

Newsletter



No. 282 June 2025

Why a table?

Jim Connor

For some time I had wondered why there was a table in the Eltham Courthouse, that opened in 1860. It seemed out of place with the original Courthouse furniture. One thought was that perhaps a community group using the Courthouse for their purposes had placed it there.

It was only after looking at early drawings of the original interior layout that I realised this table was for use by local newspaper reporters, who attended the hearings. Without their press reports we would not have the recorded details of the cases heard there, by either a visiting Presiding Magistrate (P.M.) or by local Justices of the Peace (JPs).

Such reports include one in the Eltham and Whittlesea Shires Advertiser and Diamond Creek Valley Advocate, dated Friday 22nd, 1922, where it was reported under the heading "Horse-Play" that "Passengers travelling on the trains are frequently subjected to considerable annoyance by the misbehaving young people, who seem to have the impression that because they have paid their fares they can do as they like, and they do so in many cases. A case came before the Eltham Court last week, in which a youth of 17 was charged with smoking in a non smoking compartment, and indulging in horse play to the annoyance of passengers. The P.M. (Mr W.G.Smith) in fining him £1 and 12/6 costs, gave him a sound lecture, which should not only do him good, but scores of others who also deserve to be checked for their reckless behaviour."

In the Advertiser on Friday 30th August 1935 it was reported that "Footscray youths were treated to some cheap tobacco and cigarettes as a result of the robbery from Mr J.E. Bell's tobacco shop, Main Road, Eltham recently. Charles George Rachford, labourer, Main Road, Eltham, was charged with having received a quantity of cigarettes and tobacco knowing same to have been stolen. He appeared at the Eltham Court on Wednesday."

**CHEAP TOBACCO AT
FOOTSCRAY**
—
**Proceeds of Eltham
Robbery**
—
YOUTH COMMITTED FOR TRIAL

We would also not know that in November 1935 it was reported in an Advertiser article, that "Urging for a case at the Eltham Court on Wednesday, First Constable Stanton said of late there has been a crime wave at Eltham. In the course of the last 12 months there had been a wave of petty robberies in the town."

**WAVE OF CRIME
AT ELTHAM**
—
**Light Penalties for Offenders
Blamed**

So, while some things change, others stay the same, although no cases have been heard in the Eltham Court of Petty Sessions since it ceased operating in 1984.

Heritage belongs to all of us

We need to protect it, because if we don't, it is lost forever

Our Next Meeting

2.00pm Saturday 14th June 2025

Eltham Senior Citizen's Centre

Library Place, Eltham

Heritage Excursion

2.00pm Saturday 5th July 2025

Kangaroo Ground War Memorial Park

See further details on page 2

Next Meeting - 2.00pm Saturday 14th June 2025

Our next meeting at **2.00pm on Saturday 14th June 2025** will be held at our usual meeting venue, the **Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre in Library Place, Eltham.**

At this meeting, we are pleased to have as our guest speaker, Bronny Handfield, who will provide us with a presentation about 'The Other George Bell', which is the title of her book about her father, George William Bell, 1920-2008.

George was an experienced painter and later a photographer. His paintings were often based on narrative themes, both of historical events and news articles. He spent time living in Eltham from the 1950s to around 1980.

We look forward to sharing this meeting with you. Members and guests are welcome to attend.



George William Bell
Photograph - internet source

Excursion - Saturday 5th July - Kangaroo Ground War Memorial Park

2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the second World War. Victory in Europe was achieved on 8th May 1945 and Victory in the Pacific on 15th August that year, following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima on 6th August and Nagasaki on 9th August 1945.

Our excursion starting at **2.00pm on Saturday 5th July** will be at the **Kangaroo Ground War Memorial Park** where Terry Phillips, an experienced Military Historian and committee member of the Nillumbik Historical Society, has kindly agreed to provide a short talk to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the completion of the second World War.

Following Terry's talk there will be the opportunity to explore the buildings and recently installed interpretative signage within the Memorial Park.



Shire of Eltham War Memorial
Photograph - Jim Connor
11th November 2017

Membership Subscriptions for 2025 - 26 are due on 1st July

We hope you value being a member of the Eltham District Historical Society and will continue to support our Society by renewing your membership for the 2025 - 26 year. Your payment would be welcome, by direct credit to EDHS Bendigo Bank BSB 633 000 Account 141820902, or to our Treasurer Robert Marshall at our June meeting (including by credit card), or by mail to EDHS 728 Main Road, Eltham. Single member \$25.00 - Family \$30.00
We appreciate those members who have already renewed their membership.

