

# Shire of Eltham Historical Society

INCORPORATED

P.O. BOX 137 ELTHAM VICTORIA 3095

## NEWSLETTER

NO 75 NOVEMBER, 1990

### NEXT MEETING

8PM WEDNESDAY ,14 NOVEMBER,1990

ELTHAM SENIOR CITIZEN'S CENTRE

MAIN ROAD ELTHAM

(ENTER FROM SHIRE OFFICE DRIVEWAY)

PANEL DISCUSSION AND FILM

DIAMOND VALLEY ORCHARDS

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ELTHAM COMMUNITY FESTIVAL PARADE

11 AM SATURDAY 12 NOVEMBER

YOUTH ROAD ELTHAM  
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### CHRISTMAS BREAKUP

WEDNESDAY 12 DECEMBER

ELTHAM HOTEL

### NOVEMBER MEETING:

In past years the orchard industry was of great economic importance to the Shire of Eltham and surrounding areas. There were important orchard areas within the Shire at Hurstbridge, Panton Hill, Research, Arthurs Creek and Strathewen. Few remain today but Lindsay Apted's "Glen Ard" orchard at Arthurs Creek remains as a large scale operation. Well known Diamond Creek amateur film maker Bill Wadeson has made a short film about Lindsay's orchard. Bill himself also has a family background in the orchard industry.

At this meeting we will view Bill's film "The Apple" and hear Lindsay and Bill discuss the history of local orchards and the current status of the industry.

Some of our members also have memories of the days when orchards were an important part of the local rural scene. They may wish to add their comments to the discussion.

As usual supper will be available after the meeting. New members and visitors are most welcome.

### ELTHAM COMMUNITY FESTIVAL:

This year's festival will be held on 10th and 11th November - that is next weekend. The festival parade will be held at 11.00 am on Saturday, commencing in Youth Road (behind the Eltham Station). As usual we have entered a float in the parade but for the first time we have combined with the Diamond Valley Arts Society to produce the float. The theme of the parade is "Spring into Summer". In accordance with this theme our float will depict artists on a spring painting excursion. Part of the group will be "Walter Withers" painting a landscape. There will also be another artist painting a portrait of a girl in a spring costume.

Members who would like to walk with the float are most welcome. The most appropriate costume would be something like an artists smock, although anything giving the appearance of an artist would be satisfactory. Please be at the assembly point in Youth Road by 10.45 am.

Joh Ebeli is responsible for preparation of the float. Anyone able to help with preparation on Friday should contact Joh on 439 8525.

### CHRISTMAS BREAKUP:

Our Christmas function this year will be dinner at Eltham Hotel on Wednesday 12th December. The hotel has an extensive counter meal menu. We have a table booked for 6:30 to 7:00 pm. We need to know the number attending. Please ring Sue Law, 439-9520 by 7th December 1990 if you are coming.

### 'YARRA TRACK' EXCURSION:

This was a most enjoyable and informative excursion thanks to our guide Ann Thomas, author of "The Last of the Yarra Track Stopping Places". Ann has a vast knowledge and a great love of the Marysville area and as we travelled through the Healesville/Marysville areas she provided commentary on the history and flora and fauna of the district. We were met at Steavensons Falls by members of the Marysville Historical Society. Our lunch stop at the Cumberland Forest provided an opportunity to walk amongst the magnificent giant ash trees.

John Stafford, owner of "The Hermitage", spoke on the history of the house and studio that built by well-known Melbourne photographer John William Lindt. We appreciated the opportunity to explore the beautiful grounds and fascinating residence which are being restored by the Staffords. A superb afternoon tea was served by Val Stafford.

We are most grateful to Ann Thomas for so willingly giving us her time and also to John and Val Stafford for making us so welcome at "The Hermitage".

