

# Newsletter

No. 232 February 2017



## 1967 – A Year of Change

Jim Connor

While there have been many changes in the 50 years since 1967, the year our Historical Society was established, 50 years is not such a long time.....*in historical terms.*

It is however a significant milestone for our small not-for-profit historical group, a milestone to be appropriately acknowledged and celebrated. We can remember our past and value our present, as we encompass our future.

Much has changed since 1967, the last year Harold Holt was Prime Minister, when Henry Bolte was the Victorian Premier, La Trobe University was officially opened, the Postcode system was introduced, Heidelberg Historical Society commenced and in June the Beatles released the Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band album, considered by Rolling Stone magazine to be the most important rock and roll album ever made. June was also the month the first meeting was held to establish our Society.



Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band  
Album released in June 1967

Since that time our Society has been actively involved in many activities, excursions, meetings and initiatives to support recognition of our local history. We have been, and are part of the social and cultural fabric that makes up our community. We, and other like groups, value our history and we continue to encourage the broader appreciation of the historical elements within our district, that once gone can never be replaced.

During this year we will look back to consider those individuals who helped establish the then Shire of Eltham Historical Society, now known as the Eltham District Historical Society. They set a course that has led us to where we are today.

Along the way there have been many, many people who have contributed their time, skills, passion and commitment to support our Society and to ensure it has continued to present, value and express the importance of protecting our heritage and maintaining memories of the past, our significant local history.

Now an appropriate question is...*where do we go from here?*

No doubt this will be one of the many discussion points during 2017, our 50th Anniversary year.

## Next Meeting

8.00pm Wednesday 8th February 2017

Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre

Library Place, Eltham (Melway Map 21 ref J5)

## Local History Centre - Open Day

2.00pm Saturday 4th March 2017

728 Main Road, Eltham

See further details on page 2

## Our Next Meeting - Wednesday 8th February

The format for this meeting will be a local history trivia quiz based on pictures from the Society's collection or present day pictures taken especially for this quiz.



As we commence our 50th Anniversary year the focus will be on Society achievements and activities, but perhaps with some other tricky questions to confuse participants. An early significant achievement was participation in the collection of historical photographs for "Pioneers and Painters" now known as the Shire of Eltham Pioneers Photograph Collection, so of course some questions will be based on photos from that collection.

Participants can work individually or in teams of up to four people. Forms will be provided setting out the questions with space for written answers. There will be a prize for the winner or winning team. Quizmaster will be Russell Yeoman.

This light-hearted meeting will be held at 8 pm on Wednesday 8th February in the Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre, Library Place Eltham. All members and visitors are welcome to attend.

## Open Day at Our Local History Centre - Saturday 4th March

The former police residence at 728 Main Road, Eltham was built in 1859-60 to house the local police officer, with the first occupant being Constable Peter Lawlor and his family. This building is on the Victorian Heritage Register and is considered to be of state heritage significance as the oldest public building in Nillumbik, after the adjacent Court House, also built in 1859-60.

The original single stall brick stables building with a loft was built then in the rear yard, but has been substantially altered since. The original two-cell bluestone lockup, located where the rear car park now is, was demolished in the 1950s. Some of the bluestone blocks have been used as edging for garden beds.



Then

Police activities ceased about 1952 when a new police station was opened in central Eltham. The residence was then used by the State Lands Department, followed by a Community Youth Support Scheme and later for the Shire of Eltham Parks and Environment Section.

Since 1998 our Society has appreciated occupying this former residence for our Local History Centre as the base for our operations and to house a range of local history resources, records and documents.



Now

During the last six months we have undertaken a substantial refurbishment and reorganisation of the premises and to celebrate this achievement we will be holding an Open Day and official 'reopening' on Saturday 4th March from 2.00pm. Society members and visitors are invited to visit, browse around and explore some of our local history.

Much has been written about the historic Eltham building Shillinglaw Cottage and how it was removed from its original site and rebuilt in its current location. Articles have appeared in earlier Newsletters as well as in many other publications. What is not generally appreciated is the role that the cottage has played as a catalyst for the establishment of this Society.

