

# Newsletter

No. 222 May 2015



## The Eltham Rural Group

by Jim Connor

History is not only about buildings and places, it always includes people, because without individuals we would not have any history.

One local group of people that is celebrating making history for 60 years is the Eltham Rural Group Inc., formed in 1955 by a group of friends in the Eltham area to raise funds for the building of University House at Melbourne University. They did not stop once this appeal was completed, but decided to continue to raise funds to support many needy local community organisations. Their aim is to raise locally and to give locally.

The group now comprises over 40 members, some who have been working together for over 40 years...an outstanding achievement. This has just recently been recognised by Nillumbik Shire Council with the announcement that the Eltham Rural Group is the 2015 Nillumbik Community Group of the Year, for raising \$1.25 million for local organisations and services.

Diverse organisations and projects have benefitted from receiving ERG funds since inception and some recent ones include Allwood Neighbourhood House, Andrew Ross Museum, Banksia Palliative Care, CFA brigades throughout Nillumbik, Eltham Foodshare, Araleun, Diamond Valley Community Hospital and the Royal District Nursing Service. ERG also supported the Blacksmith Tree project at Strathewen commemorating the people and communities so tragically affected by the bushfires in February 2009.



Eltham Rural Group - 2015 Nillumbik Community Group of the Year  
Image: Shire of Nillumbik

Over the years ERG has engaged in various methods of raising required funds and the one public event that has continued to attract large crowds is the annual Paddy's Market, 'just like a giant garage sale' with stalls offering trash and treasure, clothing, cakes, preserves, books, toys, plants and much more. The 2015 market is on Saturday 2nd of May from 9.00am to 1.00pm, in the Scout Hall in Youth Road, Eltham but be warned, you need to get there early to join the queue, which usually includes some regulars who have been attending for over 50 years.

We look forward to the Eltham Rural Group continuing their significant role in our local history.

## Next Meeting

8.00pm Wednesday 13th May 2015

Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre

Library Place, Eltham (Melway Map 21 ref J5)

## Heritage Excursion

The Murray's Farm Walk

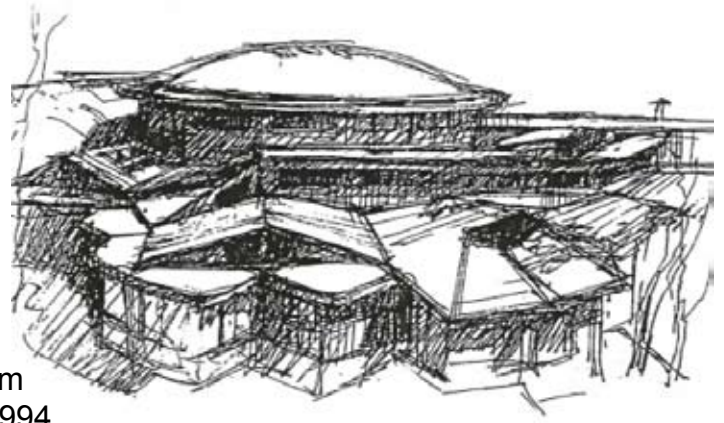
2.00pm Saturday 2nd May 2015

*See further details on page 2*

## May Meeting

The presentation at our meeting at 8.00pm on Wednesday 13th May 2015, at the Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre in Library Place, Eltham is titled 'Eltham Libraries'. This will include a panel of speakers, with opportunities for other members to comment about their memories and experiences with Eltham libraries.

This meeting date was intentionally selected to coincide with the '21st Birthday' of our current Eltham Library complex, which was opened on 22nd May 1994.



Eltham Library sketch 1994

As this was not the first library in Eltham we will explore earlier versions starting from the 1930's at various locations leading up to us then looking at the development and operation of our present library, including the range of current community connections.

As at all of our meetings, new members and visitors are most welcome.

## May Excursion - Murray's Farm, Eltham North

The farm originally established by John (Black Jack) Murray in the 1850s ultimately comprised some 190 acres and stretched across the Diamond Creek valley at Eltham North from Ryans Road to Zig Zag Road. Today it is largely a residential area but with extensive parklands along the Diamond Creek and an undeveloped area around the hilltop site of the former farmhouse.

The history of this farm includes its transition from orcharding to dairying to beef cattle and ultimately to residential subdivision. The creek area includes the features now known as Murrays Wetlands and Murrays Bridge, the former farm crossing of the creek, now adapted for pedestrian and bicycle use.



