



# **ELTHAM DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**Incorporated**

**No. A0016285F**

**728 MAIN ROAD (PO BOX 137) ELTHAM 3095**

**Website: [www.tinyurl.com/elthamdhs](http://www.tinyurl.com/elthamdhs)**

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## **NEWSLETTER**

**NO. 186 MAY 2009**

### **NEXT MEETING**

**8-00 PM WEDNESDAY 13<sup>TH</sup> MAY**

**ELTHAM SENIOR CITIZENS' CENTRE**

**LIBRARY PLACE ELTHAM**

**(FORMERLY OLD SHIRE OFFICE DRIVEWAY)**

**"THE LOWER PLENTY RIVER**

**- ITS HISTORY AND HERITAGE"**

**A DIGITAL SLIDE PRESENTATION BY ANNE PAUL**

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**HERITAGE WALKS PROGRAM**

**2.00 PM SATURDAYS 2<sup>ND</sup> MAY & 4<sup>TH</sup> JULY**

**ELTHAM LOCAL HISTORY CENTRE**

**BOOKINGS 9439 9520 or [edhs1@bigpond.com](mailto:edhs1@bigpond.com)**



Eltham from the western slope of the Diamond Creek valley from a sketch by Samuel Calvert 1884.  
See May heritage walk.

## **MAY MEETING**

At our November 2008 meeting Anne Paul joined a panel of speakers on the subject of the Centenary of Women's Suffrage in Victoria. In addition to her interest in women's issues, Anne takes a keen interest in environmental and heritage matters. In particular, and as a local resident, Anne has acquired a knowledge of the history and heritage of the lower reaches of the Plenty River. This is the subject of a digital slidet presentation Anne has produced, originally for the Diamond Valley Learning Centre.

The Lower Plenty River once formed the western boundary of the Shire of Eltham. Although it is now in the City of Banyule, it remains within our area of interest. In particular the area around the bridge and the former hotel at Lower Plenty formed the original main gateway to Eltham and its Shire. Its history provides significant connections to Eltham, Kangaroo Ground and the areas beyond.

Anne's presentation is divided into three historical periods, indigenous, early European and later European. There is some detail about the Lower Plenty area including some key heritage locations around the hotel site and Yallambie. It extends upstream as far as Greensborough.

Anne's presentation and talk will form an important contribution to our knowledge of our local area. New members and visitors are most welcome to the meeting with supper and discussion following.

## **MAY HERITAGE WALK**

Our walk on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> May traverses most of the length of Porter Street in the Crown township of Eltham. Porter Street is situated on the western slope of the Diamond Creek valley and once commanded extensive views along and across the valley.

Housing development has restricted these wide panoramic views but some narrower scenic views remain. Early photos and a sketch in the Society's collection show the village of Eltham spread out along Maria Street (Main Road) as seen from this area.

The walk will include comment on some early purchasers of land in the Eltham township. It will extend as far as Eltham Lower Park and return through the Barak Bushland.

The walk is open to members and the public and there is no charge. It starts at the Eltham Local History Centre, 728 Main Road, at 2.00pm and will take about two hours. Afternoon tea will be available at the end of the walk. Ring Sue on 9439 9520 for bookings.

## **BLACK SATURDAY BUSHFIRES**

Much of the area affected by the disastrous fires of 7<sup>th</sup> February lies within the purview of the Association of Eastern Historical Societies (AEHS). The region covered by the Association extends to Marysville and Kinglake is on its fringe. Both of these areas suffered major loss of lives, houses and infrastructure. Other areas affected by the fires and lying within the association's area include St Andrews, Strathewen, Yarra Glen, Healesville and Yarra Junction.

AEHS has produced an excellent newsletter covering the effects of the fires on the relevant historical societies and their assets. Our Society has copies for those wishing to read it. AEHS is requesting that anyone with historical records of Marysville and Kinglake districts in particular consider providing copies for those societies. High resolution scanned copies (300 dpi) can be sent to AEHS President, Glen Turnbull at [gaturnbull@yahoo.com.au](mailto:gaturnbull@yahoo.com.au).

The following items from the AEHS Newsletter are reproduced here:

## **Kinglake**

Although Kinglake Historical Society is not a member of the Association of Eastern Historical Societies nor an affiliated member of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, every effort must be made to assist this small group. The group maintains a presence in the local Neighbourhood Community House and has a small enthusiastic membership. The centre of the township has been significantly affected. Many shops and other buildings were destroyed or badly damaged. The streetscape has changed dramatically.

Barry Spencer, a member of the Kinglake Historical Society, has asked us for support and assistance. According to Barry, the group's collection at the Neighbourhood House has survived the fires. As you can imagine, the townspeople are in shock and they would value any level of genuine assistance and support. Without having seen the collection, it is envisaged that it is possible that some smoke and water damage has occurred to the collection. Only time will tell. The level of destruction in the Kinglake district is quite unbelievable.

