Every building has a history

<div align="right">Jim Connor</div>

If only our older buildings could talk, the stories they would tell. How many tales there would be about what happened within the walls during years of celebrations, family histories, joys, heartaches, personal achievements and the many changes in and around it.

This thought came to me on Saturday 16 January 2016 when I met with descendants of the Shillinglaw family and local historians Dennis Ward and Terry Phillips at the Eltham Library. The Shillinglaw family were pioneers of early Eltham and the family home is one of the earliest houses remaining in the area, though it was moved from the original site in the 1960s to the present location in Panther Place, adjacent to the Eltham Library.

Family members mentioned their memories of activities around the farm and in the cottage, built (c.1878-80) by George Stebbing. The larger property was progressively reduced in size as various parcels were acquired by the State Government and Eltham Council for community purposes, including the railway line and areas now used for Central Park, the War Memorial, Senior Citizens' Centre, Andrew Park, the railway station and the former Eltham Shire office site, where the Shillinglaw Cottage was originally established.

Stories were told of the generations who lived, worked and contributed to the local community. Thankfully the family value their history and have actively retained photographs, press cuttings and other records about the various Shillinglaws who lived there.

Later the group decided to visit the former family home, which is now the Shillinglaw Cafe. They were warmly welcomed by the new proprietors of this recently reopened cafe, who said they felt honoured to host Shillinglaw descendants, as they also value the history of the cottage and surrounds.

Shillinglaw decendants and others enjoy lunch in the original family home from left to right: Elizabeth Bell, Terry Phillips, Dennis Ward, Lorna Bunton, Ken Shillinglaw, Kathleen Shillinglaw, Marjorie Reid, Laurie Davies, Margaret Ball

So while we know this particular building can't talk, fortunately we have others who can discuss it's history and those who called it home.

Next Meeting
8.00pm Wednesday 10th February 2016
Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre
Library Place, Eltham (Melway Map 21 ref J5)

Heritage Excursion
Eltham Cemetery
2.00pm Saturday 5th March 2016

February Meeting - Shire of Eltham Pioneers Photo Collection

Our Society is fortunate to have access to digitised images in the Shire of Eltham Pioneers Photograph Collection, through a joint project with the Yarra Plenty Regional Library, funded by a State Government Local History grant. The historic photograph collection was established by the Eltham Shire Council in 1971 and is held at the Eltham Library.

At our first Society meetings in 2014 and 2015 we received positive feedback when we presented and discussed selected images from this collection.

Accordingly this year for our meeting on Wednesday 10th February 2016, at 8.00pm at the Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre, we will again choose a number of photographs of local interest. This time we will consider some images that are unusual or not often viewed so as to encourage comments and contributions from members and visitors.

Introduction and commentary on the pictures will be provided by Russell Yeoman and some other members. Russell has been involved with the collection since its inception when some were used in the 1971 Shire publication: Pioneers and Painters. As at all of our meetings, new members and visitors are most welcome.

Work in progress on the Eltham Swimming Pool - 1933
Shire of Eltham Pioneers Photograph Collection

Heritage Excursion - Saturday 5th March - Eltham Cemetery

Our records contain details of many well known and early pioneers from the Eltham district who are buried in the historic Eltham Cemetery, that was established in 1858 in Mt Pleasant Road on high ground overlooking the then the village of Eltham.

On Saturday 5th March Harry Gilham will again lead members and visitors on a heritage excursion through parts of the cemetery, while providing background information on selected individuals buried there.

As Harry's cemetery walks have been popular in the past we encourage you to come along to experience the tranquil surroundings of this picturesque cemetery.

We may even be able to view the recently installed sculpture titled 'A Currawong Takes Flight' by Michael Wilson, as described in our newsletter Number 224 of September 2015. This is located at the highest point of the fence-lined border between Montsalvat and the cemetery. It is close to the last bronze sculpture by Matcham Skipper, titled 'Young Man Awakening', commissioned by the Eltham Cemetery Trust to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the cemetery in 2008.

Detailed view of 'A Currawong Takes Flight'
Sculpture by Michael Wilson

The excursion will start at 2.00pm from the car park entered from Metery Road.

