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BOROONDARA HERITAGE STRATEGY

At the recent Urban Planning Committee meeting Boroondara Council unanimously endorsed the draft *Heritage Strategy 2025-2041*, draft *Boroondara Historical Societies Background Paper*, and draft *Heritage Action Plan 2025-2029* for community consultation to be held between 10 June-22 July 2025. What does this heritage strategy entail and how does it differ from previous Council heritage plans?

As background information, the draft Strategy and Action Plan succeed Boroondara's *Heritage Action Plan 2016*, which primarily facilitated the protection of heritage buildings through the preparation and implementation of the *Municipal-Wide Heritage Gap Study*. Upon completion of the final *Heritage Gap Study* in 2022, a key outcome of the report was an opportunity to broaden Council's heritage work program from the previous focus on identifying new properties for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay to a wider scope of heritage activities across Council, encompassing matters such as heritage communication, education, celebration and promotion.

The draft Strategy comprises four essential components: the story of where we are and how we got here; a definition of 'heritage' in the local context and our commitment to heritage into the future; the framework for a holistic response; and the challenges and opportunities posed to local heritage to be addressed.

To guide the development of the draft Strategy and Action Plan, Council has referenced Commonwealth and State legislation, State Planning Policy, *Boroondara Community Plan 2021-2031*, *Heritage Strategies: A Guide for Councils* (Heritage Victoria) and other guiding frameworks. During 2024, Council conducted a community consultation online survey which focussed on two questions: "What heritage means to them" and "What they see as the challenges facing heritage in Boroondara".

Earlier this year the six historical societies were consulted individually and were invited to provide feedback on an earlier version of the draft Boroondara Historical Societies Background Paper and to respond to a survey paper.

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[Front page]

INDIGENOUS MEN AND WOMEN BESIDE A RIVER

Unknown, photographer, 19th century

KHS

BOROONDARA HERITAGE STRATEGY (from page 1)

Each of the historical societies provided their respective feedback on the draft Background Paper, ensuring that any misrepresentation of the information provided in the paper was either corrected or further comments included to properly inform about the operations of our organisations. Representatives of each historical society also met as a group under the umbrella of the Boroondara Historical Societies Association to provide a joint response to this paper. The responses to the Background Paper, survey and the joint paper was fed back to Council through the library officers who were responsible for the draft *Boroondara Historical Societies Background Paper* forming part of the draft Heritage Strategy presented at the Council meeting.

Unfortunately, not all of the information we provided was updated in the draft Background Paper that will now inform community consultation feedback. Furthermore, it appears from the report that we are seen as beneficiaries of Council support whereas the six historical societies should be seen as assets to Boroondara. They put Boroondara in a place of strength and commitment to protecting its history and heritage practices. Support to increase and improve best practice in applying heritage management principles should be the priority of Council in partnership with the historical societies.

The report states there is 'emerging Councillor interest in Model 1' as expressed in the table of support for historical societies. This model does not reflect how the six historical societies work in covering all geographical corners of Boroondara in their respective areas. It is important for Council to understand that the number of historical societies in our City is not a negative but a positive in their ability to facilitate collections, undertake research, provide broader expertise and events, and garner volunteers to provide many hours of support, as well as much needed community input.

In the Action Plan's priorities for 2025–2029, it states Council will continue to engage with local historical societies regarding partnership opportunities and spatial needs. We appreciate the financial and in-kind support we currently receive from Council and value our relationships with Council Officers and Departments. However, we will continue to advocate for the opportunity to provide Kew Historical Society with a future permanent home that supports our identity and the services we provide in Kew.

We congratulate Boroondara Council on recognising the need to broaden the concept of heritage. However, we ask that support for historical societies is not seen as an adjunct to the future actions of this draft Heritage Strategy, but as an important stakeholder, and a resource that deserves the ongoing support in a model that respects and understands how we operate for the betterment of our City.

JUDITH VOCE



[above] **INKSTAND FROM THE DENMARK STREET
BABY HEALTH CENTRE**

KHS

KEW HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC

PATRON

Sir Gustav Nossal AC CBE FRS FAA FTSE

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

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Secretary: Desley Reid

Treasurer: Byron Smith

Archivist: Robert Baker

Curator: Judith Scurfield

Members: Lisl Bladin | Mary Kelleher | Julie King | Tony Michael | Debbie McColl-Davis | Margaret Robinson

MONTHLY MEETINGS

Public meetings of the Kew Historical Society are held in the Phyllis Hore Room at the Kew Library on the second Wednesday of each month (excluding the months of January, March, October and December). There is usually a guest speaker. Visitors are welcome to attend.

KEW COURT HOUSE

Members of the Society played a key role in the preservation of the Kew Court House. General enquiries can be made, and viewing of our current exhibition, on Fridays (excluding public holidays) between 11am and 1pm. Our room is on the first floor of the former Kew Police Station at 188 High Street, Kew.