## **St Andrews**

Much of the fires at St Andrews were to the north of the town. The town itself is intact.

Gaye Ponting, Secretary of the St Andrews Queenstown Historical Society has been in contact. She says that "our Society has been fortunate with the fires in St Andrews as the fire did not come into town – it came within 2kms. However, the district has lost some of the last homesteads that our pioneers built 120 years ago. These 4 homesteads were the last remnants linking these pioneer families with their battles and hardships of this land. It is well documented in local papers at the time, in 1896, 1926, 1939 and 1962 of how the community fought in these bushfires to save each others homes but no-one could stop Black Saturday, 2009.

This is not counting all the other homes that have been destroyed – I don't have total numbers – and the 20 deaths in our town. Then we start to count the deaths of our neighbouring communities, Strathewen, just in the next valley and then up the mountain to Kinglake. I no longer live in the area but I am not far in Diamond Creek. However, I have strong attachments through friends and my involvement with the historical Society. But there are a lot of areas in Victoria who have a similar history with bushfires in their towns and how important it is to document history".

Reg Evans, a familiar face to many, did not survive the fires. He loved the district and understood its history. The well known actor recently wrote a play about some characters of the town. The performance was postponed.

## **BLACK FRIDAY 1851**

The 7<sup>th</sup> February 2009 will go down in history as Black Saturday because of the devastating bushfires in many parts of Victoria. On that date in 1851, a Friday, bushfires were also raging through the Diamond Valley and other areas.

In the 1970's Keith Chappel produced a large body of research work from the Victorian archives. This work mainly deals with the early history of the former Shire of Eltham and now forms part of our Society records. The following extract from Keith's notes quotes from the report of the inquest on the deaths of John, James, Joseph and William McLelland who perished in the fire. The inquest was held on 8<sup>th</sup> February only one day after the fire.

(There are some obvious errors that have not been corrected. It is not known whether these are errors of transcription or in the original document.)

District of Port Phillip in the colony of N.S.W.

George Parish, laborer, residing on the river Plenty in the county of Bourke .... sworn.

I know the station occupied by George McLelland, it is situated on the Diamond Creek – on one side viz: to the east it is closed in by a long range of mountains, the country about there is also thickly timbered. I know the situation of the home station, it was situated a short distance from said creek.

On Friday morning, 7<sup>th</sup> February inst. I heard that Mr McLelland's wife and family and I went immediately to the station to render what assistance I could. The bush was all on fire – I found the home station burnt to the ground with the fencing about it and out buildings, the trees were burning all around it and the grass also had been burnt all around the station. I saw the bodies of Mrs McLelland and four of her children lying at the back of where the station had stood. The body of the eldest boy was lying more to the eastward by itself, the clothes had been burnt off the bodies. It was quite impossible for anyone in the hut at the time of the fire to have escaped alive to the best of my belief, the bush had been on fire in that neighbourhood for a month previously, said fire seemed to have proceeded from the mountains lying eastwards toward the home station, the bodies were lying on their faces within half a mile of the home station. I counted two hundred head of cattle that had been burnt, a horse was in the creek dreadfully burnt. I assisted in putting the bodies in the dray in which they were conveyed to the Bridge Inn, the ground all around where the bodies were lying was burnt.

Witness: George St Clair

Taken and acknowledged this 8<sup>th</sup> day of February 1851  
at Collingwood before W B Wilmot, Coroner

George X Parish  
his mark

Deposition by Alexander Miller, shepherd, in the employ of George McLelland, settler on the Diamond creek .....

"I have been three weeks in the employ of George McLelland. There have been bushfires around the station for a week previously to the late occurrence, they were in the mountains confined to one spot.

On Thursday last, the 5<sup>th</sup> of February inst. as I was taking the sheep to water about midday I observed the fire to approach rapidly towards the station and I immediately turned the sheep to bring them home out of the reach of the fire, on reaching home I saw the home station all on fire. I cooeed for my master but could get no answer. I then tried to get to the hut but could not on account of the fire, the fire came so close to me that I was obliged to get away to save my own life, I immediately ran and got into the creek where I remained until dark when I returned to the station which was burnt to the ground and I could see no one there – I then went towards the creek where we dip water and I saw my master in the creek up to his neck, I then asked him where the mistress and the children were and he told me they were all dead. I then took him out of the creek and we lay by the creek until daylight. I then advised McLelland to go with me at once to Mr Renold's station which was about three miles distant and we went together and I left him there. I then went to the Bridge Inn and sent information of the facts into Melbourne. I then procured a team of bullocks and dray and returned with it to the station where I saw the bodies of Mrs McLelland and her five children lying on their faces on the ground about twenty yards from where the hut stood, the oldest boy was lying about fifteen yards from where the hut stood in an opposite direction, the bodies were quite black and burnt all over and life was quite extinct in each. I then assisted in putting the bodies into the dray in which they were conveyed to the Bridge Inn – the clothes were quite burnt off the bodies, my master told me he tried to save his oldest boy but that he could carry him no further and the boy desired him to leave him and lay him down in the heat(?) and that he then went to the creek. My master told me where to find the other bodies, said creek was about a hundred yards from the home station, and the trees all around were on fire after the grass had been burnt.