EDHS members will remember Diana, who died on 1st May 2025 age 96, as an engaging bright personality with a keen interest in local history and current affairs. She would often engage guest presenters with questions during Society meetings and contribute relevant experiences or snippets of interest. She presented herself at meetings and in 2000 led an excursion to Kangaroo Ground Cemetery.

In 2009, Elizabeth Glover nominated her for the *Celebrating Nillumbik Women* publication: "Diana has been involved in the social and cultural life of the community of Nillumbik for over 50 years. She has played an integral role in the development of a number of well-established charitable, community and youth organisations."

Diana Henderson Grant was born in 1929 and was a descendant of the Stevenson and Grant families, pioneer settlers at Diamond Creek.

As a child she became an evacuee for a short time, telling historian Ann Howard for her book: *A Carefree War: the hidden history of Australian WWII child evacuees* in 2015: "I was an evacuee and I went not because of invasion fears but because my father was away in the AIF. I had a governess with a friend's family at Eltham. In the thirties, it was not unusual for a governess to be part of a country family and stay on for years..."

She attended Melbourne Girls Grammar School and trained as a nurse at the Alfred Hospital.

She was a member of a youth group in Eltham where she met Peter Bassett - Smith on a blind date in December 1950, where it is said, he proposed to her that night. He was eighteen years her senior and was already an accomplished amateur cine-photographer.

They married in June 1951 in Toorak and honeymooned in Arnhem Land. They settled in Peter Street, Eltham in a John Harcourt adobe house they named "Rath" where their first child Peter soon arrived.

To say Diana was an active member of the community, is an under-statement. She was a founding member of the Eltham Rural Group in 1955 which on the weekend following her death held its annual Paddy's Day market raising funds for local community groups. She was still an active member 60 years later when it was awarded the 2015 Nillumbik Community Group of the Year.



Diana Bassett - Smith
Photograph - from EDHS collection

Opened in 1956, Melbourne City Mission's Judge Book Memorial Village for the aged was a popular local aged care facility. Diana was a member and at times Treasurer of the Eltham Auxiliary formed to support the Village's residents locally.

In 1964 she formed the Eltham Pony Club, only the fourth in Victoria at the time, when she also formed the Pony Club Association of Victoria. The Eltham club were granted use of the land in the grounds of Eltham Lower Park for a peppercorn rent to the Lands Department of the day.

In the same year she was a member of the Shillinglaw Cottage Preservation Committee, and initiated the campaign to raise funds for the preservation and re-location of the historic cottage.

By 1967, her growing family re-located to Menzies Road, Kangaroo Ground. Diana soon formed the Kangaroo Ground Pony Club and she became a founding member of the then Shire of Eltham Historical Society, later known as the Eltham District Historical Society.

Her notes about living in Eltham in the 1950s and 1960s remain a significant first-hand recollection in our collection. She contributed regular newsletter articles including Kangaroo Ground news updates.

In 2006 Peter was interviewed by the National Library of Australia for their oral history collection. Part of that interview can be accessed online. Diana sits beside him. Her voice can be heard prompting her aged husband and adding responses here and there.

In 2009 their home, narrowly missed the bushfires of Black Saturday. She wrote: "Peter and I were fortunate in the Black Saturday fires. Bob Maloney tells me that embers had been falling on properties as close as Nicholas Lane but then the wind changed, otherwise we too would have been confronted by the 'red terror'.

On the following Monday, due to a forecast weather warning, our family decided that Peter and I ought to be evacuated. Shock at the thought of not having stayed to face the threat and helped by our children, we hastily grabbed items of sentimental or historical value and stuffed them into suitcases. Leaving our sons behind we departed for the suburbs — a sleepover as one grandchild happily put it.

Eventually everything settled back to normal and we returned home with our hastily packed bags and put everything back in place with me asking myself: What! Why? Where? When?"
(*Kangaroo Ground Chronicle* Winter 2009).

That same year she was profiled in the Nillumbik Shire Council's, *Celebrating Nillumbik Women* publication. She advocated for the former Shire of Eltham Offices site to be preserved as public parkland and to be named Shillinglaw Park in honour of its history.

