

Newsletter



No. 279 December 2024

Remembering The Shire Of Eltham – 30 Years On

Russell Yeoman

In December 1994 the Victorian Government brought most of its municipal restructuring program into effect. The result for our local area was that the Shire of Eltham as a geographical area and the Eltham Shire Council both ceased to exist.

At the same time the Shire of Nillumbik was created incorporating most of the former Shire of Eltham, but with some significant changes. Areas from the Shires of Diamond Valley and Healesville and the City of Whittlesea were added at Eltham North, Diamond Creek, Greensborough, Hurstbridge, Plenty, Yarrambat, Arthurs Creek, Strathewen and Christmas Hills. Notably Montmorency, Lower Plenty and Briar Hill were included in the City of Banyule. (The Kinglake area had earlier been transferred to the Shire of Murrundindi.)

The origins of the Eltham Shire Council can be traced back to a volunteer road maintenance committee formed in 1853. In 1856 its functions were taken over by the Eltham District Road Board. In 1871 the Eltham Shire Council was formed. Its boundaries extended from Lower Plenty to beyond Healesville and it included a small area north of the Great Dividing Range at Kinglake. Over the years there were a number of significant reductions in its size.

The Road Board first met at the Fountain of Friendship Hotel, Eltham and after 1860 at the Eltham Courthouse where the Board office was also located. From 1867 the office was located at the home of Board Secretary Charles Wingrove.

He was Secretary for the Board and Council for nearly 50 years. Later the Council bought the former office of the Evelyn Observer at Kangaroo Ground. This building burnt down in 1934 and the Council operated from temporary premises for some years. In 1941 a new office and hall was opened at the corner of Main Road and Arthur Street Eltham. This served until 1965 when a much larger office was built on the former Shillinglaw land in Main Road. Nillumbik Council moved to the former Diamond Valley office in Greensborough and the Eltham office was demolished in 1996.

The 1994 changes had implications for our Society. We changed from the Shire of Eltham Historical Society to the Eltham District Historical Society. This reflected the fact that there were a number of other historical societies within Nillumbik. However we retain a significant collection of Eltham Shire Council memorabilia.

Shire of Eltham
16th April 1871 - 15th December 1994



Coat of Arms



Our Christmas Party - 7.30pm Wednesday - 11th December 2024
Eltham Senior Citizen's Centre, Library Place, Eltham - details at page 2

This year it is 90 years since Justus Jørgensen purchased land in Eltham for Montsalvat.
Some articles in this edition of our newsletter further commemorate this anniversary.

Our Christmas Party - 7.30pm Wednesday 11th December 2024

Members are invited to our break up night

When: Wednesday 11th December 2024

Where: Eltham Senior Citizens Centre

Time: 7.30pm - 9.30pm

Theme: Trivia Night

BYO: Drinks and nibbles. Plate for Shared Supper

Dress Code: Smart casual with a touch of Christmas, Formal or Historical Costume

Book sale and Auction: Cash sales only

Gather in a team and test your knowledge of local history prizes on offer 😊



▶ **RSVP essential:** by Wednesday 4th December to edhsoffice@gmail.com

Shire Council representation - 1871 - 2024

Jim Connor

In commemorating the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Shire of Nillumbik, on 15th December 2024, it is perhaps an appropriate time to also recognise those who have volunteered to be involved with the extensive municipal history of the region, prior to this date.

Since the Shire of Eltham was established on 16th April 1871 there have been many individuals who have put themselves forward to serve as councillors representing their local communities.