KEW HERITAGE CENTRE

The Kew Heritage Centre, at the rear of the ground floor of the Kew Library, is staffed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays between 10am and 3pm. Entry is by appointment.

NEWSLETTER

This is published quarterly and distributed to all members. Additional copies are made available to the community. Past newsletters can be downloaded from our website.

WEBSITES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

www.kewhistoricalsociety.org.au

victoriancollections.net.au/organisations/kew-historical-society

www.facebook.com/kewhistoricalsociety

www.instagram.com/kew_vic/

HISTORY NEWS

MEETINGS & LECTURES

Dates, speakers and topics for our monthly meetings and lectures are posted on the EVENTS page of our website, and members notified in advance through our eBulletins. This year, speakers have spoken on: Kew's tramlines, Melbourne's Laneways, the family history of Walter Withers, and the Raoul Wallenberg Memorial.

The following speakers and topics have been organised for the remainder of 2025. In June, Allan Mawdsley will talk about his book on Dr John Springthorpe; in July Phillip Mallis will describe the impact of the 1934 floods on Kew; in August Judith Buckridge will describe Yarra Birrarung, focussing on artists, writers and the river; at our Annual General Meeting in October we hope to have the Mayor of Boroondara speak to us about heritage; the 2025 Dickinson Lecture in October will be presented by Peter Youl on Melbourne's Boom and Bust; and concluding our speaker program for 2025 will be Peter deWacht on the History of Kew Primary School.

Monthly meetings begin at 8.00pm, apart from in the Winter Months of June, July and August when meetings will begin at 7.30pm. Members are encouraged to attend our events and visitors are welcomed. Refreshments are typically provided.

MEMBERS

The Society welcomes Sara Balfe, Chris Danbury,, and Yordan Bratkov as new members. Members are reminded that subscriptions are due on 1 July each year.

GRANTS & SPONSORS

In 2024-27, Kew Historical Society is supported by the City of Boroondara through a Triennial Operational Grant. A tied grant from the National Library of Australia is allowing the Society to conserve four of our Henty

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed, and information provided, by the authors of articles in this newsletter do not necessarily mirror the views and values of the Kew Historical Society. We also rely on authors checking the accuracy of their data and apologise if errors of fact have been made.

POSTAL ADDRESS

The Society's mailing address is PO Box 3147, Cotham, Vic. 3101.
Our email address remains info@kewhistoricalsociety.org.au

EXHIBITIONS

Our current exhibition at the Kew Court House will be in place until October. It focusses on Post War Kew and the changes that occurred in architecture, technology, and society. A highlight of the exhibition is the profiles of five former or current residents of Kew, and their reflections on aspects of their lives during the period 1945 to 1960. The exhibition is open each Friday at the Kew Court House from 11.00am until 1.00pm.

During the 2025 Australian Heritage Festival, we held another fashion and design exhibition at Villa Alba Museum. The exhibition, and accompanying lectures, explored *200 Years of Wedding Fashion in Australia*. Twenty wedding gowns, all but one from our collection, were displayed as well as a number of wedding fashion accessories. The KHS Collections group would like to acknowledge volunteers from KHS and Villa Alba Museum who assisted during the three weekends. Funds raised through ticket sales will be used for conservation of our collection.



DONATIONS TO THE COLLECTION

There have been a number of additions to the collection since February 2025. These include:

- A silk and lace wedding dress made in 1960 by Valerie Smith who worked at Leo Haskins' *Salon Milano*. Donated by Susan Wright Jones.
- A satin wedding dress made by Buckley & Nunn for Margaret Coleman in 1952, as well as six parasols. Donated by Jane Burge.
- Archival records of the 1st Kew Group, the 1st Kew Group Committee, the 1st Kew Rovers, the 1st Kew Cub Pack, and the 1st Kew Scouts, some dating from 1932. Donated by Brad Miles.
- Aerial photos of Kew, Playbills from the Rialto Cinema, and documents relating to the Kew Presbyterian Church. Donated by Deborah Cleary.

MARY ANN HENTY'S WEDDING DRESS

A CASE STUDY IN CONSERVATION

In 2023, the Kew Historical Society was gifted a major collection of costumes from the descendants of Francis and Mary Ann Henty. These costumes were owned and worn by Mary Ann, her daughter Alice, and Alice's daughter-in-law, Grace Burland. A number of these costumes have been used in two exhibitions at the Villa Alba Museum. These include the 1842 wedding dress of Mary Ann Henty (nee Lawrence).

In 2024, the National Library of Australia gave KHS a grant to assess the significance of the Henty Costume Collection. This was conducted by Dr Laura Jovic. The assessment provided the basis for an additional grant from the National Library for the conservation of four of the costumes. One of these, the 1842 wedding dress, was completed in time for the exhibition of wedding fashion, held during the 2025 Australian Heritage Festival.