### CLIFTON FUGH:

Elsewhere in this Newsletter is an article on Walter Withers, Eltham's most notable artist of earlier years. It is sad to note the death of Clifton Fugh one of Australia's great artists of the contemporary era. Cliff was a noted landscape and portrait painter. He had painted many notable Australians, particularly politicians. He was also a noted conservationist and often used his paintings to promote conservation issues.

As well as the legacy of his paintings Cliff has donated bushland around his home, "Dunmoochin" at Cottles Bridge, for conservation purposes.



OTHER SOCIETY NEWS:

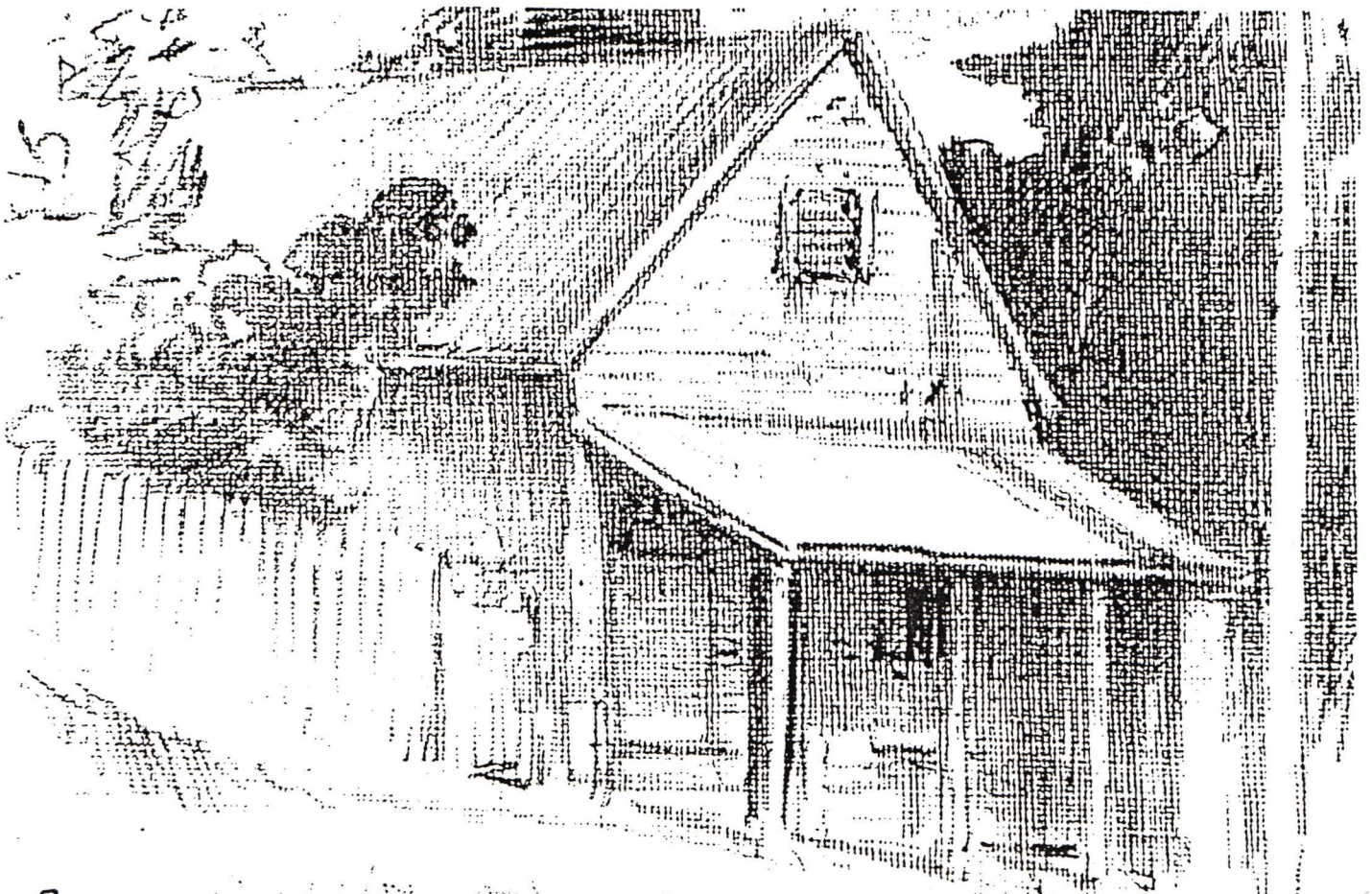
We will soon be preparing our programme of meetings and excursions for 1991. Anyone with suggestions of items they can help with or would like to see happen should contact a committee member.