Diana was an Honorary Life Member of the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria Limited.

In 2011, Diana's beloved husband Peter died. He was 100. In 2015, she was awarded honorary life membership of EDHS in recognition of her contributions to the Society including being a committee member for over 20 years. In 2017 when the Local History Centre undertook a major refurbishment, she along with co-founder Russell Yeoman joined in the celebrations of the reopening of the Centre.



Diana Bassett - Smith - Honorary Life Membership

Photograph - Liz Pidgeon - 2015

In 2020, Andrew Ross Museum implemented the Bassett - Smith family story writing competition "My Place" in partnership with Kangaroo Ground Primary School.

Diana will be remembered as a driving force behind many community groups, not least of all the Eltham District Historical Society.

The name Thomas Sweeney is well known to Eltham historians. The Sweeney family plot looms large in a visit to the pioneer section of Eltham Cemetery.

A long-awaited family history *The Sweeney Family of 'Culla Hill' Eltham*, recently published by historian and descendant Peter Cuffley has recently been donated to our Society's collection by the author. The book commences with an immediate dive into the "bubbling cauldron of discontent amongst the generally landless or at least disenfranchised sections of Irish Society" represented by Sweeney and his part on an attack of a farmhouse at Cullahill, Tipperary on the 2nd of March 1823. By the 25th of March, a trial declared guilty. An initial sentence of hanging was soon commuted to life transportation to New South Wales.

The twenty-one-year-old ploughman was quickly assigned to work after his convict ship arrived into Port Jackson in December 1823. In November 1831, Thomas received his ticket of leave and had already commenced work as a coastal trader.

In 1833, he married his first wife Bridget Coleman. Two children were born, but Bridget and a son Patrick disappear from the story, their fate unknown.

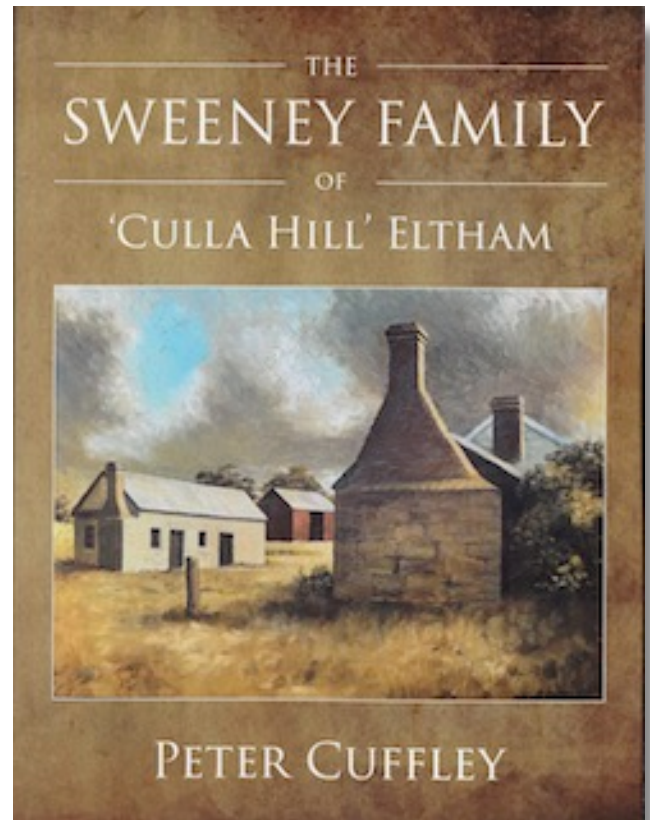
In 1838, Thomas received a conditional pardon and married a second time to Margaret Meehan, merely months after her own arrival to Sydney from Country Limerick, Ireland. They immediately moved south to Melbourne and eventually settled on the Yarra River in 1843. Thomas and Margaret had seven children – whose lives are also documented here – and prospered. They built their property "Culla Hill". Photos, floor plans and descriptions describe the house and farm, its uses and development over the years.

The book shines a light on the early days of Port Phillip and Little Eltham Village itself which later developed following Holloway's sub division in 1851. The Sweeney family were soon involved in the developing community.

The author's meticulous research is especially evident in the telling of Thomas' story. It is illustrated with black and white images and photographs, some held in the EDHS collection and descendant reports for each family line are reproduced.