The Australian Blue Book
Jim Connor

The Australian Blue Book is an all-Australian reference book containing information on Australian government matters from authoritative sources, for all members of the community. As many statistical records and summaries of governmental and local activities are included these can be a valuable historical resource providing a snapshot of an area for the year of publication. Using this resource an interesting comparison can be made of changes in the Eltham township and the overall Shire of Eltham between the years 1903 and 1946.

In 1903 Eltham was described as being a post town, with a telegraph, telephone and money-order station, located 14 miles ENE of Melbourne on the Yarra. There is daily coach communication to Heidelberg with the fare costing 1 shilling*. The hotels were the Eltham and Evelyn.
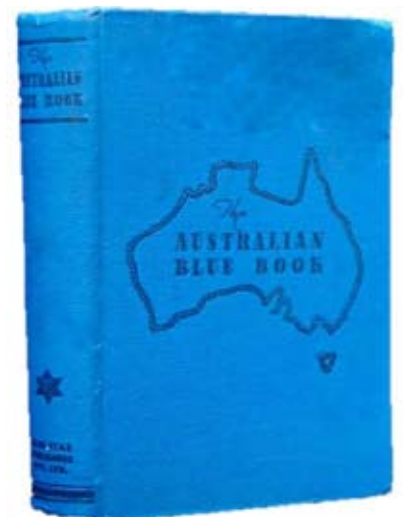

Eltham Hostelry c.1903

Drapery Store, Eltham c.1903

It is described as a grazing and orchard district with 4,289 acres under agricultural cultivation, of which 2,506 acres were orchards and gardens. Gold had been found in the vicinity, but not in large quantities. The area of the Shire was 216 square miles with 883 ratepayers and 612 dwellings. The annual value of ratable property in the Shire was £29,000. There was mention of St Mary's (R.C.) Church and the Episcopal, Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist churches. The population of Eltham was 377 and of the Shire 3,200 people.

In 1946 the Shire was described as a semi-suburban and rural area 16½ miles to the north-east of Melbourne by rail. Eltham is in the extreme south-western corner of the Shire and is distinctly suburban in character, but some fruit growing and dairying is carried on. Eltham has electric light, a water supply, sports grounds, three recreation reserves, electrically lighted swimming baths, a State School, Higher Elementary School and a Private School. It is a mile and a half from the Yarra River and is a favorite spot for picnic parties.

Beyond Eltham the country becomes hilly and semi-mountainous, heavily timbered and rather sparsely populated. There are a number of timber mills in this area and some gold mines, though most of the mines have been worked out. Away from the more suburban area around Eltham and in the other parts of the Shire, which are not heavily timbered, industries are mainly grazing, agricultural, fruit growing and dairying, products being eggs, milk and considerable quantities of potatoes. The well-known Rob Roy property (W.E.Clinton), where Shetland ponies are bred is situated within the Shire. Other sources show the population of Eltham in the 1947 census was 1278, with a total population of 7028 people for the Eltham Shire.

The Australian Blue Book 1942-43

* For anyone who does not know what a shilling is ....search the internet!

Old Postcards of Eltham

Michael Aitken

Collecting old postcards is a pastime I have pursued fervently for fifty years. The hobby doesn't have the cache of collecting antiques, paintings or even stamps and coins. However early postcards do have real attractions for people interested in local history and social culture.

The golden age of the postcard was the Edwardian era. There were very few postcards produced before the beginning of the 20th century and yet they had reached a peak of circulation by about 1906.

In this period the postcard served as a simple quick way to send a short message long before email and the mobile telephone. Postage was usually one penny (less than one cent) and most cards cost about the same.

Penny stamp, Australia c.1915

Postcards were also purchased as souvenirs of places visited, or events viewed, in the days when few people owned a camera. By WW1 postcards were already losing their popularity and although, of course, they have never died out, it is the early cards that most collectors seek.

My pursuit has been almost entirely restricted to old Australian cards – topographical, artist cards, advertising, Aboriginal subjects and military would cover most of my interests.

I grew up in the outer suburb of Boronia, then worked thirty years in Coburg and I have now lived nearly fifty years in Eltham. Not surprisingly the postcards of all three of these areas have special appeal to me but they have proved to be quite elusive. It is the early cards of Eltham that I want to discuss in this article.