Murray's farmhouse 1993 (now demolished)



Slab barn - Murray's Farm photographs - Russell Yeoman

For our excursion on 2nd May we intend to walk around the creek parkland and discuss the history of this farm and surrounding area. At the conclusion of the walk there will be the opportunity to drive to the location of the former Murray house for views over a large area of the farm.

This short walk is about 1.5 km in length. The excursion is expected to take 2 to 2.5 hours. It will start at 2pm at the car park of the Eltham North Reserve in Wattletree Road opposite Banks Road. (Melway ref.11 K12)

This free walk is open to the general public as well as Society members. Dogs are not permitted on Society excursions. The phone number for contact on the day is 0409 021 063.

The area known originally as the Shire of Eltham lies on the wooded southern slopes and along the valleys of the Great Dividing Ranges. It is drained by the Plenty and Yarra Rivers and various creeks which run mainly in their mountain and valley tracts; many flow all year except in very dry periods. These provided land suitable for grazing and food production for the early Victorian settlement.

After the Duffy Land Act in 1862 broke up the larger sheep 'runs' that lapped over into the area from the Plenty River valley, the new settlers to the western part of the Shire would have been confronted with hills covered with open bush-land growing dry climate Eucalyptus varieties such as Stringy Bark, Yellow, Apple and Grey Box, etc.

These stout hearted men and women who settled along those valleys would also have found kangaroos and other native species living on what they called Wallaby, Kangaroo and other native grasses. These can still be readily found in remnant native bush, on roadside verges and in cemeteries, etc.

Early closer settlements were based on timber and later on gold mining, which followed the significant discovery of gold in the Yarra Valley at Andersons Creek. Early mines at Diamond Creek, Queenstown (now St. Andrews), Panton Hill and Arthurs Creek promoted development but were not productive enough to maintain a long-term extractive industry.

Early farming accompanied those mining activities and grew with the decline in the gold mining. Stone fruit (peaches, plums and apricots) and pip fruit (apples and pears) for the local domestic market was carted to Melbourne by wagon or sent by train from Diamond Creek and from Hurstbridge when the rail line was extended to the latter, largely for that purpose, in 1912. Early developments in the Eastern area of the Shire, particularly with vegetables and vines on the rich basalt soil that caps 'Garden Hill' in Kangaroo Ground, were difficult to sustain partly due to lack of water.



James and Robert Ness - Garden Hill Farm, Kangaroo Ground



Harvesting at Research

*Photographs from the Shire of Eltham Pioneers Photograph Collection  
courtesy of Yarra Plenty Regional Library in partnership with Eltham District Historical Society*

Later farming during the century to the 1950's, which was usually based on a mixture of enterprises, was always limited by the poor, shallow soils on the hills and a limited and often uncertain rainfall. However the application of phosphate fertilizer (later with molybdenum) and the use of nitrogen fixing legumes such as clover and medics with rye grass provided efficient dry-land grazing industries.

## Farming in the Shire of Eltham *(continued from page 3)*

These include:

- Dairying, particularly along the Diamond and Arthurs Creeks, using general purpose cattle breeds; the cream produced was sent to Melbourne by local carrier or by train.
- Pigs for pork, using skim milk from dairy herds, sold in Melbourne or in local markets at Mernda or Croydon.
- Cattle for beef, grown from dairy herds, sold in Melbourne.
- General purpose sheep for fat lambs and medium fine wool. On-farm breeding of new stock was often supplemented by the purchase of cross-bred ewes from inland areas.
- Pip and stone fruit for both Melbourne and European export markets was sold as picked or kept in community cool-stores in Hurstbridge and Diamond Creek and later in small private cool-stores in the area.
- Vegetables, particularly tomato growing along the Arthurs and Diamond Creeks and potatoes on the Kinglake ranges.



Packing apples at Hurstbridge



Bullock teams on Ellis's Farm, Kangaroo Ground

*Photographs from the Shire of Eltham Pioneers Photograph Collection  
courtesy of Yarra Plenty Regional Library in partnership with Eltham District Historical Society*

The proximity of the Shire to Melbourne always provided a major opportunity for local sale of produce. However with improved transport and large-scale fruit and vegetable production across the State during the second half of the 20th century, such produce became more readily available and demand grew as work and lifestyles of city folk changed. The small-scale dry-land production of many crops in the Shire was not able to compete on price or availability with these large-scale commercial producers and declined during the second half of the 20th century.