Thomas Sweeney died at Culla Hill in 1867, age 65. "He had achieved a remarkable life and made the most of every opportunity that came his way". His story is a significant one in recalling the early history of European settlement in Eltham.

Peter Cuffley's book is supported by an excellent website at sweeneyfamily.au from where copies can be purchased. A copy of the book can also be borrowed from Eltham library.

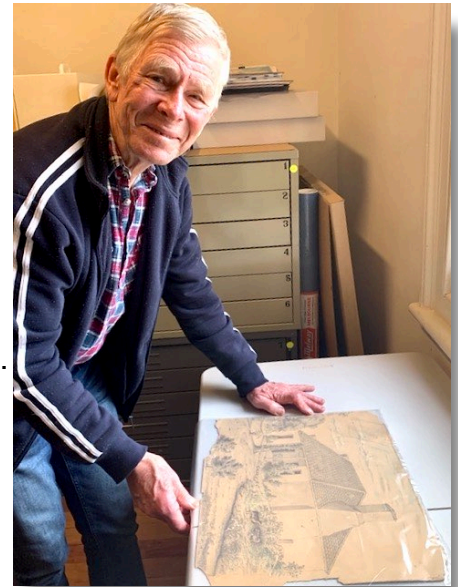


The Sweeney Family of 'Culla Hill' Eltham
Book by Peter Cuffley

New member Tim Erickson recently visited our Collections Team to view one of our collection items – excited to view an item he thought lost!

In the early 1900s, Mary Sweeney commissioned artist Charles Bertie to sketch the main house at Culla Hill. She took the drawing with her when she married Michael Carrucan in 1910. Tim remembers it hanging in his Uncle Jack's Dalton Street farmhouse in the 1960s. He thought the sketch was lost following John Carrucan's death in 1976 (described in Peter Cuffley's book).

We were able to inform him that it was donated to the Shire of Eltham in 1970 when there was a community callout for historical contributions for the Shire's centenary history project. Though photographed at the time, the image was not included in the publication *Pioneers and Painters: One Hundred Years of Eltham and its Shire*, (1971). That photograph is part of the Shire of Eltham Pioneers Photograph Collection.



Tim Erickson and the sketch
Photograph - Liz Pidgeon

The very fragile original was kept in the Council strongroom and suffered significant damage to its edges over the years. It has also yellowed and lost its frame.

A comparison of the original when it was digitised in 2022 with the negative taken 50 years earlier also reveals that the left 20% of the sketch has been cut off, probably due to damage. The Shire of Nillumbik gave EDHS the Shire of Eltham archives in 2004, but the sketch is not part of that listing. We probably received it after that time.

Honorary Life Memberships - Peter and Liz Pidgeon

At our 2025 Annual General Meeting Peter and Liz Pidgeon were awarded Honorary Life Memberships of our Eltham District Historical Society.

Peter is a vice president responsible for managing our digital collections, website and social media. Without Peter's dedicated contributions and leadership, our society may still be trying to manage a haphazard but significant collection of photographs, documents, plans and maps, based on outdated technology. It is because of Peter's outstanding commitment and innovations our society now has a well-maintained collection, website, and social media presence, as well as over 14,000 images online.

Liz Pidgeon is a vice president who brings to her role, as the Collections Manager for our Society, a wealth of experience as a professional librarian, specialising in local and family history. Liz has utilized her skills and experience to assist with managing and cataloguing our significant collection of photographs, documents, plans and maps. Her dedication to improving processes and procedures has been of benefit to our Society, as is her willingness to share her knowledge.



Peter and Liz Pidgeon
Photograph - Alison Delaney

Peter and Liz Pidgeon have over many years shown a dedicated commitment to our Society and are worthy recipients of Honorary Life Memberships, as recognition of their excellent commitment and contributions.

Eltham District Historical Society President and Newsletter Editor Jim Connor has kindly asked me to recall memories of being a newspaper reporter at the Eltham Courthouse in 1975, a half-century ago.

I do not want to overstate my role. In 1975, I was a young and ambitious 18-year-old journalist, with a particular interest in the Diamond Valley area including Eltham and its Courthouse, which sat regularly under the supervision of visiting Magistrates.

My first impression of the 1860 building was that it must have been built for smaller people than the ones who were attending in 1975: magistrates, policemen, defendants and their lawyers, as well as local journalists.