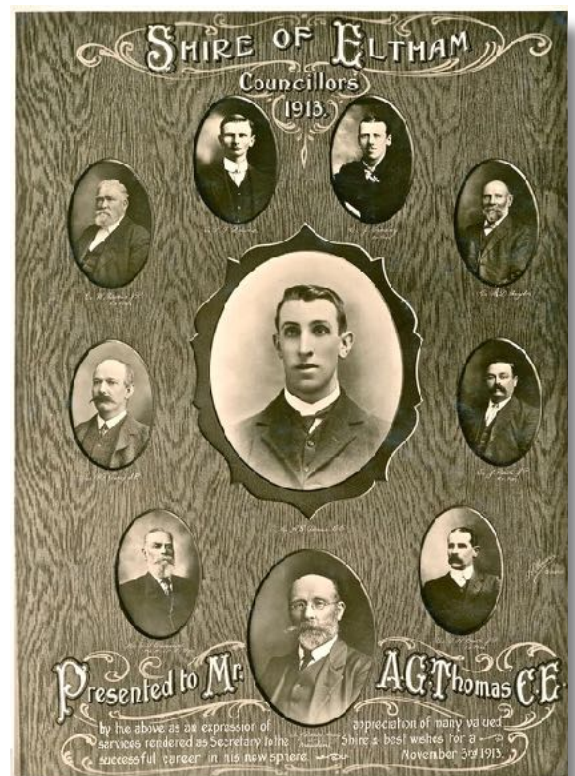
In the ninety years between 1871 and 1961 there were one hundred and six Eltham councillors elected, some for a number of terms. From 1961, until all councillors were dismissed due to State Government municipal restructure in 1994, there were fifty councillors elected, again some for multiple terms.

So from 1871 until 1994 the Shire of Eltham was served by one hundred and fifty six elected councillors, who represented communities across the municipality.

When the Shire of Nillumbik was established in 1994 it also included much of the former Shire of Diamond Valley, where sixty three councillors had served in the thirty years, from when it commenced in 1964.

Five commissioners and two administrators have been involved with Nillumbik. There have been ten Chief Executive Officers, of which six have been permanent appointments, with the others either in an acting, or interim role.

Since the first Shire of Nillumbik election was held in 1997 there have been forty seven councillors elected, including some for more than one term.



Shire of Eltham Councillors - 1913

*Photograph - EDHS collection

This article is one of two on Montsalvat from the book Nillumbik Now and Then by Marguerite Marshall published in 2008. The images in this article are not from Nillumbik Now and Then.

At first glance, Montsalvat, the artists' community at Hillcrest Avenue, Eltham, could belong to another time and place.

The French provincial Gothic-style buildings blend picturesquely with the introduced and native trees and farm animals on the five hectare property.

But Montsalvat belongs very much to today's Eltham, having inspired much of its creative activity and style. The use of mud-brick and recycled building materials, for which Eltham is so well-known, was largely popularised by Montsalvat.

Montsalvat – unique in Victoria and probably in Australia – is registered by the National Trust and National Estate.¹

Montsalvat, named after the castle of the Knights of the Holy Grail, has attracted artists and intellectuals since it was founded in 1934.

For years at weekends, artists, lawyers, philosophers, politicians and others, who shared a love for what Montsalvat stood for, gathered for a meal and stimulating discussion. The focus for this gathering of talent was Justus Jørgensen, an eccentric man with vision and charisma.

It was Jørgensen's foresight that saw the creation of Montsalvat, which in 1975 was formed into a trust to benefit the Victorian people. The property was then valued at about three million dollars. It is now visited by thousands of people annually.

Born in 1894 and brought up a Catholic, Jørgensen had trained as an architect. He later studied painting at the National Gallery School under artist, Frederick McCubbin, then joined the studio of artist Max Meldrum.

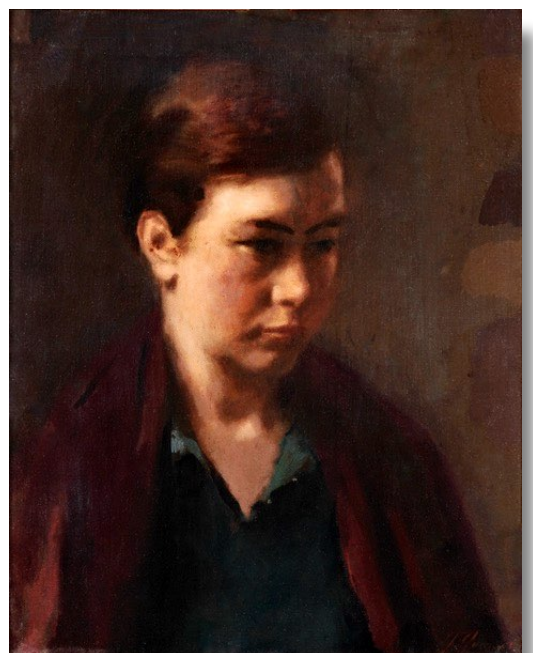
In 1924, Jørgensen married medical student Lillian Smith, and with artist friends they travelled to Europe to study the great masters.