The story starts in 1963 after the Eltham Shire Council had purchased the cottage as the site for a new shire office. In earlier years most of the Shillinglaw farm had been purchased by the council and the State Government for parkland and railway purposes, including the Eltham station. The Council had decided that the cottage was of no value and should be demolished. However Shire Engineer John McDonald thought the cottage might be worth retaining and referred the matter to the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation. The CSIRO wrote to the National Trust noting the unusual character of the cottage and suggesting that it might be of interest to the Trust. The cottage was subsequently classified by the Trust.



Shillinglaw Cottage on the original site c.1963  
- includes Eltham Shire Engineer John McDonald

Diana Bassett-Smith recalls that in May 1964 she received a phone call from Shire President Cr. Les Docksey. Diana says that in his pre-emptory way his words were to this effect. "Diana, if you want to save the cottage you have three days to come up with an idea and there will be NO MONEY from the Shire!!".

Diana replied that she would get back to him. Diana and her friend Cr. Charis Pelling quickly recruited a number of local people who were prepared to act as guarantors for a bank loan to fund the relocation of the cottage. The Shillinglaw Cottage Preservation Committee was formed chaired by Charis Pelling and it set about raising funds. A major fundraiser was the very successful cookbook 'Flavour of Eltham'. Alistair Knox and Peter Glass prepared plans of the cottage and it was quickly demolished. Reconstruction on Council land a little to the south of the original site proceeded concurrently with construction of the new shire office. While all of this was going on the committee collected furniture and artefacts with the intention of establishing a cottage museum.

In 1967 with the restoration of the cottage well advanced local people turned their attention to wider issues of local history. Charis Pelling convened a public meeting in the Eltham Shire Hall with the intention of establishing a local historical society. This meeting on 6th June 1967 was attended by a number of members of the Shillinglaw Committee and others who had assisted with the project. The meeting decided to form the Shire of Eltham Historical Society and appointed a tentative committee to investigate a constitution for the society. The first general meeting of the new society was held on 24th October 1967 when Charis Pelling was elected as President.

The Society and the Shillinglaw Committee co-existed for some years with a significant overlap of membership. Much of the furniture for the cottage museum was lost when fire destroyed the Pelling house in 1969. The museum proposal was significantly downgraded and eventually did not proceed. The restored cottage was operated as a craft outlet with the Committee collecting the rent. It was officially opened in 1973. In 1987 the Council took over management of the cottage and the Preservation Committee became inactive.

It is likely that at some stage a historical society for our area would have been started without the stimulus of Shillinglaw Cottage. However the reason why it happened 50 years ago is the interest in local history sparked by the local movement to preserve the cottage.

During this 50th Anniversary year it is intended to revisit aspects of the history of our Society, including those individuals who contributed to the establishment of the Shire of Eltham Historical Society in 1967, known since the local government restructure process in 1993/94 as the Eltham District Historical Society. The first person is:

### Charis Meta Alexander Pelling

'You are cordially invited to attend a public meeting on Tuesday June 6th to form a Shire of Eltham Historical Society'. So began an open letter dated 24th May 1967 from Shire of Eltham councillor Charis Pelling.

As we look back at our own history, it is appropriate the first person we consider is Charis Pelling, our foundation president. Charis is an unusual given name, one derived from a Greek word meaning 'grace, kindness and life'.

Charis Pelling served as a councillor from 1961-71 for the Shire of Eltham, which then extended from Lower Plenty to Kinglake, and was Shire President from 1962-63, the Shire's first woman to hold this position.

This public meeting held in the Shire Hall, on the corner of Main Road and Arthur Street, Eltham was the initiative of Cr. Pelling and was focussed on the history of the wider shire. In her opening address Cr. Pelling pointed out the urgent need for an historical society in the area, as many old records and landmarks had been gradually disappearing over the years.

