Eltham Living and Learning Centre

In 1974 a grant from the Federal Government enabled the Shire of Eltham to purchase the property at 739 Main Road, Eltham containing an historic house (c1857) and associated farm buildings. This subsequently was developed as the Eltham Living and Learning Centre.

This property was initially part of Josiah Morris Holloway’s ‘Little Eltham’ subdivision. While Holloway went on to become a pioneering land developer who purchased and quickly subdivided large tracts of land in various parts of early Melbourne, his first speculative venture was this Eltham subdivision in the Parish of Nillumbik.

During the mid 1800’s land values in the Melbourne area were increasing rapidly, as did this allotment as it passed through the hands of several speculators. In 1857 the land was purchased by John Pearson, a tanner, who built the solid brick house that still exists today, though it has been somewhat modified over the years. He also constructed a tannery close to the Diamond Creek but when his venture folded he sold to Benjamin Oliver Wallis, a publican and it remained in the Wallis family until 1896.

Subsequent owners were Richard Edward Gilsenan from 1899, a teacher at Eltham Primary School then William Scott Matthews from 1923, who lived and operated his business there as a carrier. When Alfred and Claire Fitzpatrick brought the property in the early 1950’s the improvements included the original 1857 house as well as a variety of separate out buildings. The Fitzpatrick’s owned and further developed the property until 1974 when it was purchased by the Shire of Eltham.

The Eltham Living and Learning Centre was originally established to offer a range of activities to cover ‘practical skills for living, as well as various hobbies and arts and crafts’. Since then the centre has undergone many structural and operational changes while continuing to provide an extensive range of self-help and tutored courses involving hundreds of volunteers. It is now known as the Eltham centre for Living and Learning Nillumbik.

Harry Gilham, the immediate past president of our Society has had a long association in various roles at the Eltham Living and Learning Centre from the early days. This article is partly based on his detailed history of the organisation he prepared for the 21st anniversary celebration in 1996.
September Meeting

Walter Withers was born in 1852 at Aston Manor, Warwickshire, England and died on 13 October 1914 at his home ‘Southernwood’ in Eltham. This year then marks the centenary of his death and Art Historian Andrew Mackenzie OAM, who has studied the work of Walter Withers for 30 years, will be the guest speaker at our meeting at 8.00 pm on Wednesday 10th September.

Andrew has written books, articles and given many talks about Walter Withers and thinks members and guests will be interested in the photographs and works of Eltham by Withers that he has recently discovered, as well as photographs from the Withers Family Album.

There will be a commemorative book of Wither’s sketches of Eltham released in October to mark the centenary of his death. Photographs of some of these sketches will be shown at this meeting, as well as some memorabilia from the Withers Collection.

We hope you can join us, as members and visitors are most welcome at all of our meetings.

September Excursion - East of Eltham Walk

In Newsletter No. 197, March 2011, there was a brief history of Crown Allotment 15 Section 5 Parish of Nillumbik (CA 15) a parcel of land of a quarter of a square mile extending from Eucalyptus Road to Reynolds Road at the eastern extremity of Eltham. From the 1940s it was known as Stokes orchard. In later years it has been subdivided for residential purposes but leaving significant areas as power line and water supply reserves and bushland reserves that are habitat for the threatened Eltham Copper Butterfly.

For our excursion on 6th September we intend to walk through CA 15 to a bushland reserve east of Reynolds Road. The walk will traverse the boundary between suburban Eltham and the non-urban areas to the south and east.

This is a pleasant walk through residential areas and bushland. Along the way we will discuss the early and more recent history of CA 15 as well as local natural history and geology.

This walk is about 3.5 km in length and will take 2 to 2.5 hours. It will start at 2pm at the corner of Eucalyptus Road, Pitt Street and Nyora Road (Melway ref.22 C6). Street parking is available but exercise care in parking due to narrow roads, hill crests and the like.

The walk will be along streets and bush tracks. It will include some rough ground so sturdy footwear should be worn. This free walk is open to the general public as well as Society members.

Dogs are not permitted on Society excursions. Phone number for contact on the day - 0409 021 063.
Have you discovered Trove?

Have you discovered Trove? If you are new to local and family history – it is your “must know” resource focusing on Australia and Australians.

Trove is a free search engine managed by the National Library of Australia (NLA). Trove searches the print catalogues of libraries around Australia but also sound and music files, digitised newspaper collections, pictures including contemporary and historical images, maps and archived websites, diaries, letters and archives, people and organisations and lists created by Trove users.

The Books category pulls in results of your search from the collections of 761 libraries. These include the National Library, State Libraries, public, school, museum and special libraries.

Archived Websites includes the Pandora archive which NLA has been building since 1996. Other archived sites include “First Families 2001” which began life as a user-contributed database of a record of the first member of a given family to have arrived in Australia.

In the Pictures, photos, objects category – search photographs, negatives, artworks, drawings, posters, postcards and other pictures, as well as physical objects such as puzzles, instruments and clothing. This category also includes contemporary and historical images contributed by the community via the photo sharing website Flickr.