In London Jørgensen exhibited in several major galleries. One of his still life paintings was included in the book *The Art of Still Life* by Herbert Furst, which featured 100 of the greatest ever still life paintings.²

In 1929, Jørgensen returned to Melbourne where Lil, now qualified, worked as an anaesthetist at St Vincent's Hospital. They bought a small house in Brighton and Jørgensen rented a large building in Queen Street for his studio until the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria bought it in 1955.



Justus Jørgensen in his studio
Photograph - Montsalvat Collection



Lil Jørgensen by Justus Jørgensen

While designing and overseeing the building of a studio for his friend the famous cartoonist Percy Leason, in Lavender Park Road, Jörgensen decided to buy land for a country retreat in Eltham.

So, the building of Montsalvat began. Jörgensen gathered around a dozen of his friends and students from his Queen Street studio. They set to work, first at weekends then some decided to live permanently on the site.

Jörgensen had seen mud-brick buildings in Spain and recognised that Eltham's clay soil was ideal for mud-bricks and although labour intensive, it was a very cheap way of building.

Jörgensen's students and friends worked under his direction with the help of local tradesmen, including carpenter, Len Jarrold and later stone mason, Horrie Judd. In return Jörgensen would give the students a painting lesson or two. It was the Great Depression when many were out of work. Jörgensen also inspired people to give generously of money and materials.

With their help Jörgensen found second-hand materials for building. Friends donated slate for roofing, discarded firebricks were used for flooring and windows and doors and a cast-iron circular staircase came from a wrecker.

The students' day started at 7am with building and domestic chores, shared equally between the sexes.

The first building was used by his friends at weekends and then became a home for his wife Lil. It consisted of three rooms and an attic under a high-pitched roof.

Jörgensen then built a similar structure with the same high-pitched roof as a more permanent home for his students. The two buildings were joined together with a tower and a studio for Jörgensen. While excavating for the studio a reef of yellow mud- stone was found and then used in construction.³

Sources

1. Bick, D and Kellaway, C *Shire of Eltham Heritage Study* 1992 p 952
2. Jörgensen, S
3. Marshall, A, *Pioneers and Painters* p118



The cast-iron circular staircase

Photograph - Jim Connor - April 2019

Montsalvat and all that Jazz

The Montsalvat Jazz Festival was held annually from 1988-1996. Sigmund Jörgensen is credited with helping establish this significant event in the then Australian Jazz scene.

Many notable jazz artists were involved over these years including Bob Barnard, Graeme Bell, John Sangster, Margaret Roadknight, Don Burrows, Judy Bailey and Judy Jacques.

There is a Montsalvat Jazz Honour Roll held in the collection of the Australian Jazz Museum.

Jim Connor



On the 19th of December 2018 I was at the Montsalvat Christmas function in the Great Hall, one in a crowd of many people enjoying themselves. While I was sitting talking with Hamish Knox, I casually admired the substantial timber posts supporting the ceiling and the upstairs gallery.

Intrigued by what I saw, I pointed to these posts and asked Hamish, “what are those holes for?” He gave me a wry smile, then recounted the following story:

Many years ago, an agitated Sig Jörgensen phoned him saying the Great Hall is sinking and they were desperately concerned. Montsalvat had obtained some engineering advice and a quotation, which was well beyond their capacity to afford the suggested repairs. He asked Hamish if he could come and have a look, so he did.

On close inspection, Hamish ascertained the six huge posts had in fact been slowly sinking. This turned out to be due to a previously unknown subterranean stream that flows under this section of the Montsalvat property. As a result, the softened foundations had undermined the base of the main support posts, resulting in the interior of the building slowly subsiding.