The meeting decided that a Shire of Eltham Historical Society should be formed and an interim committee was elected. In October 1967 the first formal meeting of the new society was held, a committee elected and Charis Pelling became the first President. Charis held this position from 1967 until 1976, then was Vice President during 1977.

Charis was one of four children from a high achieving family. Her father was William Alexander Osborne (1873-1967), a professor of physiology, man of letters and broadcaster, born in 1873 in Ireland and educated there, including at Queen's College, Belfast, topping his final year.



Cr. Charis Pelling with author Alan Marshall 1971  
Photograph from the Shire of Eltham Pioneers Photograph Collection

In 1903, he married Ethel Elizabeth Goodson in Leeds and that year he was appointed professor of physiology and histology at the University of Melbourne. His reputation was already brilliant, his versatility and range of interests were extraordinary. In Melbourne he became involved in many organisations, including being a committee member of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria (1930-37).

Charis married Edwin Pelling in 1941. She was born on 1st March 1920, died on 4th December 2006 and is buried in the Kangaroo Ground Cemetery. We owe a great deal of thanks for her outstanding historical initiative that established a developing legacy for following generations.

The site for a village at Eltham was first gazetted by the Colonial Secretary's Office in Sydney on 9 January 1851. The first race meeting noted came on 24 December 1855 – like most of the early meetings, prize money was determined on the sweepstake basis with the entry fees providing part of the prize and the organisers making up the difference to a total stake of between £7 and £15. A proviso (as in most cases) was that at least three horses must be entered for the event to protect the organiser's exposure in making up the prize money.

**“ELTHAM RACES** - For the first time there is to be a race meeting at Eltham this year. At a meeting held recently, stewards were appointed and subscriptions liberally entered into. The races are to take place on the 24th December, and will be followed by a number of old English sports, which cannot fail to prove attractive to the number of farmers and agricultural labourers in the neighbourhood. A flat near the township is well adapted for the formation of a three-quarter-mile racecourse and may be sufficiently cleared at a very little expense”.

*The Argus, 24 November 1855*

The Victorian Colonial Government in August 1857 authorised a temporary grant of 58 acres of land at Eltham for a racecourse “and other recreational purposes”, the Trustees appointed being Messrs. Henry Stooke, John Brown and John Bell.

The 1856 and 1857 meetings were held over two-days – typically three races (some with heats and a final) and a pony event on the day, and a steeplechase, Publican's Purse, hack race and a Consolation Stakes for horses that had been beaten in earlier events on the second day.



Bell's Life in Victoria (21 November, 1857) noted the meeting:-

*“... on land recently granted by the Government for a racecourse, situate quite in the bush and formed with a course over 1/2 mile in extent ... the attendance was numerous, comprising many sporting men from the district, and gentry and farmers from the neighbourhood, and we are happy to see so many of the fair sex present, the majority of which were mounted and did credit to the pigskin”.*

The early meetings appear to have continued until February 1877 when it was noted that the reservation of land of Eltham was about to be revoked; the meetings were predictably very much local affairs. The Age in December 1869 mentioned that there were no horses from the metropolitan area and all but two were locals.

The revocation was in name only; the land was simply reassigned from Government control to a proclaimed public park with the Council of the Shire of Eltham assigned as the Committee of Management (it was noted that the former co-trustee of the racecourse, John Bell was by then the Shire President).

*(continued on page 6)*

Racing at Eltham was revived in 1887 with a six-race meeting with stakes ranging from 7 to 20 sovereigns, the conditions somewhat changed with two races expressly restricted to horses from the district.

The new Eltham Race Club was granted permission by the Shire of Eltham to lay out a track at Eltham Park – given both the earlier racecourse and Eltham Park (from 1877) were public lands, they were almost certainly one and the same site.

The early organisation seems to have had some way to go, the local Evelyn Observer noting “certain difficulties”, the meeting not under the protection of the V.R.C., a number of “welshers” among the bookmakers, a number of frivolous protests and a number of racehorses under assumed names. Later meetings suggest that the racing club had established a strong presence in the district with meetings advertised “no person allowed to enter a horse unless the bona fide property of a subscriber to the Eltham Race Fund of not less than two sovereigns”.