In our application to the National Library for a conservation grant, we used Dr Jovic's assessment of the four dresses, which provided detailed descriptions of their significance, past use and condition. This was used by conservators of Grimwade Conservation Services [University of Melbourne] to provide quotes for the conservation of the dresses.

Dr Jovic's original assessment stated that the wedding dress was: *'Worn by Mary Ann Lawrence when she married Francis Henty at St John's Church, Launceston at 8am on 5 January 1842. [It is a] Pale grey taffeta dress with short sleeves; fan-shape fullness on bodice front controlled at lower centre front with rows of ruching; full skirt cartridge pleated at waist. Woven width of the fabric is a narrow 18"; 6 panels to the skirt. Matching fabric panels have been added as a cosmetic mend at the centre back opening where the hooks and eyes fasten.*

This dress would have been re-worn by Mary Ann as a best dress. Over the years it was worn by successive generations of Mary Ann's descendants. This probably explains the replacement of the fabric at the centre back of the bodice where the hooks and eyes may have damaged the fabric. Close inspection shows that the garment has not been altered and the fabric panels have been taken from a part of the skirt that has been neatly concealed. This refurbishment indicates the family's ongoing use of the dress and its historical life cycle beyond the original wearer.'

Based on this description, as well as a physical assessment, Grimwade Conservation Services (GCS) were able to outline the conservation treatments appropriate for a dress of this age.



MARY ANN HENTY'S 1842 WEDDING DRESS
Robert Baker (photographer), 2023

GCS undertook to provide: *'Brief photography and brief documentation; and to repair existing losses and consolidation/stabilisation of the fragile areas and tears. For larger losses, such as the areas under the armpits, new silk fabric will be prepared which will be close in colour, weight, and type to the original silk. This fabric will be used locally underneath the loss areas and large tears as a backing support to infill the losses affixed onto the place with fine hand-stitches using very fine silk threads pulled from crepe silk fabric. Smaller losses and tears will be stabilised with self-couching hand stitches using fine silk threads. Crease reduction [will be used] to ease the line folds and restore the shape of various parts/elements using gentle, passive methods.'*

The dress was collected from GCS a week before it was due to be exhibited which allowed me to prepare an illustrated lecture on the conservation of the dress. The lecture drew upon Dr Jovic's assessment, the GCS quote, as well as Larry Edward's - the textile conservator - written and visual record of the conservation. The photographs that accompanied the record showed the dress before, during and after treatment. The detailed photographic record pre treatment identified each of the areas requiring preservation.

MARY ANN HENTY'S WEDDING DRESS (from page 4)

His photographs, taken during the conservation treatment, provide forensic detail of the sections requiring repair such as the degraded fabric under the arms.

For the first time, in perhaps 100 years, the extent of the removed fabric at right front, which was used to create the fabric panels on the rear of the bodice, as described by Dr Jovic, was revealed. It was a savage cut as evidenced by the rough edges to the large loss of fabric, measuring approximately 320mm x 180mm.



Whereas in the past, the removal of the fabric had been concealed by an artfully sewn seam which pulled together a pleated fold, an attempt to create the original 1842 bell shaped silhouette of the skirt meant that the large loss of fabric needed to be replaced. During the 1840s, the Victoria & Albert Museum notes that: 'Skirts at this time were large and bell-shaped, supported by numerous layers of petticoats which proved to be heavy, hot and unhygienic. Volume was achieved through tiered, flounced, quilted or stiffened petticoats, the latter providing the most supportive structure for the era's vast skirts.'

This meant that the drooping, soft silhouette, as shown on the previous page, was an incorrect interpretation. Another photo taken following the treatment shows the correct profile of the skirt for the period. [above right]. When thus expanded, the risk when sourcing a replacement fabric to conceal the loss might risk reducing the visual integrity of the garment.

Typically, a conservator will source an identical or similar fabric to that used in the remainder of the dress, and dye fabric swatches to match the original, allowing a curator or owner to assess which swatch best meets the needs of the garment and its intended use. A similar fabric and a close colour match was essential in this case, in order to preserve the dress for display.



Together with the photographic record, the conservator provided useful notes outlining the processes used in the conservation.

'The dress was brush vacuumed. The crude stitching covering the loss in the front of the skirt was removed and localised crease reduction was done to assess the losses and measure for replacement silk. The underarm areas of shattered silk were stabilised, then covered with a silk net to help prevent further damage when handling. The two broken eyelet's on the centre back of the bodice were replaced.'

'The Centre Back waist band area was stabilised and covered with a silk net to help prevent further damage when handling. The major holes in the skirt that were accessible, were stabilised. A similar colour and texture silk was used to fill in the missing area of skirt.'