Interior of the Great Hall - Montsalvat
Photograph - Jim Connor

With Sigmund’s agreement, Hamish formulated a rescue plan. He begged and borrowed as many ten tonne bottle jacks as possible from his various local contacts. Hamish and assistants Mark Spratt and Mat Boyle then drilled a horizontal hole through each post, about a metre above floor level, to enable a solid steel rod to be inserted. They clamped timber on the sides of the six posts to provide support and to spread the load, for the two jacks placed under each end of the protruding steel rod, on each post. Heavy sections of timber were placed under the jacks to protect the existing slate flooring.

By slowly raising the jacks, in order, the weight of the interior of the building was gradually transferred to the jacks, with the posts being very slowly lifted, some up to 300mm above the earlier subsided level. This enabled access for a chainsaw so the bottom of the posts could be squared off, removing the damaged timber. At one stage the six posts were not touching any ground, with the full load being carried by twenty four jacks. Bricks with strong mortar were then used to build a solid base under each post. They needed to be careful not to over jack, while still stabilising the structure, and continued doing so until the exterior walls started to show some signs of cracking.



A hole in a post
Photograph - Jim Connor

The jacks were then very slowly lowered to enable the building to settle, at a level close to when the Great Hall was originally constructed. New timber skirting was installed around each post, at floor level, to cover the top of the brick bases. This process was carried out over several days.

So, the next time you are in this magnificent building, observe the hole in each of these substantial posts, knowing how Hamish Knox managed to reestablish close to the original building levels, by sheer ingenuity and his lateral approach to problem solving.

Apparently when Helen Skipper next saw Hamish, she threw her arms around him emotionally exclaiming “Hamish, you have saved Montsalvat.”

History came alive in October with the premiere of the open air play *The Bridge* performance at Hurstbridge by members of Allwood Neighbourhood House and the Hurstbridge Community.

To commemorate 100 years of Hurstbridge township, the production was led by local historian David Kerrigan who co-wrote the play with Keira de Hoog.

The quiet life of the Diamond Creek district was shattered on the 4th October 1866 when a visitor arrived seeking food and shelter. What followed has become part of the Hurstbridge story. The death of Henry Hurst by the bushranger Robert Burke and the subsequent inquest, trial and execution of Burke captured the attention of the nation. News of the event was reported nationally and in UK newspapers.

Rain at sunset on opening night set the scene for the sombre story which opened with clap sticks and imagery as part of the acknowledgement of country.

Attention to detail in Act One included the enactment of writing a letter Ellen Hurst had actually written back to her family in England, days before the incident, which set the scene – and choreography of the “capture” of Burke immediately following the shooting, as drawn by the engraver Robert Bruce and published in 1866. The cast, crew and audience moved around the actual site where the altercation took place till the final act and judgement of Sir Redmond Barry to execute Burke.

An excellent souvenir program was produced which includes photos and biographies of the cast taken in costume at Gulf Station, Yarra Glen, together with background information and the narrative of the play.

From funding to photos, costumes to choristers, props to pearls, lighting to the language in the play: everyone including the cast and crew of all ages are to be congratulated.

Guests on opening night – 158 years ago to the day of the event included Dianne Switzer, descendent of pioneer Cornelius Haley and Rob Fergusson, descendent of Henry Hurst.

Hurstbridge

Hurstbridge was first settled by colonists in 1842 by Cornelius Haley, a grazier. The area was originally known as Upper Diamond Creek, or Allwood, after the homestead built there on Haley's selection. The town was renamed in 1924. The town's current name is from the Hurst family. Henry Hurst worked for Haley, and in 1857 was joined by his father Robert, mother, and siblings. The Hursts took over from Haley and built the first log bridge across the Diamond Creek in 1858, upstream from the present Monash Bridge.



The Bridge - opening scene
Photograph - Jim Connor



Sir Redmond Barry addresses the jury as Burke looks on
Photograph - Jim Connor

David Gibbins recently received a donation of the book, "Pioneers and Painters - One hundred years of Eltham and its shire" by Alan Marshall. It reminded him of his time in Eltham.

David informed me that his father, the Rev. John Fenton Gibbins was the rector of St. Margaret's Anglican Church Eltham, from 1951 to 1955.