Eltham itself was established relatively early as a remote Melbourne suburb. Although the population was small the railway had been extended to Eltham by 1902 and by this time there were a few shops as well as the railway station. It is this kind of pioneer image of our town that can be found on a few early photographic postcards. There exists a fine early card of a steam train arriving at the Eltham station but sadly I still do not have this card in my own collection.

There is a rare series of Eltham cards showing the unmade main road before WW1. In these views there are no motor vehicles and only a single power line or phone line can occasionally be seen. The two hotels and a few small shops were located south of Bridge Street.

Postcards showing Main Road, Eltham c.1910

Old Postcards of Eltham

Eltham was seen as an attractive destination for a holiday outing. On the main road we can see the overdressed strollers returning to the railway station without having to compete with vehicle traffic.

Shillinglaw Cottage is just visible at the bend of the road in the far distance.

Main Road, Eltham - Postcard c.1910

Main Road, Eltham, vicinity of Franklin Street - Postcard inscribed 1909

An especially fine postcard shows the central area of the early village looking approximately south across the main road in the vicinity of Franklin Street.

The corn store of William Andrew is prominent in the foreground and above the adjacent cottage can be glimpsed the roof of the Eltham Courthouse near the corner of Brougham Street.

A much more lively image shows picnickers occupying the park like timbered grounds just north of Dudley Street where today the main shopping centre has been long-established. It appears to be a holiday and quite a few families have arrived in horse drawn carriages. On the opposite side of Main Road is the single shop. The railway station would have been accessed by a side road just beyond this shop in the same way as we do today. The tent in the right centre may be for a party.

A Peep at the Picknickers, Eltham c.1910

For those interested there are other postcard views of Eltham. Some can be seen in Pioneers and Painters, published by the Shire of Eltham in 1971 to commemorate the centenary of the Shire's birth; there are some good reproductions in the Shire of Eltham's Pioneers Photograph collection at the Eltham Library and our Eltham District Historical Society holds many more.

Rob Roy

Jim Allen

Did you know that in the back roads of the former Eltham Shire is one of Victoria's oldest motor sports venues? The facility in question is the Rob Roy Hill Climb located off Clintons Road, in the Christmas Hills area. From the early appearance of automobiles hill climbs have been a popular event in Victoria with tracks being established at many locations across the state. The objective of a hill climb is to get your vehicle to the top of a hill in the fastest possible time. My interest in hill climbing began after viewing a re-enactment of the 1904 Burgundy Street, Heidelberg Hill Climb.

Rob Roy started life initially as a Shetland pony stud owned by Bill Clinton, a former Mayor of Heidelberg. Over time the property progressed to being known as Clinton's Pleasure Grounds, where companies would transport their employees for a day of picnicking and other recreational delights. Available were a swimming hole, tennis courts, tea-rooms and an area for cricket, football and other sporting activities.

In 1923 the Victorian Light Car Club was formed to actively promote motor sports. During the mid-thirties Bill Clinton had discussions with the Light Car Club of Australia and invited them to organize hill climbs at the property. In the 1935 October issue of the motoring magazine 'The Car' mention was made of a new hill climb venue, but it did not divulge where it was until they stated in December that they had approval to use Rob Roy.

Several motoring enthusiasts along with the Light Car Club of Victoria got the ball rolling by marking out the course, as Rob Roy was a public road and the surface was unsealed. The first event was held in February 1937 and was won by Peter Whitehead from the United Kingdom in an ERA (English Racing Automobiles).

In January 1962 the Light Car Club of Victoria were forced to abandon the Christmas Hill venue when bush fires burned out the access bridge to the track area and the repair costs to restore the course were too expensive.

From 1979 to 1987 the MG Car Club ran a hill climb at Templestowe, however a decision by the owner of the land to subdivide soon put a halt to that venue.

Rob Roy 1952
Photograph by Norm Williams on his Box Brownie

With the closure of the Templestowe Hill Climb a new venue had to be found, which resulted in the subsequent resurrection of the Rob Roy facility. In 1989 it was announced that a steering committee had been established to negotiate with the Board of Works and the Eltham Shire Council to take over the lease of the hill climb venue, formerly known as Rob Roy. In 1992 the MG Car Club was successful in obtaining a ten-year lease on the property.