The replacement fabric on the large loss was clearly going to be the most noticeable element of the conservation treatment. On display at Villa Alba during the Australian Heritage Festival, we did not use underpinnings to the same extent as used by the conservator in the image above, which meant that the replacement fabric was less noticeable.

Another three Henty dresses are to be conserved before the end of September 2025. These include two dresses owned by Mary Ann Henty: a circa 1842 pink evening dress; and a circa 1872 black silk two-piece day dress with a thin green stripe. The final garment is a girl's dress, owned by Mary Ann's daughter Alice, dating from 1858.

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THE CITY OF KEW FLOAT

VICTORIAN CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS IN 1934

This article explores the story of the Kew float and its connection with William (Bill) Ferguson (1882–1950), a leading campaigner for Aboriginal people in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reading this article should be aware that it contains images and names of deceased persons. Readers should also be aware that some of the language and descriptions used in this article reflect cultural values of a former period.

.....

The City of Kew's entry in the Melbourne Centenary Float Parade in 1934 was awarded the prize for best historic float. In *Kew's Civic Century*, W.D. Vaughan observed that: *'This was a striking entry. ... and evoked much comment on account of its originality and truly Australian motif.'*

The Victorian & Melbourne Centenary celebrations between October 1934 and June 1935 marked the arrival of Edward Henty in Portland on 19 November 1834 as the establishment of the first permanent European settlement in Victoria, and John Batman's pronouncement on 8 June 1835 of 'the place for a village' on the bank of the Yarra as representing the foundation of Melbourne.

Major events of the celebrations included the Royal Visit by Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, the third son of King George V, to both Melbourne and Portland, the MacRobertson Centenary Air Race from London to Melbourne, and the Centenary Floral Parade.

In addition to their local celebrations, the Kew Council organised a strong post [pictured page 7] in St Kilda Road to welcome the Duke of Gloucester as he travelled by carriage from HMS Sussex at Port Melbourne to Parliament in Spring Street, to open the Centenary celebrations on 18 October 1934. They also entered a municipal float in the Centenary Floral Parade held on 27 October 1934. The Kew Municipal Band marched in the parade. Kew's entry in the Floral Parade was awarded a £25 silver cup donated by the Myer Emporium for the best historical float.

The floral parade was sponsored by the Motion Picture & Theatrical Industry Centenary Committee. In their promotional material, it was suggested that the event was a chance to demonstrate what Victoria could do with flowers and artistry. An opportunity for each municipality to have its own float, typifying its activities and featuring its most attractive girls with their garlands of flowers.

A photograph album held in the Boroondara Heritage Collection includes an image of Kew's float [above right].



CITY OF KEW FLOAT FOR THE VICTORIAN CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS, 1934

Courtesy Boroondara Heritage Collection

Reporting on the parade, *The Argus* described the Kew float as *'Grass tussocks and sandy slope set on a frame so low that the foundation seemed part of the ground, (it) carried a rotted tree stump in the centre and a fallen tree trunk upon which two tiger snakes were coiled. Four Aborigines from North Australia sat in front of a mia-mia of gum boughs, while smoke curled from a fire beside them and a waterfall splashed over stones on a ferny bank.'*

The absence of both flowers and pretty girls on the Kew float may have been somewhat controversial at the time. When the mayor, Cr Carnegie, later presented Rowland Chipperfield, the Kew Council building surveyor and the designer of the float, with a replica of the silver cup in miniature and a framed photograph of the float as a token of the councillors' regard for him, Chipperfield was reported to have commented that *'the float had been rather severely condemned before it left Kew, but happily it had found favour elsewhere.'*

In 1932 Louis McCubbin, president of the Victorian Artists Society, and son of Heidelberg School artist Frederick McCubbin, proposed that an exhibition of Aboriginal art should form part of the Melbourne Centenary programme. He stated that great interest in the art of 'primitive people', and a reassessment of its importance, was occurring all over the world. An article in *The Age* reporting McCubbin's suggestion commented:

'So complete has been the disappearance of the Aborigines from this State that it is difficult to comprehend that they played no small part, albeit an obstructive one in the early settlement of Victoria.'

THE CITY OF KEW FLOAT (from page 6)

Historians and others hope to make more than passing reference to the original inhabitants when the centenary is celebrated, but it appears that the artists will succeed in making the most of this idea.'

In June 1934, a public meeting was held in Kew to consider the ways and means that the citizens of Kew might effectively co-operate with the Centenary Council in the forthcoming celebrations, including ensuring the provision of a sufficiency of flowers. Major S.B. Nicholson, Deputy Organiser of the Centenary Celebrations, spoke generally on the lines that the celebrations would proceed, while Louis McCubbin, who had been appointed as the manager of the floral parade, explained the proposed floral pageantry.

Unfortunately, there seems to be no record of the process which resulted in the flowerless design of the Kew float or any controversy regarding the proposal. In early September 1934, the Kew Centenary Celebrations Committee reported to a council meeting that the matter of design and construction of the floral float be referred to the Building Surveyor and Curator with full authority to proceed with the work.