He related some personal recollections of growing up in Eltham, as an 8 -11 year-old.

His memories included:
Walking to and from Eltham Primary School, not too far he thought, in a carefree, easy and untroubled way.

Learning to ride his pushbike on a path around the church, being very aware of the buttresses, if you got the wobbles.

Climbing and sitting outside the front of the church grounds, on what he remembers as a raised structure, from which he could view the "noisy men staggering" out of the Eltham Hotel across the road. After all it was the time of six o'clock closing!

Playing in an area near the church, (it may have been a kindergarten) with what we now call "tan bark", which was a new surface to play on.

Memories of going to a little wooden church in his dad's old car, which had a roll up blind on the back window. They drove over some really steep hills (probably Kangaroo Ground) which was exhilarating, but also a bit frightening as the old car roared a lot.

Being involved in a church youth group C.E.B.S. (Church of England Boys Society), a weekly gathering similar to Scouts, but with a religious element.

His father was very involved with this organisation and was invited to move from St Margaret's to Christ Church Daylesford in 1955 to rejuvenate interest in the C.E.B.S clubs at other local Anglican parishes.

In later years his father mentioned to him that he spent some interesting, enjoyable and vibrant evenings at Montsalvat with Justus Jørgensen and other "boisterous people" discussing religion, world politics and life in general.

The following quote is from page 120 of Pioneers and Painters. "Indeed, many came to Eltham because of Jørgensen and spent hours at his dining table arguing and discussing aesthetics and the ways of man."

On leaving the parish in December 1955, Rev. J.F. Gibbins received a mantel clock in recognition of his time at St. Margaret's. The inscription on the clock reads, "Presented to Rev. and Mrs. Gibbins by the parishioners of St. Margaret's Eltham, December 1955."

Rev. J. F. Gibbins died suddenly in 1970, aged 60, from a heart attack. Mrs Gibbins lived until 2016 and died aged 95 years old.

David has inherited the mantel clock.



St Margarets Church Eltham - August 2015
Photograph - Jim Connor

(As 2024 is the 90th anniversary year of the establishment of Montsalvat, our newsletter during this year, thanks to Richard Pinn, has featured a series of articles about significant people who lived and worked at Montsalvat.)

Lesley Sinclair (1904-1999)

Lesley Sinclair was one of the founders of Montsalvat. Early in her adult life, she worked as an artist for The Argus, attending night classes in commercial art at Swinburne and later studying at the National Gallery. She became actively involved with Justus Jørgensen's art school, going on to become his studio manager. By this time she was living in a large studio in the city, where she painted and ran her own art classes. In order to devote more time to her art, she gave up her job at The Argus, working as a cleaner to support herself. At weekends, she bought food at the Vic Market and travelled out to Montsalvat, where she worked on construction of the buildings.



Lesley Sinclair
by Angela Abbott

In the 1960s, Lesley moved to Montsalvat full-time. She continued to paint, setting up a studio where she taught several nights a week. Sigmund Jørgensen said that one of her great attributes was her ability to make friends with people of all ages. She acted as the "gatekeeper" at Montsalvat, welcoming visitors as they arrived. From 1975, she entered works in various exhibitions and regional art shows, winning six first prizes. But she didn't take up the prize she'd won at the Glen Waverley art competition, which was a trip to Singapore. She preferred to visit the Western District of Victoria where she had grown up.

Source: article by Andrew Sinclair (Lesley's nephew) on the Montsalvat website

Matcham Skipper (1921-2011)

Matcham's parents first brought him to Montsalvat when it was under construction in the mid-1930s, where he would recklessly clamber up and down the scaffolds. Hoping to channel his enthusiasm, they enrolled him in Justus Jørgensen's art classes. By the late 1940s, Matcham had become a painter and a noted silversmith and jeweller, working from a small studio behind Russell Street Police Station. His jewellery later won a swathe of awards world-wide. But by then he had taken up new challenges, such as pottery (though few pieces still exist). And the lead light windows in the Great Hall at Montsalvat are his work, made from old photographic glass plates.