The Society has agreed in principle to take up the offer of use of the school residence at Kangaroo Ground. We now have to discuss matters of detail with the school authorities. By our next Newsletter we might be able to announce a date for shifting in of our Society collection.

WALTER WITHERS PLAQUE:

At long last we have unveiled our plaque in the Walter Withers Reserve. The function was attended by a number of members and friends of the Society and descendants of the Withers family. Following the unveiling, the group proceeded to the Eltham Shire Office for afternoon tea and a small exhibition of Withers' paintings arranged by Andrew Mackenzie.

The unveiling was performed by Mary Owen, a grand daughter of Walter Withers. Her speech provided an interesting personal perspective on Withers and is repeated in full here.



*Eltham Post Office*

FROM WALTER WITHERS' SKETCHBOOK.



I feel somewhat overwhelmed by the responsibility of paying tribute to the man you have all come to honour today. I have the feeling that most of you probably know more about him and his work than I do.

Walter Withers died nearly seven years before I was born and so I never knew him. Sadly, although other members of his family inherited some of his talent, I was not among them and I know very little about art. This is doubly hard to bear because my husband had some ability to draw and my second daughter also has some talent in this direction.

My children are all artistic - mostly in the field of music - inherited partly from their father - a Welshman who sang like a Welshman - and partly from my grandmother, Fanny Withers who, I believe was no mean pianist. However all this talent gave me a miss and for many years I felt a complete ignoramus in the fields of the arts.

It was not until I was nearly fifty years old that I walked into a gallery in Brisbane and, as I wandered around the room, suddenly one picture leapt at me and I knew instantly that it had been painted by my grandfather. I had never seen the picture before and it gave me quite a shock to find that I had recognized the style of painting. I realized then that I had absorbed more than I realized simply by living with pictures and with people who painted them and talked about their painting and the painting of others.

When I was a child I sometimes spent school holidays with my Aunt Margery Withers and her husband, Richard McCann. Aunt Marge painted me several times but I'm afraid I was a restless subject and used to sit reading a book and look up grudgingly when she wanted to paint my eyes.

During the September holidays my aunt and uncle were busy preparing paintings for the annual exhibition of the Melbourne Twenty Painters, to which they both belonged. I remember how important I used to feel when they took me along to the Athenaeum Gallery on the Friday night before the opening to help hang their pictures. There were many artists there but the two I remember are - perhaps surprisingly - both women: Miss Bale and Miss Tweddle.

I remember how cold it used to be up in that gallery at night. They used to heat water on a gas ring to make tea and Aunt Marge used to bring sandwiches and fruit for our evening meal. Everyone seemed to be poor in those days and no-one dreamed of going out for a meal. It was a case of make-do - even to cutting down frames to fit pictures or cutting pictures to fit the frames. They had to use the same frames from year to year if the pictures didn't sell.

The opening was an exciting event for me. I felt I was privileged to meet important people - people who knew a lot more than I - and Uncle Dick would get quite merry after a couple of the tiny sweet sherries which were always distributed.

I realise now that quite a lot of "art talk" rubbed off on me during my visits to the Athenaeum and during my stays with my aunt and uncle.

I suspect that much of our most useful learning comes this way and those of us who have had the privilege of associating with artists, writers, philosophers and other thinkers have a richness in our lives of which we may be unaware.