The Aboriginal men on the float, reported in *The Argus* as Johnny Quayle, Bimbo Johnson, Nunyah, and Scrubbo, were among a group of 12 Aboriginals who travelled to Melbourne from outback New South Wales, with Dubbo man William (Bill) Ferguson. The arrival of a truckload of Aboriginals in Victoria bound for the Centenary was newsworthy enough to be reported in the press as they passed through Mildura and Bendigo on their way to Melbourne, where they set up camp in Stradbroke Park, Kew.

They were not the only party of Aboriginals in Melbourne for the Centenary Celebrations. Some effort was made to ensure Aborigines were represented in the celebrations. However, a proposal in 1933 to bring a tribe of Queensland Aboriginals to Melbourne for display in a village setting at the Centenary was abandoned following advice by the Queensland Home Secretary that no private scheme to exploit Aborigines would be permitted. He advised that there was a penalty of £100 or imprisonment, not exceeding six months, for removal of Aborigines from that State without authority.

The United Mission Council brought four Aboriginal men and a boy to Melbourne from the remote north of South Australia to take part in an Outback Exhibition in the Melbourne Town Hall during September 1934. They presented demonstrations of Aboriginal arts from the stage in the afternoons and evenings. Examples of Aboriginal craft work were displayed. Lectures were also given by numerous speakers including: George Alston, a protector of Aborigines from Mulka, who was in charge of the visiting party; Aboriginal speakers David Uniapon and Doug Nicholls; as well as anthropologists and speakers representing the missions.

On 2 November 1934, at Scots Church Hall in Collins Street, the Ferguson party participated in an evening pageant with Fitzroy school children arranged by the Aboriginal Fellowship Group, with the proceeds to support the Framlingham Welfare Fund. Earlier in the day they had entertained the children of Kew at a local picture theatre after a picnic at Victoria Park was cancelled due to rainy weather.



CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS: KEW 'STRONG POST' ST KILDA ROAD, OCTOBER 18th 1934

The SEARS Studio (photographer),
KHS

William (Bill) Ferguson (1882–1950) who accompanied the four Aboriginal men on the Kew Float, was the son of a Scottish immigrant shearer and an Indigenous *Wiradjuri* woman, formerly an aboriginal housemaid in a station homestead. He had started work in Riverina shearing sheds at the age of 14. He later became a shed organiser for the Australian Workers Union and active in the Labor Party.

After his return to Dubbo, in June 1937 he launched the Aborigines' Progressive Association. With two other Aboriginal leaders, William Cooper and John Patten, he organised the 'Day of Mourning' conference for Aboriginals, on Australia Day, 1938. Until his death in 1950, he was a tireless campaigner for Aboriginal welfare and citizenship rights. His *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry concludes with the following words, "He stood tall, with a calm and reliable manner, and his strong Presbyterian faith supported his pride in Aboriginal people."

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WILLSMERE

High up above the winding Yarra River facing west, in the north of Kew and with a commanding view west over bushland, golf courses, green open spaces, over Collingwood and to the City of Melbourne four kilometres away; to the north towards Fairfield and Alphington; and to the east over suburbia to the Dandenong Ranges, stands the grand, imposing Willsmere, and since the late 1980s when the institution was sold for private development, a fully gated upmarket residential complex including 155 heritage apartments and 101 modern townhouses.

Its name comes from Thomas Wills who purchased Lot 60 in 1845 alongside the reserve where the Kew Lunatic Asylum was later built. Wills Lookout, Wills Street, Willsmere Road and Willsmere Park also carry his family name.

The site was chosen but faced fierce opposition from the residents of Kew who delayed the opening of the Asylum until 1871. Later however, many Kew residents supported and volunteered in its programmes.

Operational from 1871 to 1988, when the facility was decommissioned, the Kew Lunatic Asylum, its first official name, was one of the largest asylums ever built in Australia, and one of the most recognised architectural landmarks in Melbourne. It was the first purpose-built asylum in the Colony of Victoria, mirroring Colney Hatch Asylum in England, its design based on English barrack-style models of asylum planning. Kew was larger and more expensive than its sister asylums at Ararat (1867–1905) and Beechworth (1867–1905). The complex of buildings at Kew was constructed between 1864 and 1872 to the design of architects G.W. Vivian and Frederick Kawerau of the Victorian Public Works Office to house the growing number of ‘lunatics’, ‘inebriates’, and ‘idiots’ in the Colony of Victoria.