Matcham Skipper at work
Photograph - *EDHS collection

After moving to Montsalvat in the mid-1950s he became an expert sculptor, often using bits of scrap fossicked from almost anywhere. Major commissions included a large sculptural screen at the ANU, a ceremonial mace for Monash University, a series depicting the Stations of the Cross at the Ivanhoe Catholic Church and a statue at Eltham cemetery. His enthusiasm never waned. Shortly before Prime Minister Hawke was due to visit Montsalvat, Matcham began to dig up the driveway to restore some plumbing. Sigmund Jørgensen directed him to desist, but it was too late: the PM's car got bogged.

Source: talk given by Sigmund Jørgensen at Montsalvat in 2011 (text reproduced on yumpu.com)

Flavour of Eltham: recipes and other things was collected and published by the Friends of Shillinglaw Cottage in 1964. Many members would go on to join the Shire of Eltham Historical Society when it was formed in 1967.

The original cottage once stood about 100 metres away from its current location in Panther Place, Eltham and is one of Eltham's earliest buildings. In 1963 it faced demolition to make room for the Eltham Shire offices. But local residents came together to save the cottage. It was the first time that an early settler's brick building was removed and reconstructed.

A fundraiser was the resident's compilation of loved recipes into the cookery book *Flavour of Eltham*. It also includes illustrations and advertisements for local businesses.

The foreword of the book states:

"This book is about Eltham. But more than that it is about intention. It originated when the people of Eltham, the first in Australia to preserve by reconstruction an historical building, removed and rebuilt a cottage that reflected the spirit of a period.

The Shillinglaw cottage was first built in 1859 and was rebuilt in 1964. It has beauty and is rich with the past.

The people of Eltham stand for something. There is, in this community, a firm resolve to preserve for their children the natural beauty of the district; to establish a centre whose allegiance is to aesthetic values rather than to commercial ones.

Eltham already has this reputation, a reputation that is known beyond the borders of Australia. Its desire is to increase it.

This book is a step forward in that direction."

October 1964.

Signed



The chapters include: Old time, Restaurants, Are you in a hurry, Advance action, Serve it cold, Teatime tantalizer, Pickles and preserves, Fabulous fare and Ne Buvez Jamais L'eau.

The cover illustration was drawn by Peter Glass. First published in November 1964, a final print run took place in August 1969.

Community cookbooks have been recognised as expressing the voices of "ordinary people" in every day life, in particular the large cohort of mostly middle-class twentieth century women – and volunteers - who recognised the community cookbook as a way they could help their communities.



Drawing of Shillinglaw Cottage
by Peter Glass

I am a Postdoctoral Research Fellow on the project "Finding Australia's Disabled Authors: Connection, Creativity, Community" which is funded by the Australian Research Council. This project is based at the Creative Department of University of South Australia, but I actually work remotely from Sydney. One aspect of my work on this project is writing a book about Alan Marshall. I had hoped to research Alan Marshall in my PhD thesis, but realised fairly early on that I wouldn't have the space, so it is a joy to return to researching him for this project.

One objective of my research is to highlight the breadth of Marshall's work. Of course he is well-known for *I Can Jump Puddles*, but I think he was a talented Australian author in a number of genres, and on many topics. And he was a dedicated writer in the sense that he thought so deeply about the craft of writing, and about perfecting his particular style.

The other objective of my research is to reclaim Alan Marshall for disabled people. When I was growing up as a disabled kid in the 1980s, *I Can Jump Puddles* was the book that many adults pushed me to read and to emulate.

Whatever I did, I was told that Alan Marshall could do it better, and I grew to hate him for it. It wasn't until I read *I Can Jump Puddles* again early in my PhD research that I understood how much that book had been misused and misinterpreted. I have a piece in the *Sydney Review of Books* about these experiences.

<https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essays/a-history-of-reading-alan-marshall-and-helen-keller>

I have since discovered that many disabled people had similar experiences as children, and I think that is a tragedy because he was a trail-blazer for disabled people in this country.

