

Newsletter



No. 286 February 2026

Memories

Jim Connor

One definition of “memory” is: “The ability to remember information, experiences and people.”

Another is: “The power or process of reproducing or recalling what has been learned and retained especially through associative mechanisms.”



As an historical society we have a treasure trove of memory inducing resources, either online or in hard copy or historic stories our members share. We are fortunate that some individuals in earlier times thought to capture what are now memories, either in photographs or in the written word. Press reports about proceedings in the Eltham Courthouse, prior to 1984, provide some readers with memories of happenings there.

At times, we hear our members and others comment “I remember that” when they read an early press article or see an image.

Photographs can act as a powerful recharge of memories, as does recalling earlier experiences and activities. Perhaps thinking about your first employment, early travel adventures, meeting a significant person or sharing experiences with a loved one. Reading a passage in a book, a newspaper or even in our newsletter might trigger a valued memory.

Viewing a documentary on film or on television might remind us of times spent elsewhere and with others, or of a way of being in the world that is no longer with us and assigned to history.

Rolls of Honour are a formal method of recognising and remembering those who have contributed in times of conflict and in some cases lost their lives serving. The words “Lest we forget” continually prompt us to remember.

There are also times when we would prefer not to remember painful memories. While memory can vary for different people, at different stages of life it can also change as we age.

Historical societies are keepers of memories

Our Next Meeting

2.00pm Saturday 14th February 2026
Eltham Senior Citizen's Centre
Library Place, Eltham

Heritage Excursion

2.00pm Saturday 7th March 2026
An Outside/Inside Experience
See further details on page 2

Next Meeting - 2.00pm Saturday 14th February 2026

Our next meeting at **2.00pm on Saturday 14th February 2026** 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.

This is our first meeting for 2026 so we look forward to sharing this time with you. Members and guests are welcome to attend.

This presentation was originally planned for Saturday 14th June 2025 but needed to be postponed.



George William Bell
Photograph - internet source

Heritage Excursion - Saturday 7th March - An Outside/Inside Experience

In February 1968, we were fortunate that an unknown person took a selection of photographs while walking north along Main Road, Eltham. This walk commenced at the Eltham Hotel on the corner of Pitt Street and went to and through the shopping centre to Elsa Court.

In 2013 we looked at these images together with photographs taken then.

Given the warm weather conditions we have had, and are still experiencing, we thought we could do something a little different for our next excursion.



Main Road, Eltham - February 1968
Photograph - EDHS collection

So, instead of having a heritage excursion "outside", in the heat, we are going to experience an "outside" excursion "inside".

We will travel along Main Road but do this inside in cool comfort, while comparing these 1968 images with current photographs taken at the same locations.

Our "outside/inside" excursion experience will be held at the Eltham Senior Citizens' Centre in Library Place, Eltham, at 2.00pm on Saturday 7th March 2026.

We hope to see you there to travel back in time..... *just a little.*

What do the Zen Den Café building and Eltham Fire Brigade have in common?

- They both celebrate their Centenary in 2026.

William Bravery Andrew, a native of Surrey, England first arrived in Australia in 1842 and settled in Brighton for 14 years. Following a visit to England in 1856-1857, he returned to Victoria and moved to Eltham around 1859 where he met and married a widow, Ellen Harper (nee Clarke) in 1867. Ellen had four children and together they had three more of their own: Mabel (1868 Eltham), William Bravery (1870 Eltham) and Ernest James (1873 Eltham).

By 1867 William was the registered newsagent for Eltham with a produce store, W.B Andrew Corn Store, on "Policeman's Hill", at the corner of Maria Street (now Main Road) and Franklin Street. He took a lively interest in the public affairs of the town and district, and with his wife Ellen ran the store for some forty years.

Following the death of Ellen in 1906, and William in 1907, their youngest son, Ernie took over running the store and newsagency. Ernie became a prominent member of the community and an Eltham Shire Councillor for 30 years.



W.B. Andrew Corn Store, corner Main Road and Franklin Street, Eltham; postcard dated 4th November 1909
EDHS Collection

In 1923 Ernie Andrew opened a new a combined newsagency and haberdashery/clothing shop in Main Road opposite the railway station, separate from the original weatherboard store on the corner of Franklin and Main.

In late 1925 under direction of the new management of J.E. Young, the former Andrew's Store underwent modifications converting it into a modern "emporium". However, only a few months later, on 12th February, 1926, the weatherboard store was destroyed by fire. There was no local fire brigade. The Heidelberg and Ivanhoe brigades were called but it was too late to save the building, which was a mass of flames within 30 minutes and reduced to glowing embers within the hour.