Alexander X Miller  
his mark

## **ELTHAM ENGLAND CONTACTS**

Over many years now we have had an on-going contact with our English counterpart, The Eltham Society. Former Presidents of the Society, Margaret Taylor and Clifford Crate visited our area in the summer of 1997-98. Margaret has written to Marion and Russell Yeoman reflecting on the recent bushfires and relating them to places she visited. She appears to have been closely following reports of the fires in the British press.

Margaret has also advised that Clifford, at the age of 91 years, is quite frail and has now moved to a nursing home.

Margaret sends her greetings to our members.

Jim Connor has produced a CD of historical and current views of our Eltham to send to the Eltham Society. It is to be delivered by Gabrielle Turner on her forthcoming overseas trip.

## **OFFICE BEARERS 2009 - 10**

At the Annual General Meeting in March office bearers and committee members were elected for the coming year.

The full list of office bearers and committee members is as follows:

|                                |                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| President                      | Jim Connor                                                                                                                     |
| Senior Vice President          | Sue Law                                                                                                                        |
| Junior Vice President          | Doug Orford                                                                                                                    |
| Treasurer/Membership Secretary | David Johns                                                                                                                    |
| Secretary                      | Russell Yeoman                                                                                                                 |
| Committee Members              | Diana Bassett-Smith, Alison Deleney,<br>Harry Gilham, Jo McCormick, Gwen<br>Orford, Jock Read, Mary Regan,<br>Gabrielle Turner |

Harry has stepped down as president after occupying the position since 1993. More about that below. New Committee members Alison and Gabrielle are extended a very warm welcome.

The Committee welcomes ideas for Society activities or for the better functioning of the Society. Contact one of the persons listed if you have any suggestions.

## **HARRY GILHAM**

Harry has occupied the position of President of the Eltham District Historical Society from 1993 until 2009 and during this time has been a driving force behind the success of the Society.

He has been involved in many personal historical projects including the history of local schools, the local railway and the Eltham Justice Precinct. His commitment to the establishment and maintenance of our Local History Centre is a significant long-term contribution to the provision of a permanent home for the Society, including the many historical records, resources and acquisitions held there.

As convener of Nillumbik Council's Kangaroo Ground War Memorial Tower Committee he has played a leading role in the on-going refurbishment of this important site and tower, together with the building of the Moor-rul Viewing Platform. Other volunteer community involvement has included Council initiated committees for the Eltham Library and the Living and Learning Centre.

In recognition of his efforts on behalf of our Society over a long period Harry has been awarded an honorary life membership of the Society. Harry together with his wife Sue Dyet were named joint 2008 Nillumbik Citizens of the Year in acknowledgement of the decades of community service both of them have given to their local communities.

Among Harry's many interests is the home production of wine from the fruits of the local area including the well known "Roadside Plum". Although he remains on the Society's Committee Harry is taking six months leave of absence from involvement with Society activities. We will miss the long standing tradition of a glass of Presidential wine at Committee meetings.

**SUBSCRIPTIONS**

At the Annual General Meeting subscriptions for 2009-10 were fixed as follows:

|                       |         |
|-----------------------|---------|
| Newsletter            | \$15.00 |
| Single member         | \$25.00 |
| Family                | \$30.00 |
| Business organization | \$30.00 |

Subscriptions are due on 1 July but earlier payment is welcomed. David would be happy to receive your money either at the May meeting or through the mail.

**OTHER NEWS**

Coming dates for records workshops at our Local History Centre are as follows:

|                 |                        |
|-----------------|------------------------|
| Mondays 9.30am  | 18th May and 21st June |
| Tuesdays 7.30pm | 2nd June and 7th July  |

The collection of records is an on-going project. For example members are encouraged to keep press cuttings about interesting local people or events for inclusion in our files.

Members are encouraged to become involved in these workshops.

Jim Connor  
President

Russell Yeoman  
Secretary

David Johns  
Treasurer /  
Membership Secretary  
Phone - 9434 3357

Phone - 9439 5916

Phone - 9439 9717