My memory - from 50 years ago - were steps to the entrance, a timber bench behind which Magistrates or Justices-of-the-Peace presided, a Bar table for Police Prosecutors and lawyers, a dock behind which was a door if a prisoner had to be brought from the cell, a witness box and several rows of uncomfortable seating for the public.

One of the dominant personalities of that era was Detective Sergeant Noel Murphy, or 'Murph', of the Eltham Criminal Investigation Branch. He was recipient of the Victoria Police Valor Badge in 1974, and was a formidable character with whom the 'crooks' had to contend.



Eltham Courthouse - August 1967

Photograph - EDHS collection

The citation to his award read: "At about 4.00 p.m. on Saturday 14 December 1974, Christopher Sullivan, drinking heavily throughout the day, returned in a drunken condition home accompanied by two friends, showing a shotgun he wished to sell."

"Assembling the shotgun during a later car drive, the drunken Sullivan suggested they rob a Woolworths Store before fleeing to New South Wales. Attempting to calm him his friends decided upon the best course of action being to 'dump' the armed drunk."

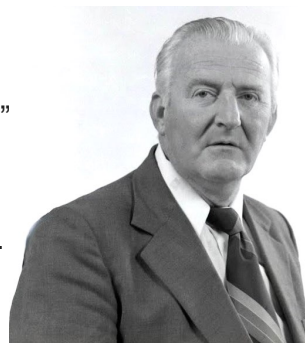
"Later about 5.30 p.m., Sullivan menaced the occupants of a house on the corner of Jason Avenue and Templestowe Road, Eltham South, boasting he had already shot a man; likewise threatening to shoot them unless they obtain bullets, an armalite rifle, gelignite as well as a car to enable him to travel to New South Wales."

"Obtaining shotgun cartridges from the occupants rather than having his demands met, Sullivan allowed them to leave upon which they immediately notified the police. Sullivan, in the meantime, in his drunken attempt to load his shotgun caused it to accidentally discharge into the ceiling before breaking into an empty house at 4 Jason Avenue, Eltham South, again accidentally discharging his shotgun. In his drunken state he fired a shotgun blast at a police divisional van causing Constable Taylor to call upon him to drop the gun; in response Sullivan pointed the shotgun at the policeman who, in answer, discharged his weapon at the drunken gunman."

"Forcing entry into 3 Eltham Templestowe Road, Eltham South, to threaten the Baker family as well as discharging his shotgun for the third occasion Sullivan called upon off duty Detective Sergeant Noel Murphy to negotiate himself out of a dangerous 'tight spot'."

“Walking to the front door of the Bakers' house, unarmed, his hands above his head, Noel Murphy found the front door ajar, permitting him to see Sullivan standing in the passageway holding the shotgun to Mr Baker's head.”

“Entering the house Noel Murphy had the shotgun barrel pressed against his stomach then against his forehead whilst Sullivan made a series of demands. Negotiations of the demands were conducted in their respective positions. Agitated, Sullivan became extremely excited, sweating profusely.”



Detective Sergeant Noel Murphy
Photograph - The Local Paper

“Hands above head, Murphy, spoke calmly to him slowly bringing his right hand down, grabbing the barrel of the shotgun, simultaneously pushing it away; calling for assistance, he wrested it from Sullivan's grasp, prior to the arrival of police reinforcements.”

My memory is tested 50 years on, but some of the Eltham Courthouse personalities along the way had quite the Irish influence: Murphy, Kennedy and Scully. One local Policeman was what can only be described as 'supersize', with a beer belly that must have been earned through meticulous hours of conversing with all types of contacts at district ale houses. Policing was done differently, and - to my mind - often more effectively in those days.

My involvement at Eltham Courthouse was quite minor. As a teenager at school, I had been a part-time 'stringer' for the Leader Publishing Company's Diamond Valley News, paid 4½-cents per published line. In 1975, as a University student, I was involved in a project to start an opposition newspaper, the Diamond Valley Star, which did not come to fruition. My attendances at Eltham Courthouse at that time were part of the 'dummy runs' for the Star. Others were to produce an opposition newspaper, Valley Voice, for 18 months in 1978-79.