Twelve days following the fire, Cr. Andrew convened a meeting in the Public Hall on Henry Street, to discuss the formation of a volunteer fire brigade.

The first meeting of the Eltham Volunteer Fire Brigade was held on 15th March 1926 and was well attended with Cr. Andrew in the chair. Walter Herbert Warren was appointed Captain. Equipment was to be obtained and housed in Warren's shed. Electoral Roll records show Warren's residence as Bridge Street in 1928 and later Pryor Street in 1931.

Between April and August 1926, a new modern brick building was erected on the site of the former Andrew's Store. F.H. Collis took over management of the new "Economic Store" in September 1926, the basis of which remains today as the Zen Den Café.

Both the Zen Den Café building and the Eltham Fire Brigade share their heritage stemming from that disastrous fire which occurred 100 years ago on 12th February, 1926, and the subsequent actions taken by Cr. Ernie Andrew.

A Well Deserved Award For Mike Ridley

We congratulate our member Mike Ridley who recently received a well deserved Council of the Ageing (COTA) Victoria Senior Achiever Award.

We appreciate Mike for his support of EDHS, including with presentations about Montsalvat history and for conducting tours of Montsalvat for our members. The following description is from the Seniorsonline.vic.gov.au:

“In his local community, Mike is known for his volunteering work. His contributions show ageing can be an expansion, not a retreat. Over decades of hands-on volunteering, Mike has built connection, preserved culture and brought people together.

For 25 years, Mike has played his part at Gulf Station Historic Farm, keeping the heritage site open for the public. Mike contributes to the physical upkeep of the historic farm. From maintaining infrastructure to tending animals, Mike encourages others to pitch in.

Mike is also a storyteller, making history relatable and memorable. At Gulf Station, he ran historical tours about Victoria's rural past for visitors and school children. He also shared his knowledge at Montsalvat, Melbourne General Cemetery and the ABC studios. Mike gives his time so the community can learn and feel inspired. His volunteering shows what it means to live with purpose and generosity, at any age.”



Mike accepting his award, alongside COTA Victoria President Robert Caulfield (left), and the Governor of Victoria, Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Margaret Gardner AC (Right) Photo courtesy of @vicgovdffh.

My Memories Working at La Ronde Restaurant

Lyn Hardiman (Dodkins)

The article in our December 2025 newsletter about the history of the La Ronde restaurant at 1078 Main Road, Eltham, prompted Lyn Hardiman to provide us with the following story about her memories of working there.

I was about 12 years of age when I first started working for Mr MacKenzie at La Ronde Restaurant in Eltham around 1955.

He was a lovely man to work for although he made it very clear that we were to be courteous to all the customers. The customers mostly came from Melbourne and in particular, suburbs such as Toorak, Camberwell and Hawthorn.

It was my task to serve strawberries, scones and cream as well as English pots of tea. Further we all pulled our weight with washing and drying the dishes. Mrs MacKenzie also worked with us serving customers and doing kitchen duties.

There were regular clients arriving in the afternoon each weekend with one that I remember well was a Dr. Southby, the perfect gentleman, he would arrive in his large Humber Snipe car which we all admired.

La Ronde was a very happy environment in which to work.



In late January 2026, it was 125 years since a monumental blast knocked poor Mrs. Withers off her feet and onto the kitchen floor. At that time in 1901, construction of the line's extension to Eltham from Heidelberg Station was under way and workmen were blasting the rock face for excavating the large cutting near Darebin Street. However, previous detonations had buried the fuse with fallen debris. Having removed most of it and leaving only a light cover of material to be broken up, the fuse was lit. The explosion was beyond expectation, raining rocks and stones over surrounding homes, causing significant damage. Reportedly, the shock wave was felt up to half a mile away.

About 30 metres from the detonation site, was situated the aesthetic residence of the renowned artist, Mr. Walter Withers. Tragically, even closer to the explosion was Walter's studio. It received the full blast, smashing windows and damaging weatherboards. Several finished and unfinished artworks, sculptures, statues, as well as palettes, brushes, easels and paints were strewn about in mad disarray. A head and bust by the celebrated sculptor, Milo, was broken, as was a bust by Donatello. A completed portrait by Walter entitled "*Seaside at Cowes*", had a rock punched through it. Being home alone at the time, Mrs. Withers stated she was thrown to the floor by the blast.

Thankfully Walter had not been working in his studio and nobody else was injured, yet some twenty Heidelberg residents gave accounts of the damage sustained to their properties; being mainly broken windows and crockery thrown from shelves and cupboards. The local chemist reported that many jars of medications had been knocked off the shelves. The blast even raised concern at the Heidelberg Court House, where senior locals were applying for the new aged pension scheme introduced into Victoria. Building railways was dangerous and labour intensive work before mechanization.