The music, sound and video category includes records of the Hazel de Berg oral history collection at NLA. Hazel was an Australian pioneer of the oral history interview recording many people in the arts community. A search in the maps category also includes links to digitised maps.

Journals, articles and data sets – includes a gateway to current Australian research. Publications ranging from theses to journal articles, public policy documents and large health and ecological studies are often available for immediate download.

Love craft and cookery, enjoy the Royal Family? The Australian Women’s Weekly is there from its inception in 1933 through to 1982. Browse its covers.

The digitised Australian historic newspapers are an essential tool for Australian family history research. The service offers fully indexed and digitised newspapers for all capital cities and many regional and smaller country newspapers. At the time of writing there were 712 titles.

Local papers include:

• Evelyn Observer and South and East Bourke Record 1882-1902
• Evelyn Observer and Bourke East Record 1902-1917
• Eltham and Whittlesea Shires Advertiser and Diamond Creek Valley Advocate 1917-1922
• The Advertiser 1922-1939
• Eltham and Whittlesea Shires Advertiser 1940-1942

Visit and re-visit as the site is constantly growing.......so what are you waiting for?

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Liz Pidgeon is the Local and Family History Librarian at the Yarra Plenty Regional Library service

Eltham District Historical Society
Fabbro Farm Art Project

We mentioned in our last edition the use of the title ‘Fabbro Fields’ for the land at 2 Bell Street, Eltham farmed since 1930 by the Fabbro family. One of the few remaining structures on this land is a large metal clad shed that had been used for various agricultural and storage purposes for many years. It is intended to retain this building for future community use.

Some middle level students from the adjacent Eltham High School have been involved in a related art project under the guidance of Felicity Gordon, a local community artist. Students have used early photographs of Fabbro farm activities as inspirations for painting their own artistic interpretations onto four large panels, now protected with anti-graffiti paint and fixed to the exterior of the shed.

Initially twelve enthusiastic students were involved in art workshops at the shed but word spread about the project and triple that number participated in the final stages of the painting process. Funding for this project was provided by a grant from Nillumbik Shire Council’s Community Fund that was auspiced by Local Food Connect.

Eltham District Historical Society contributed information, encouragement and photographs to support this project, which we believe assists younger generations to appreciate the contributions of the Fabbro family to early farm activities in the local area. Hopefully it will also provide a personal connection and engagement with this community space.

Eltham Library - 20th Anniversary Celebration

The 20th anniversary of the Eltham Library opening was celebrated on 22nd May 2014 and the following weekend. This was a time of remembering and acknowledging how much had been achieved by so many people to make this the community responsive resource it is today. In our newsletter number 97 in July 1994 the following description of the library was used:

‘The external appearance is striking and it is certain to become a landmark feature. It is not to everone’s taste. Some people think the roof line and architectural detail is too ‘busy’. However, we have heard nothing but favourable comments on the interior. These range from the architectural details, to the splendid spaces available for library and exhibition use, to the changing views from the windows around the building.’

Eltham Library is part of our local history and has become one of the most, if not the most prestigious community building in the Shire of Nillumbik. Through recent internal layout changes and extension of the children’s area it will continue to support the ongoing needs of residents and visitors.

Eltham District Historical Society
Henry Gilbert Jones
an early Eltham settler........and an amazing coincidence

by Michael Aitken

Members can all be excused for not knowing of Henry Gilbert Jones. He was born in Cheltenham, England (or possibly Cardiff, Wales) in about 1805. We know that his father, who lived to 100, was an architect and probably quite wealthy. Henry studied pharmacy and art with his close mate, Daniel Rutter Long who just happened to be my great great grandfather. At some stage Henry introduced his sister, Helen, to Daniel and they were married in 1828. In a few years the Longs had a growing family and they made the courageous decision to emigrate to the infant town of Melbourne. Henry was already an adventurer and he decided to go along with his sister and his in-laws, and they all arrived here early in 1840. Daniel soon set up a home and flourishing pharmacy in Bourke Street. (His building on the corner of Exhibition St. still survives as the Elephant and Wheelbarrow Hotel).

The first bridge over the River Yarra, Melbourne. Engraving by Henry Gilbert Jones c.1846

Henry at first pursued his artwork and he was actually responsible for some of the first engravings of Melbourne. He also acted as a Deputy Protector of the Aborigines. However he must have soon found life too hectic in the big city and in 1850 he was able to purchase an allotment of 93 acres in the peaceful district of Nillumbik. This was roughly the area bordered in the west by what is now Hillcrest Avenue and in the east, the line just beyond the northern extension of Kent Hughes Road. Portions of Dalton Street and Mt Pleasant Rd formed the northern limit and the Yarra River was the southern boundary.

Some of my family accounts claim that Henry Jones was Eltham’s first white settler but historical records show that Thomas Sweeney his immediate neighbour on the east side purchased his land some ten years earlier.