Walter Withers was a prolific painter and, although he painted for love of it, I suspect that the need to provide for his family drove him, like Mozart, to greater efforts than he might otherwise have achieved.

Reading old letters and articles about the Heidelberg artists, I have come to realize something of the constant strain placed on many of them - particularly Withers and McCubbin - by poverty and the need to make ends meet.

Withers was ever conscious of the need to provide for his wife and his five children and there are touching letters to his wife, regretting that he was not able to earn more for them.

In addition to his painting, he worked hard at teaching and illustrating and, as he grew older, the strain began to tell and his health deteriorated. He seems never to have had a very strong constitution and suffered from rheumatism, which must have made painting quite painful at times. His eldest daughter, Gladys, was eventually confined to a wheelchair with rheumatoid arthritis and I have a tendency to arthritis myself, so I am particularly aware of what this could have meant to him.

Recently I found a short letter written by my mother to her mother, Fanny Withers on the anniversary of her father's birthday in 1919, in which she said: "Poor old Dad. I often think now what a lot he must have suffered. His life was too hard and too strenuous for him. He had too many chick-a-biddies, I think. He wasn't equal to so much town life and train journeys with so many delicacies as he had. Since I have been ill, I have realized what he must have felt like."

He certainly drove himself to produce. He travelled all over Victoria by train, buggy, bicycle and on foot and for a time he travelled from Eltham to Melbourne every day by train, although later he lived in Melbourne during the week and only returned to Eltham for the weekends.

My mother died seven years after her father's death, when my twin sisters were 10 days old and I was 16 months. So I never knew my mother or my grandfather. But my two aunts, Gladys and Margery, sometimes took me to stay with Gan Withers at Southernwood in Bolton Street. No cars in those days and it seemed a very long hot and dusty walk from the Station.



Three memories remain with me of Southernwood. One is the well at the back which I found quite terrifying; the second is Gan killing a snake - even more terrifying. She was a formidable woman, my grandmother, and a great ally and support to her husband. I think she was the business end of the partnership.

The third memory of Southernwood is my grandfather's studio - down what seemed like a toy staircase inside the room. This and the big walk-in fireplace stayed in my mind from the age of about six until I saw them again about forty years later when the house was being used as a Sunday School.

I just wish that money could be found to purchase this old house for the city of Eltham so that a permanent museum could be established in memory of a man who did so much to put Eltham on the map of art history.

Recently I have become interested in family history and spent some time in England, Ireland and Wales looking for traces of my ancestors. I realized then how important it is to have records of people who have contributed to our society. We forget so soon and it is amazing how often, within two generations, names, dates and many details are forgotten.

We are fortunate that so many of Walter Withers' works have been bought by galleries and that people like Andrew Mackenzie have taken the trouble to search out people who knew him and to write about him and his work. And I am very grateful to the Historical Society of Eltham for recognizing the importance of having a permanent tribute in Eltham to the contribution made by Walter Withers, who loved Eltham so much and who has assured this lovely district a place in the annals of history.

I am indebted to Kathleen Mangan, the daughter of another famous Australian painter, Fred McCubbin, - featured in The Age this morning (thanks again to Andrew Mackenzie) for the most apt tribute to Walter Withers. Kathleen is not well and she rang me a couple of days ago, regretting that she could not be present today "to pay tribute", as she said, "to Walter Withers, for I always think Walter Withers is the spirit of Eltham."

Thank you, Kathleen.

And now I have much pleasure in unveiling the plaque commissioned by the Eltham Historical Society from Bob McLellan of Charmac Industries to commemorate the life and work of Walter Withers, the spirit of Eltham.

Mary Owen  
13 October 1990.

Russell Yeoman  
Secretary  
439-9717

Sue Law  
President  
439-9520

Opal Smith  
Treasurer/Membership Secretary  
439-8209