Many hundreds died making the great railways across America and POWs on the Burma Railway were frequently pelted and some seriously injured by blasted rock crashing through the jungle. Ray Parkin, was a Chief Petty Officer on HMAS Perth, sunk in the "Battle of the Sundra Strait" and became a POW. He returned from the infamous railway to live out his life in Heidelberg and was fully aware of the dangers from blasted rocks. In his book "*Into The Smother*" he states "In the open you sidestep the stone as it comes down. But if you are in the trees you only hear it ripping through leaves and branches and dive behind a tree like a man who values even this miserable existence".

A few weeks later - "three positions were blowing together, and no matter how we sheltered, we were still exposed to two lines of fire. The stones and fragments came ripping through the treetops, cutting branches and lopping bamboos. The sound stopped. Jim felt a whoosh past his ear. Then I felt a terrific thump on my back, to the right of the spine, and just below my shoulder blade. All the wind was knocked out of me. And I was painfully trying to get it back with unrelated gasps and wheezes no human should make. Blackie saw the stone hit me. It bounded off down the hill one way and knocked me on my face the other."

"They took me to where the next gang had an explosive tent and a first aid kit. I didn't want to move any part of me from the waist up, in case something broke or fell out. But I was able to eat my rice; that cheered me up a bit. When I got back to camp I was put in hospital for the only treatment – rest".

Sources: EDHS Archival File - extract of Heidelberg Historical Society News. "*Into The Smother*" by Ray Parkin, published 1963.

Australia – A Timeline of Settlement

Barry Carozzi

It is almost fifty years since the appearance of Carl Sagan's 1977 book, "The Dragons of Eden." The first chapter is titled "The Cosmic Calendar," and its opening paragraph continues to haunt me:

"The world is very old, and human beings are very young. Significant events in our personal lives are measured in years or less; our lifetimes in decades; our family genealogies in centuries; and all of recorded history in millennia. But we have been preceded by an awesome vista of time, extending for prodigious periods into our past, about which we know very little – both because there are no written records and because we have real difficulty in grasping the immensity of the intervals involved."

When I went to school – between 1949 and 1960 – it was generally believed that what we then called Australian Aborigines arrived in Australia about twenty-or-so thousand years ago. By the time I went to University, that had been stretched to 30,000 years. These days, there is evidence to suggest that the original inhabitants of Australia – Australia's Indigenous people or First Nation people – landed on Australian shores around 65,000 years ago. At that time, the Earth was in the grip of an Ice Age; as a result, the seas were significantly lower. At that time, the Australian continent was much bigger.

The year 2020 marked the anniversary of Captain James Cook's voyage northwards along the Eastern Coast of what he named New South Wales. He also "claimed" the continent in the name of the British monarch at that time: King George the Third. In 2038 Australians will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet.

But Australia had been settled and inhabited long before 1788 – about 65,000 years before! The first member of my family to "settle" in Australia was convicted in 1832 and arrived in the Colony of Van Diemen's Land in 1833. He was my Great, Great, Grandfather. Since his arrival, there have been seven generations of my family who call Australia "home". Seven generations!

But Australia's First Nation People have been around for an estimated 2500 - 3000 generations. How do we make sense with such information?

Here's a way:

What if we COLLAPSE the period of time – of roughly 65,000 years – into a single CALENDAR YEAR? It would mean seeing the arrival of first settlers in Australia as commencing on January First in this Timeline of Australian settlement.

A year consists of 365 days. If we divide the number of years since the first Indigenous people arrived in Australia by the number of days in a year: ie. 65,000 years divided by 365 days in a year = approximately 180 years.

In other words: A DAY = 180 years

A WEEK = 1250 years

FOUR WEEKS = 5000 years

ONE HOUR = 7.4 years



On this AUSTRALIAN CALENDAR, Captain Cook would have first sighted the Australian continent at roughly 2 o'clock on the afternoon of 30th December and "claimed" it as British territory. Roughly three minutes later, the First Fleet would have sailed in to Port Jackson.

My Great, Great, Grandfather would have arrived in Van Diemen's Land at roughly midnight on 30th December – just in time to welcome the new day.

A minute after midnight, the first subdivision of land in Little Eltham would have been opened up. Thomas Sweeney – after whom Sweeney's Lane is named – has already purchased one hundred acres of land from the government. His block was bordered on one side by the Yarra River, and on the other side, by what is now called Mt. Pleasant Road. at about the same time.