A great deal of voluntary work was carried out by club members over the next 12 months to restore the original track and associated facilities. *(continued on page 7)*

Rob Roy - November 2015 - historic and classic vehicles represented
Photograph by Jim Allen

The access road was improved and guardrails were installed on the causeway. In order to finance some of the enormous costs the 'Friends of Rob Roy' group was established and 500 memberships were offered at $150, with members gaining free spectator entry for 10 years.

Many famous racing drivers have competed at Rob Roy, including Bib Stillwell, Jack Braham, Norm Beechey, and Peter Brock, who as a guest of honour in an unofficial demonstration run created an unofficial class record of 23.76 seconds in a Holden Torana GTR-XU1.

Rob Roy - November 2015 - Maybach 1
Photograph by Jim Allen

In 2005 near the start mark a shelter was constructed from where hot food and drinks could be obtained. Over the period of Rob Roy's existence many different vehicles have competed, including motor cycles, (some with sidecars) and midget speedway cars. In the early days helmets were not a requirement and even today some vehicles compete with just a frame and no body.

In November 2009 the giant PBR brake shoe that was a feature of the Templestowe Hill Climb was rescued and erected at the start line at Rob Roy.

Rob Roy - November 2015 - Start line
Photograph by Jim Allen

Over the years since it was established many residents from the local area have been involved in activities at Rob Roy, either competing or in an organising role. On event days one could see a steady stream of sporty looking cars passing through Eltham along Main Road. One person involved in racing there was Rod Robertson, who was successful with his award winning MG TC during the 1970s. In conjunction with Bill Lockington he rebuilt this car with a new aluminium body.

So if you want to actively experience some of our local history and explore something new keep your eye on the automobile section of the Herald Sun for the next scheduled competition, or check the MG Car Club website at http://mgcc.com.au/robroy/. The next event will be on Sunday 21st February 2016.

You may find like me you enjoy seeing a range of vehicles of all ages competing against one another.

References

1. A History of Rob Roy Hill Climb, 1937-1961, (The Hill, The Drivers, the Cars) by Leon Sims
2. Commemorating 50 Years of the MG Car Club Victoria, (From Larikins to old Snoozers) - researched and written by Leon Sims and edited by Bob Somerville
3. Diamond Valley Leader article dated 21 October 2015, page 5

Rod Robertson in his MG TC
Photograph provided by Lucy Robertson

Cranky Jimmy's Ghost

In the late 1880s an Eltham farm worker known as 'Cranky Jimmy' fatally shot his employer Mr. Lane and disappeared into the bush near Laughing Waters Road, Eltham. Sometime later a skeleton was found in the bush near the river and it was widely assumed this was the remains of the murderer and so began the local myth of Cranky Jimmy's Ghost.

In the Diamond Valley News in 1980 Beatrice Morrison, who lived in 'Killeavey' in Laughing Waters Road for most of her life, recalled how in the early 1900s her family nurse would terrify the Morrison children when they were in the outdoor bathroom - knocking on the door and whispering: *'This is Cranky Jimmy's Ghost'.*

Article from Nillumbik Chronicles 24 October 2014

2016 Program

Accompanying this Newsletter is the Society's program for this year. It is also available on the Society's website and extra copies are available if required. It includes topics and speakers for Society meetings as well as dates for other activities, committee meetings, records workshops and heritage excursions. We look forward to members being involved in our various activities during 2016. Any changes during the year will be notified in the Newsletter.

In accordance with a decision of the Committee the meeting schedule has been altered from what it has been in past years. Following the first Society meeting in February, meetings will be held every two months with the Annual General Meeting to be held in April. There will be five meetings rather than the six held in past years. The Christmas function in December will take the place of the sixth meeting. Excursions and Committee meetings will be held in alternate months to Society meetings. The net effect of these changes is that Society activities will be spread more evenly throughout the year.

As indicated above, the April meeting is the Annual General Meeting. Formal notice and the agenda for this meeting will be contained in the April Newsletter, which will be distributed in time to satisfy statutory notice requirements.

Members are encouraged to come along to our records workshops to assist with the on-going task of getting our records into systematic order. A growing number of members continues to make progress on this and other tasks associated with the operation of our Society. The first workshop for 2016 is scheduled for Tuesday 2nd February at 7.30 pm.

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