The zeitgeist of colonial Victoria denigrated the mentally ill. They were locked away as shameful beings. The Kew Lunatic Asylum however ‘was designed to be elegant, beautiful, yet substantial, and to be viewed as ‘a magnificent asylum for the insane’ with the aim of portraying Melbourne as a civilised and benevolent city, whilst avoiding the gaol-like appearance of other asylums. This was the reason why low ha ha walls were built, and why elegantly landscaped gardens and grounds were established. The buildings were E-shaped, with courtyards lined with iron columned verandahs and a few blue stoned cells underneath for extremely difficult inmates. The genders were strictly separated with laundry facilities in the female wing. All inmates were required to dress in drab, grey institutional clothes. Each ward was shut off from the others by great doors. The dormitories, with neat rows of beds, were locked at night.

In England, in the nineteenth century, enlightened principles were being applied to the treatment of mental illness. Illnesses would be cured scientifically using medical therapies, routine work and strong moral guidance. Daily timetables would be followed with regular mealtimes, toilet access and social activities. The Kew Lunatic Asylum opened and initially conveyed this great optimism. Within the 340 acres were gardens, a sports ground, orchards and extensively landscaped grounds. Two gazebos were constructed, retained, and can still be seen on heritage walks inside Willsmere. There were sunshades, a pavilion and even an aviary. The front buildings of Willsmere and the large twin towers feature mansard roofs with dormer windows, a strong characteristic of early French style architecture in many public buildings throughout Melbourne. Water storage tanks were housed in the towers at Willsmere.



ENTRANCE GATES TO THE KEW ASYLUM IN PRINCESS STREET
Henry Beater Christian (photographer), 1920s
KHS

A gatehouse and gates stood proudly at the present day junction of Princess Street, Wills Street, Main Drive, Willsmere Road and Eglinton Street.

The original plan was to provide asylum for 600 inmates and solve the overcrowding in prisons and other asylums such as Yarra Bend Asylum (1848–1925) just below Kew on the river flats in Fairfield. Within a short time, however, the numbers had reached 1,000. Overcrowding and primitive living conditions were soon crippling the idealistic vision of the evolution of mental health treatment. On the hilltop site, ‘freely admitting light and air’ and drainage, a different picture emerged. The institution was seriously underfunded.

> Page 9

WILLSMERE (from page 8)

Melbourne was a very young city, founded in 1835. Its population in 1851 was 77,000, swollen by the gold rushes to 540,000 in 1861. Many people lived in prefabricated tents in a city short of housing. Many didn't cope: those who had failed to find the riches they sought on the goldfields, displaced Indigenous people, unmarried mothers, women suffering post partum depression, paupers, convicts, criminals, those shunned or supported financially by their families, those with conditions not yet understood or named, and the mentally ill. There were also paying patients who lived in comfort.

Kew Asylum was continually criticised by the medical and social services professions. Within a decade of its opening, it had become so rundown that it was described by the Victorian Branch of the British Medical Association as 'a disgrace to the community'. It never lived up to the original, visionary expectations. Inadequate government funding led to gross mistreatment of patients by untrained, inadequately trained or inadequate numbers of staff. There were no female physicians. Many inmates suffered from institutionalisation rather than illness. Kew was subject to repeated public criticism leading to a Royal Commission in 1886. Conditions and morale were low.

Despite underfunding, the awareness of the health benefits of patient participation in a range of practical activities was apparent. Inmates provided 'useful labour' in the Asylum's farm and orchards and could participate in carpentry, mattress and shoe-making, blacksmithing, tailoring, fancy work, as well as the sewing of linen, aprons, chemises and dresses. At the Kew Asylum, females produced socks and stockings.

In the 1880s, it was proposed to close both the Kew and Yarra Bend Asylums and replace them with four new facilities, however action was delayed by the Depression of the 1890s.

There was an 'Idiot Ward' in the Asylum which became the independent Kew Cottages in 1887, built on Asylum land, with its own story. Here intellectually disabled children were housed in a facility which functioned separately. The Children's Cottages finally closed in 2008.

Typhoid fever came to Melbourne In 1907, rainproofed fever tents were erected to allow quarantining of affected patients. These tents were retained and converted into a gymnasium and function room for current residents. Another piece of history were the privy buildings for the inmates of the Asylum, now used as bike sheds.

In 1933, the Asylum was renamed Kew Mental Hospital.

During the ensuing years, government and mental health authorities attempted to close and demolish the buildings. In 1939, Larundel Mental Hospital opened, but plans for it to replace the Kew Asylum were delayed by World War II. The Gatehouse was demolished and the gates moved to their present position in High Street, Kew, at Victoria Park to facilitate the straightening of Princess Street in 1939–1940.