At roughly 1 am on 31st December (July, 1855), David and Catherine Clark – a brother and sister – started teaching in the bark school house in Dalton Street, Eltham.

Around 2 am (around 1860) a "reservation" was established at Healesville – at Coranderrk Station – for Aboriginal people.

Here is a list of events that took place on 31st December of this timeline of Australia:

31st DECEMBER:

Commencing at 12 am of our AUSTRALIAN CALENDAR

| | | |
|----------|-------|--|
| 12 am | 1845 | Thomas Sweeney establishes a farm near the Yarra River in Eltham |
| 1 am | 1851 | Gold Rushes begin. Victoria separates from the colony of NSW |
| 3 am | 1860 | Penny Farthing invented |
| 4 am | 1870 | Free, Compulsory and Secular Education introduced |
| 6 am | 1885 | First car invented |
| 8 am | 1902 | Federation has occurred. Invention of the aeroplane Women are allowed to vote for the first time |
| 9.30 am | 1914 | First World War breaks out |
| 10 am | 1918 | First World War ends. Spanish flu epidemic |
| 12 am | 1930s | The Great Depression |
| 1 pm | 1940s | Second World War. I am born in 1943 The Nuclear Age begins with the bombing of Hiroshima |
| 2 pm | 1956 | Television comes to Australia |
| 3 pm | 1963 | Vietnam War begins |
| 4 pm | 1969 | Apollo spacecraft land on the Moon. "That's one small step for a man, One giant leap for mankind". Women achieve "Equal pay for equal work" |
| 7 pm | 1985 | New-fangled computers are introduced |
| 9 pm | 2000 | Sydney Olympics. The Internet begins to take hold |
| 11.30 pm | 2020 | COVID pandemic |
| 12.00 pm | 2025 | Awareness of the effects of Climate Change begins to be widespread. |

"The world is very old, and human beings are very young"

My Uncle Don Comans grew up in the 1940s and has told me about life growing up on a farm south of Kilmore. “.. the main activity on the farm was naturally enough looking after the sheep and cattle. The things you were trying to make money, but the major job after that was trying to keep the rabbits down. And you could only do that basically in the winter. In the summer time it was too hot for the dogs and the ferrets would go in the burrows and go to sleep, so you had to do it in the wintertime and the next major thing that you tried to do if it dried off in the summer – you’d put a mark along the ground for a couple of mile around the farm and you’d put out poison and you’d try to poison as many rabbits as you could. ... The place was crawling with them.

Right from when I was five year old I was taught to save my money so even when I was little I would sell the rabbit skins, any rabbits that were caught with ferreting and everything you could sell to the rabbit buyer as long as they didn’t have any bruises on them so when you caught them you’d gutted them, you took them up and put a hessian bag over them so the flies wouldn’t get all over them and the buyers would only come in the winter time or late autumn.

They’d drive on the road on the truck and they’d pick them up where you left them. They wouldn’t come to the door. They drive on the highway and it was two or three times a week and you’d get so much a pair and they’d leave the money in the tree and nobody ever pinched it. Originally when I started, I was getting about ninepence a pair about ninepence for two, nine pennies and I remember it went up over a couple of years to one and threepence and I thought I had it made so I had all that money and the sheep skins. Dad gave me the sheep skins. I got them and the rabbit skins. Good sales for rabbit skins – the pelts.”

There were many boys and young men doing the same thing in the Eltham district at that time as well. Rabbits were plentiful in and around Old Eltham Road, Lower Plenty when Arthur and Annie Castledine owned the property from the 1920s. Annie learned how to serve rabbit a million ways according to her granddaughter Joan.

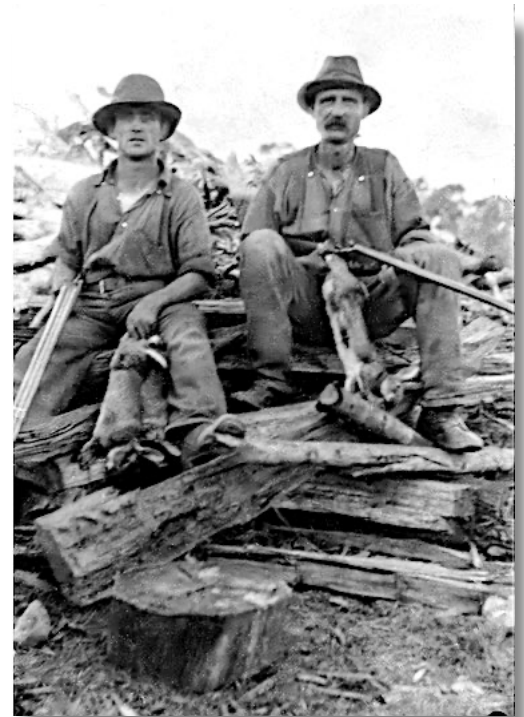
Rabbits were caught by traps or by the use of ferrets or shot with a gun.