The last meeting appears to have been in January 1904 under trying conditions with the temperature reaching 105 degrees and with some adverse publicity after a young man was fined in Eltham Court for being drunk and disorderly – police had arrested him after he was refused permission by stewards to ride in the pony race – in his defence, he claimed that the stewards had backed another pony “and were frightened the pony he was riding would win”. (*He was fined five shillings, the magistrate took a rather more serious view of two men selling fake jewellery without the appropriate hawker’s licence and fined both £10, or two month’s jail in default*).

“Eltham Park” is now known as Eltham Lower Park located on Main Road and bordered by the Diamond Creek and the Yarra River. It is used for a variety of active and passive recreational purposes, including by the Eltham Horse and Pony Club, established there in 1953.

*This article first appeared on Wikinorthia: documenting life in Melbourne’s north. Visit [www.wikinorthia.net.au](http://www.wikinorthia.net.au). Wikinorthia is a partnership between Moreland Libraries, Darebin Libraries and Yarra Plenty Regional Library.*

## The Eltham Report 1856

The following report comes from “The Argus”, Melbourne, 26th July, 1856:  
*Eltham District (from a Correspondent July 24th 1856)*

The inhabitants of this locality are exceedingly gratified by the steps Government are at length taking towards giving them some kind of road worthy the name, even though the operations have not as yet progressed beyond the surveys of the line of road; and, considering that it is now seventeen years since this district was first opened up by the farmers of Kangaroo Ground, and not a single bit of road has as yet been made by the Government, it surely is not too soon to make surveys. Indeed this part of the country - only a dozen or fifteen miles from Melbourne as to distance, but more than double that distance practically, owing to bad roads, etc., has hitherto been most strangely neglected: and notwithstanding the most strenuous exertions on the part of both the Kangaroo Ground and Eltham farmers, nothing has yet been done by Government to help them out in their troubles. It is to be hoped, therefore, that now a beginning has been made, in the way of surveys, we shall really have something done before long. A more beautiful district does not exist in the Colony, and once fairly started, none will out vie it is prosperity.

More loss and hardship have perhaps fallen on the farmers of this district than on any others, owing to the immense labour required in clearing, grubbing, etc., over most districts: for this part of the country, though so extremely fertile and luxuriant when in full cultivation, presents a very

(continued on page 7)

unlikely appearance to the intending farmer: but when to this is added the absence of any road, save stump-strewed bullock tracks, it is quite enough to dishearten any man, and helps to prevent that speeding of the plough which is most assuredly for many years will prove the greatest source of prosperity to the Colony. There is little doubt but that your efforts lately on behalf of the agricultural interest have done much to awaken the Government to the necessity of unusual exertions in assisting that class of the Community, and this neighbourhood feels very grateful.

But it is not the agriculturists who desire roads, bridges, etc. in this neighbourhood. We have no less than three or four sets of diggings lying near Eltham, to find out which the poor diggers are sometimes sorely puzzled, and which, from their proximity to Melbourne, would prove useful to the diggers little capital, as not involving great travelling expenses. There are the Old Caledonia diggings, which are at present paying very fair wages; then there is the New Caledonia, which have not turned out permanently remunerative, probably owing to insufficient search; then we come to the lately discovered diggings at Bell's paddock. I visited these diggings a day or two since, and from replies to my questions to the diggers learned that they can depend upon half a pennyweight to three buckets of washing stuff. The holes are sunk in the bed at the creek to the depth of from eight to twelve feet. Many of the holes are driven some distance, after going down about six or eight feet. The sand is of a golden colour, but does not show any signs of gold to the naked eye. The diggers have requested Mr. Bell to allow them to enter his paddock through which the creek runs higher up; but that gentleman has hitherto declined to accede to their request. The diggers seem confident that they would do well should Mr. Bell kindly permit even a small portion of the creek in his paddock to be worked. This creek is called the Dry Creek; just now, however, there is rather too much water. These diggings are but three miles from Eltham, by the short cut, which runs across the ranges by the farm of James Buchanan, Esq. at the east side of the township.