GATES OF THE KEW ASYLUM NOW AT VICTORIA PARK

Felicity Renowden (photographer), 2025

Managing patients gave way to a change of attitude. The arrival of Dr Cunningham Dax of the Mental Health Department, and his very different views, saw great changes. Padded rooms were decommissioned, mandatory seclusion and restraints were stopped and activities such as exercise, occupational therapy and art activities were introduced. In the 1950s, a new wave of reform came, with widespread criticism of the huge nineteenth century medical institutions. The Mental Hygiene Authority turned Kew into the Willsmere Mental Hospital until December 1988, when it closed. Its heritage value was retained and the main building and surrounding grounds were sold by the Victorian Government for private residential development in a gated facility. Asylum land was sold off for housing. In 1991, Willsmere was placed on the historical building register.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

MEMORIES OF KEW BY ALVA ALLEN

The subject files of the Kew Historical Society contain a number of reminiscences by former residents. One such is a 28 page typescript of a talk by Alva Allen, given to members in 1986. The following is a small selection from the much longer document.

.....

I was born in Kew a long time ago. I am the youngest son of ten boys and two girls, and my mother and father lived in Kew for many years. My father was born in 1865, and he was born in Rathmines Road, Auburn. He came to Kew when he was six weeks old. My mother was born in Daylesford in 1866, and she came to Kew when she was 18.

My father had a plumbing business in Kew and he had 25 men working for him, and he had quite a business. People would come into his workshop and they would see the patterns hanging up on the wall here and there - patterns of coffins - and you could see them think, 'Oh, gee, what's this fellow up to?' But he had to make lead coffins for Padbury's, the undertakers, and as a rule a lot of those early people were buried in lead coffins. They had been embalmed, of course, and he had to seal up the coffins. I know he did David Syme. When he was embalmed and put inside the lead coffin, my father had to go down, just before the funeral started, and cover him up and put the lead together and seal it up.

The cemetery had quite a big staff. To see the grave diggers walking out of the cemetery at 12 o'clock was something to be seen. They would appear from around the back of bushes and various places and as the clock struck twelve, they would all walk out. Of course, they all lived nearby down Disraeli Street and Derby Street; a couple lived in Mary Street. They were within walking distance and they would all go home for lunch, and you could bet your bottom dollar they would be back there as the clock struck one. They would be marching through the gates, and that went on for years and years. There were the Murdoch brothers, Bob Murdoch and his brother Dave, and old Black; I think the Atkins were there; so were the Catons; old Mr Hastings. He always wore a boxer hat, and it was comical to see him digging graves with a boxer hat on his head.

Also, there were the monumental yards. One was on the corner of Mary and High Streets, and the other one was just around the corner in Parkhill Road. Mr Presnell had one at Mary and High Streets, and the McCrackens had the other one round the corner. You would see them there, they would have great slabs of granite and colossal bits of stone-work, and a bloke working for Presnell - old Tom Black - you would see him chipping away at a rough old piece of granite and things, but by Jove, when it was finished, it was absolutely perfect.



KEW CEMETERY
Postcard, 1905
KHS

The Rices next door were mixed up with the cemetery. George Rice was a grave decorator, as he was called, and the bloke on the other side of High Street, old Fred Bossy, they used to be down there filling in their time in the cemetery, looking after graves. Rices had the big flower shop there and on Sunday afternoons there would be hundreds there buying flowers.

The Harp of Erin Hotel was owned by the Jones family. Mrs Jones used to run that, and it was a well known thing that if you bought a bottle of beer up there, you didn't know what sort of beer you were getting. A bottle of Melbourne Bitter would have a Fosters label on the cap, or vice versa. They reckon that she used to save all the beer in the drip trays and bottle it. Whether she did, I don't know, but you could buy a bottle of beer with a Melbourne Bitter label on it and a Fosters cap on it. I used to knock around with the boys from the Jones' pub. Leo, and we were all great mates, and of course we went to school together, but they were a well known family in Kew. They had a few boys there, the Jones family, and a couple of girls, but they had the pub for years.

Outside the Harp of Erin Hotel, they had a big horse trough with a sign on it saying 'Drink and let the cattle drink also', and I can always remember that. They had a drink called *Horandah*. I believe that Mrs Jones' brother had a soft drink place and that was one of their favourite drinks. I don't know whether anyone has heard about that, but that's what was up at East Kew.

— — —
Alva Allan also writes about the Railway Station, the Kew Asylum, exploring drains, Sir Robert Menzies and Alice Anderson. We may include other recollections by him in subsequent newsletters.

© KEW HISTORICAL SOCIETY

100 YEARS AGO

JUNE 1925

HOLES 6 FEET DEEP IN KEW ROAD

Residents of Kilby road, Kew, complain that holes six feet deep have appeared in the footpaths. At tonight's meeting of the Kew Council a motion will be submitted that a deputation wait on the Minister for Public Works. It is felt that if the matter were taken up by the Government It would help to relieve unemployment.

The Herald, 2 June 1925, p.14

IN THE SUBURBS

Wandering Cattle at East Kew

A letter has been sent to Kew council by the Tramway Employees' Association complaining about wandering cattle that roam uncontrolled in High St, East Kew. An electric tram recently ran down and killed a cow that had strayed on to the line. Wandering cattle on a main tram thoroughfare were undoubtedly a source of grave danger to the travelling public. Following this complaint, the municipal inspector has been asked to look into the matter.