Many residents and most farmers grew their own produce with purchased products being limited to special veterinary, cooking and cleaning needs. Like many rural and semi rural areas around the world there has been a return to local small-scale production and sale in so called 'farmers' markets'.

Eltham Shire started as a purely rural shire but the changes noted above have resulted in the decline in full time mixed farming and created the mix of mainly grazing and hobby farms that we see in the rural areas of the Nillumbik Shire today.

(The Macmillan family have farmed in Arthurs Creek from 1866. Ross, the great grandson of the original settler Donald, is Senior Fellow in Agricultural Engineering at The University of Melbourne.)

*Textural and editorial suggestions by Sue Apted and Jim Connor are acknowledged.*

## The Tower of Remembrance - Kangaroo Ground Memorial Park

The year was 1917 and the McDonald family is distraught at the news their 26 year old son Harold has been killed at the Battle of Bullecourt in France. Two years later in 1919 Harold's sister Ruby and her husband Robert White donate a section of their property to the then Shire of Eltham to create the Kangaroo Ground War Memorial Park.

In memory of the soldiers from the district who lost their lives in the war, work begins on a massive square tower constructed of stone quarried from Dr Ethel Osborne's property in Donaldson's Road, Kangaroo Ground. In 1926 the tower is unveiled by His Excellency the Governor-General Lord Stonehaven.

The Tower of Remembrance on the Eltham-Yarra Glen Road in Kangaroo Ground is open daily and is still in use as a fire spotting tower.

This article from Nillumbik Chronicles No.1-14 July 2014  
[www.nillumbik.vic.gov.au/historicalplaces](http://www.nillumbik.vic.gov.au/historicalplaces)



Harry Gilham at the Kangaroo Ground Memorial Tower

## Diana Bassett Smith - Life Membership

by Jim Connor

There was unanimous support at our 2015 Annual General Meeting to the awarding of a Life Membership to Diana Bassett-Smith.

Diana (and Peter) were inaugural members from commencement of the society in 1967 and Diana has been a Committee member for over 20 years. Her knowledge of local matters and extensive list of contacts has been of great benefit, as has her passion and commitment to local history.

Our Society is just one of Diana's many interests in our area for over 50 years as she has been involved in the development and operation of a number of community based groups. As well as our Society, Diana is a founding member of the Eltham Rural Group, the Eltham Pony Club, the Kangaroo Ground Pony Club and the Andrew Ross Museum, where through her hard work and persistence she assisted the Museum gaining Museum Australia Accreditation and a tax deductibility status. Diana was also active in the preservation committee for Shillinglaw Cottage, which achieved relocation to the current site in Panther Place, Eltham.

In 2006 Diana donated a number of timber woodworking planes to Museum Victoria. These were once owned by Joseph Stevenson, reputed to have built the first wooden house in Melbourne and the first public punt to operate on the Yarra River, for publican William Watts, near the site of the present Princes Bridge.



Diana Bassett-Smith

We are very pleased to honour Diana Bassett-Smith with Life Membership of the Eltham District Historical Society and value her ongoing contributions, her community knowledge and her passionate commitment to our local history.

## Annual General Meeting

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 Alan Butler (Assistant Secretary), Diana Bassett-Smith, Alison Delaney, Jim Allen, Maureen Jones, Tony Brocksopp.

Also at the AGM the following subscriptions for 2015-2016 were retained:

Single member	\$25.00	Family	\$30.00
Business organisation	\$30.00	Newsletter subscription	\$15.00

We encourage members to take up the three year subscription option that is available. It is three times an annual membership fee and has proved to be popular as it reduces the need for both a member and the Society to process a payment each year.

Subscriptions **are due on 1 July** but earlier renewal is welcomed. David Johns would be happy to receive your payment either at the May meeting or by mail. Our Society expenses continue to increase, mainly due to costs and fees imposed by Government authorities and external bodies.

As foreshadowed in our March Newsletter the matter of a new constitution for the Society was put to the AGM. It was passed unanimously and now will be sent to Corporate Affairs Victoria for approval.

### ....and also

Some newer members have been assisting at recent records workshops. We try to tailor tasks to members' individual interests as much as possible. All help at these workshops is appreciated.

Coming dates for records workshops at the Local History Centre are:

Tuesdays 7.30pm – 5th May, 2nd June

Mondays 9.30am – 18th May, 15th June

## 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

We appreciate the financial support provided by  
Nillumbik Shire Council and the  
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Committee of Management

Printed by courtesy of Vicki Ward MP, State Member for Eltham