It seems that Henry kept to himself. He reportedly built a couple of huts or log cabins but I can only guess the location of these. He owned a few cows and probably did a little farming but he was very much a recluse and never married.

Even so in 1871 he was appointed a Justice of the Peace so he must have had some community involvement. Henry had paid the reserve price of one pound per acre in 1850 and when he died in 1888 the property was valued at one thousand pounds. So in 38 years he had made quite a good little profit.

Part of the Nillumbik parish plan showing the Henry Gilbert Jones property
Henry probably didn’t have many visitors but his artist brother-in-law, Daniel Long must have travelled to Eltham at times and some of his landscapes survive including this view of the Bridge over the Diamond Creek at Eltham, dated 1855.

Daniel died in 1886 and his old friend Henry followed within two years. They were buried in adjacent graves in the St Kilda Cemetery. Henry, of course, had no descendants and his will clearly indicates that he bequeathed the property to his sister Helen (my great, great grandmother). The rest of his estate valued at more than 5000 pounds was left to charity. I imagine that Henry’s wealth must have been inherited since he never seriously worked.

Now there are a couple of question marks in my mind. A document in the Eltham District Historical Society collection describes a Patrick O’Callaghan as being a farmer owning a parcel of land within this same area. It is said that he owned a hut on the site from as early as 1858 and that his family resided at New St. (now 125 Lavender Park Rd.) until the 1930s. There is still a very old cottage at this address.

Since Henry Gilbert Jones definitely owned the property when he died in 1888 I believe that the O’Callaghan family simply leased and farmed some acreage while ‘squire’ Henry continued to live in his nearby log cabin. When his sister Helen Long died in 1896 her probate document showed the 93 acres as her only real estate and still being valued at 1000 pounds. Another document indicates that the property was then sold by her trustee company to a member of the O’Callaghan family for a little over 500 pounds, the reduction in value presumably being due to the severe financial depression at the time.
My guess is that the present old cottage at 125 Lavender Park Road replaced a hut on the same site perhaps early in the 20th century. Probably by this time the O’Callaghans accessed their home via Hillcrest Avenue along with the residents on the west side. It could be that there was an earlier access for HGJ up the present path of Short Cut Road as suggested by Long’s painting. Obviously more research is required.

Copies of old land titles show that in 1913 the property had changed hands still intact and again in 1920 when some subdivision began to take place. Further subdivision occurred over the next several decades although there has been very little change in the last half century.

...and now for the amazing coincidence
Rosemary and I came to Eltham in late 1966 when we were delighted to buy a small acreage fronting the Yarra River. I think it was another 25 years before I was in our Eltham Library one day perusing some notes by a local historian (K L Chapple) and I realised that our property is actually a small but definite section of my ancestor’s land. We are not complaining, but in another time and place we just might have been lucky enough to have inherited the whole parcel of land!

Street by Street

At a meeting of the Association of Eastern Historical Societies in May 2014 Sue Barnett president of the Surrey Hills Historical Society spoke about their project to develop a contemporary collection or documentation of the local Surrey Hills area, by photographing every property (residential, commercial, offices).

The project will have various components to be developed over several years with the initial part focused on capturing the details and flavour of Surrey Hills and Mont Albert. It involves volunteers photographing every property in the 218 streets in the 3127 postcode, comprising an estimated 7000 plus residences, offices and shops. They are using an information kit to support existing volunteers in the field with the intention to eventually develop an interactive website, once they can secure some funding.

Sue mentioned a similar living history project being undertaken by the Mosman Library in NSW where local residents, old and new, are encouraged to share stories of their street in Mosman. The aim of the Mosman Memories of Your Street project is to help fill in the recorded history of Mosman and capture the local memories that are quickly disappearing.

Part of this process will seek answers to questions such as: How have the streets of Mosman been used by residents throughout the decades? How did residents view their street? Has the manner in which residents use their street changed over the decades? Do children still play in the street? Is there a sense of neighbourhood in your street?

Further details on the Surrey Hills project can be obtained by emailing heritage@surreyhills.org.au. and information on the Mosman project is available at mosmanmemories.net/about.

Eltham District Historical Society
A variety of tasks is available for members at our regular records workshops. They include filing, cataloguing, research projects and even “housekeeping” of our Local History Centre. It is most pleasing that we are seeing an increasing number of members at these workshops.

Coming dates for records workshops are as follows:
Tuesdays  7.30 pm           2nd September       7th October
Mondays   9.30 am            15th September      20th October

Once again this year the Rotary Club of Eltham has invited our Society to participate in the Eltham Festival on Sunday 9th November and will generously provide a marquee and other equipment necessary to set up our display. We have accepted this invitation and so this is a preliminary advice to members that we will need people to look after the display during the day. Please advise Russell Yeoman if you are able to assist.

Contacts for the Eltham District Historical Society

• Jim Connor, President – Telephone 9439 5916
• Russell Yeoman, Secretary – Telephone 9439 9717
• David Johns, Treasurer / Membership Secretary – Telephone 9434 3357

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