By 1978, I was a Manager at Leader, later to be in charge of eight newspapers including the Diamond Valley News, the Heidelberger, and Doncaster-Templestowe News. In 1983, I purchased the 98-year-old Yea Chronicle newspaper business, developing a new edition for Kinglake, which was then partly within the Shire of Eltham. That had me again at local courthouses including Whittlesea, Yea, Seymour, Alexandra and Mansfield. Eltham Court closed in 1984.

I moved to live in Eltham in 1995, at which time I started the Diamond Valley Advertiser, which appeared for about half-a-dozen years. This was when I first met then - Cr. Jim Connor of the former Shire of Eltham. When the Leader group closed their print newspapers in April 2020, my company jumped into the spot, producing The Local Paper in print and online.

Local police said the role of the press and local courthouses was profound. Detective Sergeant Ian Welch produced figures saying that crime was reduced by between 25 and 42 per cent when there was a local newspaper to print the names of the naughty; a large number of people were just as nervous having their name published, as they were about the punishment that a Court might hand out. The colour of many of the Eltham Courthouse's cases over the decades (1870s-1940s) are contained in the files of the Evelyn Observer, and Eltham & Whittlesea Shires Advertiser, available online at Trove.

Ash Long is the Editor-in-Chief of The Local Paper, which has localised editions for all suburbs, in and around Melbourne. The Northern Suburbs edition includes Nillumbik (urban). Further details at www.localpaper.com.au

Annual General Meeting - Saturday 12th April 2025

At the Annual General Meeting on Saturday 12th April 2025, at the Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre, 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
Vice-President	Peter Pidgeon
Vice-President	Liz Pidgeon
Treasurer / Membership Secretary	Robert Marshall
Society Secretary	Russell Yeoman

Ordinary Committee Members:

Joan Castledine, Alison Delaney, Andrew Lemon AM, Irene Kearsey, David Taylor, Terry Beaton

Membership Sub-Committee:

Rosemary Aitken OAM, John Fecondo, Peter Thomson.

We welcome our 2025-26 committee members and thank them for their commitment to supporting the operation of our society, on behalf of our members. At the Annual General Meeting subscriptions for 2025-2026 were fixed at the same levels as last year, as follows:

Single member \$25.00 Family \$30.00

Greg Burgess, Guest Speaker - Annual General Meeting - 2025

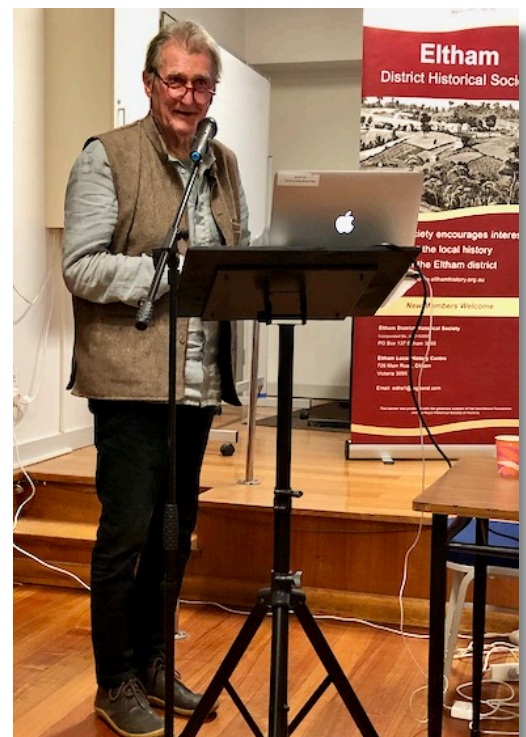
We were fortunate to have Greg Burgess as our guest speaker at our Annual General Meeting on 12th April 2025.

Greg Burgess and Associates was responsible for the design and construction of the valued Eltham library, which opened in May 1994.

Greg is a renowned architect, especially notable for his participatory design approach, which has produced some remarkable and unique buildings. He acknowledged that the Eltham Library is one of his favourite buildings.

Greg provided engaging and interesting insights into his design process, starting from small personal sketches of minor details, progressing through to scale models and complex technical drawings.

Along the way Greg entertained everyone there with personal anecdotes about some of the intrigues and challenges inherent in such a large project, including planning overlays and council and community expectations. There was even mention of some symbolic aspects to the design of the central roof sections.



Greg Burgess
Photograph - Jim Connor

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

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Printed by courtesy of the Hon. Vicki Ward MP - State Member for Eltham