The Age, 19 June 1925, p.7

...

SENATOR PEARCE'S ANNUAL PEPPERCORN

The entertaining spectacle of the mayor and councillors, of Kew gravely forwarding to the Minister for Home and Territories at any time during the next 99 years, one peppercorn, is conjured up by the revival of an Interesting piece of legal fiction in the *Commonwealth Gazette* today. With many flourishes, portion of the postal land at the corner of High-street and Cotham-road is granted on lease to the council for the purpose of a war memorial. The term of the lease is 99 years, and the rent is one peppercorn per annum, payable if demanded.

The Herald, 25 June 1925, p.1

GRANT OF LEASE OF POSTAL PROPERTY TO THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF KEW

WHEREAS the land described in the schedule hereunder is not immediately required by the Commonwealth for any public purpose, His Excellency the Governor-General in Council, pursuant to Section 63 of the *Lands Acquisition Act 1906-1916*, has approved that authority be granted for the lease of the said land to the Council of the City of Kew for the term of 99 years at a rental of one peppercorn per annum, payable if demanded, to the intent that the said land shall be used for the purposes of a War Memorial.

G.F. PEARCE,

Minister of State for Home and Territories.

(B 25/1101.) *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, 25 June 1925 (Issue No. 49) p.993



GRANT OF LEASE OF POSTAL PROPERTY TO THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF KEW.

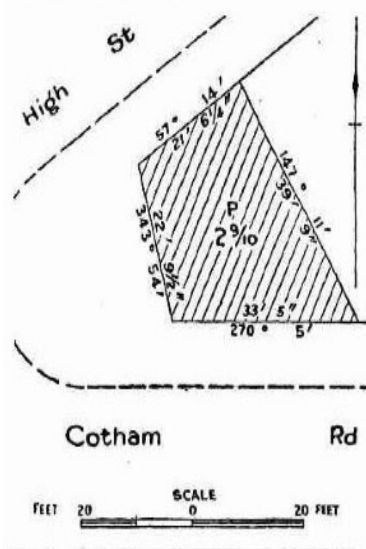
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G. F. PEARCE,
Minister of State for Home and Territories.

(B 25/1101.)

DESCRIPTION OF LAND REFERRED TO.

All that piece or parcel of land containing an area of 2.9 perches, more or less, being part of Crown portion 86, and being part of the property entered on page 3 of the Schedule of Transferred Properties in the State of Victoria, and therein described as office and quarters (joined to State Government offices), City of Kew, Parish of Borondara, County of Bourke, State of Victoria, Commonwealth of Australia, as shown hachured on plan hereunder:—



Authority has been granted for the full right and liberty for the mayor, councillors, and citizens of the City of Kew to enter upon and maintain for the use and enjoyment of the public under a permissive occupancy, rent free, a strip of land 6 feet or thereabouts in width, adjoining an area of about 2.9 perches leased to the mayor, councillors, and citizens of the City of Kew, for a period of 99 years from 25th September, 1925, and being portion of the Post Office site at Kew, Victoria.—B.25/3112. *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, 26 November 1925 (Issue No. 102) p.2430

MEMBERSHIP & DONATIONS

KEW HISTORICAL SOCIETY - KEEPING ALIVE KEW HISTORY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

The Society has operated continuously for 67 years holding monthly meetings, conserving historical records and items, undertaking research, arranging public exhibitions and lectures, and giving guided tours. You can become involved and support the Society's work by becoming a member or renewing your membership and or making a donation. Circle YES or NO:

I/we wish to join the society	YES/NO
I/we wish to renew my/our membership	YES/NO
Individual membership (2025–26 annual fee \$25)	YES/NO
Household membership (2025–26 annual fee \$35)	YES/NO
Student membership (2025–26 annual fee \$10)	YES/NO
I/we agree to be bound by the rules of the Society	YES/NO
I/we prefer to receive the Society's quarterly newsletter by email	YES/NO
I/we would like to volunteer - on a committee, on the court house or supper rosters or with research	YES/NO
I/we would like to make a donation of \$_____	<i>Note: All donations above \$2 are tax deductible</i>

NAME/S: _____ [Please print] TITLE/S: _____

POSTAL ADDRESS: _____ POSTCODE: _____

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PAYMENTS: Please email form and cheque made out to Kew Historical Society Inc., PO Box 3147, Cotham, 3101
OR pay by direct deposit to Kew Historical Society Inc., account 633-000 171300288 with your family name
as the subject or reference and email payment details and/or scan the form to:
secretary@kewhistoricalsociety.org.au

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Privacy note: The KHS will not pass your details to a third party without obtaining your permission

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