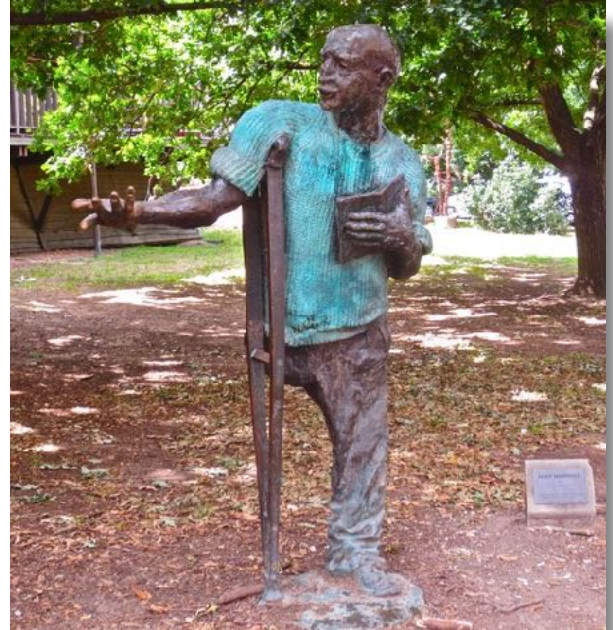
So overall I hope that I can contribute to all Australians having a more nuanced understanding of Alan Marshall's life and writing.

Dr Amanda Tink

Dr Amanda Tink is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at UniSA Creative, University of South Australia, and Adjunct Research Fellow at Western Sydney University's Writing and Society Research Centre. She is a proud disabled person with research interests in Australian disabled authors, crip poetics and memoir, and the Nazi genocide of disabled people.

She is currently working on the Australian Research Council discovery project "Finding Australia's Disabled Authors: Connection, Creativity, Community." In 2023 she completed her project "Learning my First Language: Blindness, Neurodivergence, and our Creative Writing Practices" funded by Creative Australia, and graduated from her PhD. Her thesis "Never Towing a Line: Les Murray, Autism, and Australian Literature" details how Murray's autism and his experiences of being disabled influenced his poetry.

Source: <https://people.unisa.edu.au/Amanda.Tink#About-me>



Alan Marshall sculpture by Marcus Skipper
outside Eltham Library
Photograph - Jim Connor 2013

Experience Eltham Cemetery

Julia Drew

Montsalvat connections with the Eltham Cemetery

Montsalvat and the Eltham Cemetery share deep historical and cultural ties due to their geographic proximity and connections within the local arts community. Both properties value their natural landscape, and have a shared emphasis on artistry and craftsmanship, as well as cultural and historical heritage. In recognition of Montsalvat's 90th anniversary, we highlight a few of the artists and influencers of Montsalvat who rest at Eltham Cemetery:

- **Justus Jørgensen** – Founder of Montsalvat, known for his visionary architecture and commitment to the arts.
- **Lily Jørgensen** – Justus's wife, a dedicated supporter of the artistic community at Montsalvat.
- **Mervyn Skipper** – Influential artist and mentor within the Montsalvat community.
- **Lena Skipper** – Mervyn's partner, known for her contributions to the local arts scene.
- **Gordon Ford** – Renowned landscape designer who shaped the gardens of both Montsalvat and Eltham Cemetery.
- **Gwen Ford** – Partner of Gordon Ford, recognised for her support of artistic initiatives in the area.
- **Alistair Knox** – Pioneering mudbrick builder and landscape designer associated with Montsalvat.
- **Peter Glass** – Noted painter and sculptor whose work contributed to Montsalvat's artistic legacy.
- **Ian John Dingwall Hassell** – Artist known for his involvement in the Montsalvat community and commitment to craftsmanship.
- **Stephen Dattner** – Former MI5 agent, involved with those connected with the early days of Montsalvat.
- **Dorian Le Gallienne** – Composer and musician connected to the vibrant arts culture surrounding Montsalvat.



These individuals are just some of many whose lives and work were deeply intertwined with Montsalvat, continue to inspire through their artistic legacies. Their resting place at Eltham Cemetery symbolises the enduring connection between these two renowned community landmarks, where art, history, and nature come together.

We appreciate the support our Society receives from our local sponsors and encourage you to support them



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We are always interested to consider local history stories or articles for publication in our newsletter

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State Member for Eltham**

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