Mrs Evelyn Barling was featured in the *Diamond Valley News* in 1985 following her death. She had recalled the time when the butcher used to come around Eltham in a horse drawn cart. “He’d ring a bell and the housewives would come out and choose their meat which the butcher could then cut for them there at the back of the cart. The baker called on his horse drawn cart too and Mr. Parker from Panton Hill would bring his fruit down.

Lou Meadows the rabbitier would call too. He’d have two bicycle wheels with a rod between them and fresh rabbits hanging down from the rod. He’d get to our place and sit down in the front yard and I’d take him a big jug of tea.”

A rabbit tanning business operated in Yan Yean Road Plenty and the Hat Factory which operated in Eltham used rabbit skins in their hats.

Today rabbit control is an issue faced by landowners and Council alike with rabbit trappers employed in areas such as along the Diamond Creek Trail.



Arthur Frederick Castledine (right) at their property, Araluen, Lower Plenty, c.1930.
Photograph - EDHS collection

Eltham Community Centre Opening

The following article written by Russell Yeoman is from newsletter Number 1 for the Shire of Eltham Historical Society, published in May 1978.

“The Eltham Community Centre was opened on 22nd April by the Premier, the Hon. R.J.Hamer. It is the only mud brick Community Centre in Australia. The society was represented in displays at the centre by community groups. Our display featured old photos of the Community Centre environs and some historical details of part of the site of the building, which was once owned by Henry Dendy (of Brighton fame).

The Community Centre occupies lots 275 and 276 of Holloway’s 1851 subdivision, which he called ‘Little Eltham’. Lot 275 was purchased by Dendy in 1856 from Charles Wingrove and Alfred Armstrong. These men probably purchased the land from Holloway. Wingrove in 1858 became Secretary of the Eltham District Roads Board, a position he held for many years, whilst Dendy became a member of the Board and served one term as its President.

Dendy also purchased lots 277 and 281 on the opposite side of Maria Street (now Main Road) and extending between Pitt and John streets. The whole of his purchase was about 5 acres. Lots 275 contained a steam flour mill near the Diamond Creek whilst Dendy lived in a house at the front of the land.

Dendy’s wife Sarah died in Eltham in 1860, aged 57 years and also in that year Dendy was appointed Chairman of the committee to established a Church of England in Eltham.

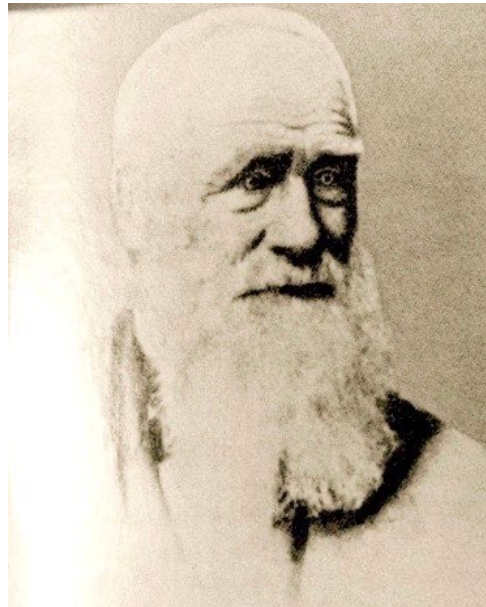
He donated half of one of his Pitt Street lots for this purpose. St Margaret’s Church was opened on this site and remains in well preserved state today. The old vicarage is now named Dendy House.

In 1867 Dendy sold his land and business to William F. Ford of Malmsbury for 600 pounds and he shifted to Walhalla where he had an interest in a copper mine. He is buried in the Walhalla Cemetery.

No trace of Dendy’s mill or house exist on the site today, but trees on the land could well have been planted in Dendy’s time. An avenue of trees leading to the creek may have bordered the track to the mill”.

The Eltham Community and Reception Centre, as it is now known, was reopened in June 2017 after extensions and an extensive refurbishment. It is considered to be the Shire of Nillumbik’s premiere function venue providing a fully-accessible and functional community space, while retaining the unique character of the original iconic mud brick building.

Refurbishment included accessibility upgrades, water harvesting, solar power, improved lighting, new amplifiers, improved foyer and commercial standard kitchen facilities.



Henry Dendy c1875
Photograph - EDHS collection

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

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