Lastly, there is Anderson's Creek, the oldest gold-field in Victoria. Between Bell's diggings and Anderson's Creek is but three miles by the short cut across the ranges, but, from the fact of there being no bridge across the Yarra hereabouts, the traveller has to go round by way of Templestowe, - a distance of about fifteen miles. At Anderson's Creek some are doing very well, and the only hindrances to the well-doing of all seems to be the absence of machinery. It certainly does seem strange that some few capitalists do not turn their attention to the development of the treasures hereabouts.

From Anderson's Creek the transition is easy to Mr. Anderson, one of the candidates offering himself for this district. I regretted that when he addressed himself to the Eltham electors yesterday (Wednesday the 23rd) he was not explicit as to the question of roads for this district. He merely said that the roads must speak for themselves, which they certainly do as far as those who travel on them are concerned; but, alas! None of the members of the Government are in the habit of travelling on them.

The land is now pretty generally ready for the seed, but the late wet weather, has hitherto prevented the farmers from sowing. A great quantity of new land is being turned up in this neighbourhood, so it is evident there are plenty who have faith in the agricultural interest. It would be much to be regretted if the Protection heresy were to take root in the minds of the farmers in this locality, as one might be led to fear by the fact that the most influential farmer of the Kangaroo Ground asked Mr. Anderson, when at Eltham, if he would be prepared to support a prohibitive duty on imported corn. It is due to Mr. Anderson to say that he at once stated that if his success in that district depended on the support of such a duty he would at once retire from the field.

Mr. Anderson's views seem likely to win him success.

*Based on an article from the Eltham District Historical Society's Newsletter No. 181 July 2008.*

## 2017 Program

Accompanying this Newsletter is the Society's program for this 50th Anniversary year. It is also available on the Society's web site 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. Members and visitors are welcome to be involved in our various activities and any changes during the year will be notified in the Newsletter.

We are fortunate excellent speakers have agreed to help us celebrate our 50 years of supporting local history, including at our special 50th Anniversary luncheon on Saturday 10th June, in the Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre. Associate Professor Don Garden, president of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria has agreed to be our keynote speaker. Further details of this event will be distributed later in the year.

Members are encouraged to come along to our records workshops at our Local History Centre, as listed in this program, to assist with the on-going task of records management. A growing number of members continue to make progress on this and other tasks associated with the operation of our Society. The first workshops for 2017 are scheduled for Tuesday 7th February at 7.30 pm and Monday 20 February at 9.30am.

## Victorian Collections

On 24th January a workshop was held for some members about the process of cataloguing and uploading details of our records and photographs into the Victorian Collections online collection information system. This service, supported by Museum Victoria in partnership with Museums Australia (Victoria), is now used by many organisations to store and promote their collections. You can visit and browse their website at <https://victoriancollections.net.au>, where there are many entries displayed, including by Greensborough Historical Society and Nillumbik Shire Council.

A collections sub committee will be formed to facilitate digitising and cataloguing of our collected resources and there will be some additional workshops held this year to progress this program.

## ...and also

We thank the Nillumbik Shire Council for the recent grant of \$600, which will be used to offset some of our regular operating expenses. Shown below are two new email addresses to be used for our Society and it would assist our operations if you could update your contacts list accordingly.

## Contacts for the Eltham District Historical Society

- Jim Connor, President – Telephone 0418 379 497 – [edhshistory@gmail.com](mailto:edhshistory@gmail.com)
- Russell Yeoman, Society Secretary – Telephone 9439 9717 – [edhsoffice@gmail.com](mailto:edhsoffice@gmail.com)
- David Johns, Treasurer / Membership Secretary – Telephone 9434 3357

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