neerim North and Thorpdale were destroyed during the worst period of the fires, 13th. to 21st. January; many other towns barely escaped, and many selections in various parts of Gippsland were burnt out.

It was in this year that the Yinnar South School was burnt down. Here is the report that the teacher, Roland Greaves, made to the Education Department in a letter dated Thursday, 3rd. February, 1898. He was in charge of the two half-time schools, Yinnar South and Hazelwood Ridge.

"A fearful bushfire swept over the ranges at the back of the Yinnar South School, on Tuesday, 1st. February, and completely destroyed it. I had school at Yinnar South that day, but being warned that the fire was approaching rapidly, I sent the children home shortly after 12 o'clock.

The school paddock contains about an acre of ground, and it is enclosed by a post and rail fence, being surrounded on three sides by scrub, logs and tall, dry trees. The fourth side is bounded by the road which is cleared in the middle, with scrub and timber on both sides. The scrub in the paddocks around the school had been cut last year and was lying thickly on the ground in dry, inflammable heaps. The people of the district worked hard to save the school, but by 1.30 p.m. it was surrounded by a roaring fire which crossed the road into the grass flats on the other side. The majority of those assisting me to protect the school had to gallop away to save their own homes and I was left with three men to do our best.

By this time the outbuildings had been consumed within a few minutes. The fire made a clean sweep of the school grounds but we prevented it taking hold of the school. Trees were blazing on all sides, some falling across the fence and setting it on fire in several places. The heat was intense and the dense smoke was blinding and suffocating.

Shortly after 3.00 p.m. when the school seemed safe, apart from the danger of the burning trees and intense heat, against which we could do nothing, we thought it advisable to try to get away ourselves. There was only one possible route - along the road - and at the third attempt, we got through safely, and I went home to Hazelwood.

This morning, I returned to Yinnar South and found that the school had been reduced to ashes. Logs and trees are still burning in all directions. Buildings have been destroyed, thousands of acres of grass have been laid waste, and many cattle have been roasted.

The school caught fire between 5.00 and 6.00 p.m. observed by a party of men engaged in beating back the fire from the residence of Mr. Gilbert, on a hill nearly half a mile from the school. They tried to reach the school along the road, but could not do so."

The summer of 1943-1944 was another hot, dry season, typical of our worst fire-danger periods, and indeed, in the matter of lives that were lost, the fires of January and February, 1944, must be counted as the most tragic Victoria has suffered.

In January, 1944, fire swept through the Western District of Victoria, causing 35 deaths. The later fires, and particularly the one that devastated the Morwell-Yallourn area, on the 14th. February, 1944, increased the death toll to well over 50 persons.

The Great Morwell Fire started at Hernes Oak early in the afternoon of the 14th. February. It is said that an old tree stump which was being burnt a day or two earlier had been left smouldering, and when a gale force wind sprang up, sparks from this stump were carried far into dry, inflammable grass and scrub. In a short time, the fire seemed to have leapt for miles and the whole countryside was ablaze.

It was wartime, and in Latrobe Road beyond the town, was a flax mill, where flax, an important war-time commodity, was stacked waiting to be processed. Flax is an oily substance and very inflammable. The water supply which would have helped to lessen the destruction in Morwell, was diverted to save the flax mill, but the mill did not escape, and the flying, burning flax set further fires blazing.

The thirteen people who lost their lives that day have been commemorated by memorial gates at the Hazelwood Cemetery, and a plate on the gate pillar lists their names. They were:

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|----------------|---------------------|
| T. Cook; | J. A. Robinson; |
| Mrs. E. Dyer; | C. Tanner; |
| J. Flitton; | R. Thomas; |
| Miss G. Hare; | A. Thompson; |
| P. Jones; | F. Walker; |
| Mrs. V. Jones; | Mrs. A. Woollacott. |
| W. McNair; | |

Reports in the Melbourne papers of the following day, 15/2/44, stated that over 100 houses had been burnt down (including 19 at Hernes Oak and 10 at Morwell), that patients had been removed from the Morwell Hospital to the Town Hall as a safety precaution, and that the Yallourn Open Cut was on fire for a distance of a mile.

The fire at the Yallourn mine was gradually brought under control and finally extinguished on Friday, 18th. February. This was the second fire there, the first being caused by the bushfires of January, 1929. On that occasion the mine had to be flooded by the Latrobe River to extinguish the blaze, and it was some weeks before the water could be pumped out and work could begin again.

This fire of 1944 also burnt fiercely along the Ridge, and destroyed the old wooden bridge over the railway line. This bridge, an important part of Old Morwell, was not replaced.

SOME NOTES FROM THE "MORWELL ADVERTISER" 1964 editions as recorded in the Morwell Historical Society's Log Book for that year.

18/5/64 - Explosion at Gas and Fuel Corporation plant 13/5/64. Alan George Prest killed instantly, Hugh Dickson died 16/5/64

21/5/64 Miniature zoo and garden at Gunn's Gully is to be moved to make way for the new Princes Highway.

4/6/64 Criticism and photo of old Band Hall, Commercial Rd.

11/6/64 Fifty-seven people from eleven different countries naturalised in ceremony at Morwell Town Hall On 10/6/64

18/6/64 Old 'Advertiser' office is being pulled down to make way for a two storey block of administrative offices for the company.

NOTES FROM THE "ADVERTISER" (cont)

29/6/64 A new fire tower, 122 ft. high, costing £500, has been erected for the Morwell Urban Fire Brigade in Church St.

2/7/64 It is reported that one of Morwell's oldest hotels, "Murdoch's Hotel" has been bought by Woolworths.

2/7/64 Hazelwood' First Turbine - the new 200 megawatt turbine generator now being installed is the largest of its kind in Victoria and possibly in Australia.

2/7/64 Farewell to Dr. and Mrs. Alan Crook by the Music Group and the Philharmonic Society, of both of which Dr. Crook was the foundation president.

13/7/64 "White City", the temporary suburb of sub-standard homes built for migrants in the first rush of S.E.C. developments in Morwell will slowly disappear.

20/7/64 Floods - stock drowned and flats under water. Thorpdale Rd. closed at the Morwell River Bridge. Morwell River, Wilderness Creek, Middle Creek and Billy's Creek have burst their banks. Yallourn main oval a sheet of water four feet deep.

20/7/64. Morwell High School expects an increase in enrolments next year from 930 (1964) to 1050 (1965)

27/7/64 S.E.C. £18 million contracts for two huge boilers and two 200,000 kilowatt generators for stage 3 of the Hazelwood Project will give employment for 1000 construction workers for the next 5 years.

10/8/64 The world's largest brown coal burning turbine is now undergoing trials at Hazelwood and will go into production in three weeks time (300 tons of coal per hour .)

14/9/64 1200 trees planted in Morwell streets by Council last year.
Shire expenditure October '63 to August '64 £ 303,804
Shire income " " " £ 303,534

21/9/64 Tenders for making the first roads in the Hazelwood satellite township are about to close.

24/9/64 Morwell Squash Centre to be opened o 25/9/64
Murdoch's Hotel demolished.

8/10/64 Morwell Bowl (tenpin bowling) in Buckley St. (old Maya Theatre) to be opened on 9/10/64.

19/11/64 Morwell Shire Council refuses to introduce compulsory voting at Council elections.

7/12/64 Public use of portion of Hazelwood cooling pond approved.