

NUNAWADING HISTORICAL SOCIETY (INC) NEWSLETTER

MAY - AUGUST 1994

Series 3 No. 2



PAST MEETINGS

On Saturday, 12 February we were privileged to listen to our Mayor, Cr. Kevin Abbott, talking on 'The Importance of Local History'. From his collection of ephemera he spoke about and passed around maps, books, articles and photos pertaining to the City of Nunawading and answered many questions.

As part of the National Trust Heritage Festival, our speaker on 9th April was Laurel Martyn, former Artistic Director of Ballet Victoria. M/s Martyn spoke on the story of ballet in Australia, her method of instruction and her dance experiences in many countries over the years.

Thank you to all members who were able to help with the two working bees prior to the Heritage Festival.

Open Day on 17th April at Schwerkolt Cottage and Museum was a great success. A piper from the Nunawading City Pipe Band entertained the many visitors.

NEW MEMBERS

The Society is pleased to welcome four new members this year - Barbara Gardner, Wendy Rees-Harrison, Catriona Miller and Syd Wright. Syd is the author of the History of St. John's Roman Catholic Church, Mitcham.

NEXT MEETING will be held on SATURDAY, 4th JUNE, 1994 at 1.30 p.m. at the Museum Annexe.

Speaker - Mr. Ken Ince of Blackburn, one of our vice-presidents in the early years of the Society. His subject - 'Some aspects of a family tailoring business'.

THE AUGUST MEETING will be held on SATURDAY 13th at 1.30 p.m. when we hope to show a video.

FRIENDS OF THE COTTAGE

The Society at its April Meeting agreed to the formation of a Friends of the Cottage group.

SUBSCRIPTIONS for 1994/95 are due on 1st July - family \$8 Single \$5. Please send subscriptions to the Secretary, 10A Alexander St., Mitcham, 3132.

SCHWERKOLT COTTAGE SITE MANAGEMENT REVIEW

All members and Friends of the Society will be pleased to learn that the Nunawading Council at a meeting in January agreed not to develop the site, apart from an increase in the car parking area. The Society wishes to thank all who supported them in their efforts to keep the site open and not fenced in.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF EASTERN HISTORICAL SOCIETIES - 30th APRIL 1994

This year our host was the Sherbrooke Historic Council, representing several groups. Before business of the day commenced we were treated to "a ride on Puffing Billy". A first for some of us. From the comfort of a 1st class carriage we could view the beautiful countryside. The journey to the restored Nobelius Packing Shed, Emerald, took ¾ hour from Belgrave and was enjoyed by all.

On behalf of Mr. B. Spence, Judith Leaney welcomed representatives and guests. Some time was required to appoint Chairman - Graham Hansen, Secretary - Judith Leaney and Treasurer - Marie Cooper.

The suggestion was made that a Regional Newsletter be circulated to Societies and items of interest forwarded to Mr. Irvine Green, Doncaster Historical Society; also society members were invited to Schramm's Cottage for a Christmas break-up.

As time was limited representatives were requested to voice concerns rather than read reports. One important matter raised was the proposed subdivision of the Lysterfield Valley - to which strong opposition was expressed.

Before closing the meeting, the Chairman read a charming letter from Mrs. Marjorie Morgan. All who attended the gathering wished Mrs. E. Pullen and Mr. B. Spence a return to good health. After an excellent lunch we enjoyed the photographic display and a visit to the very fine Emerald Museum.

One of the early pioneers to the area was CARL EXEL NOBELIUS who chose to plant fruit and ornamental trees rather than search for Gold. So successful was his business, in one year he was exporting up to 3 million trees all over the world. To make transportation easier it then became necessary to open the link rail between Fern Tree Gully and Gembrook. So the early 1900's were very optimistic times for those who settled in the Hills district, and we see today a very close knit community.

Thank you for an informative and enjoyable day.

Betty Muckleston

The President spoke with the History Group of the Burwood Community House in April. Members of this group help to publish the Burwood Bulletin each 2 months. The group has kindly donated back copies from 1980 to the Society.

WILLIAM HENRY SLATER came from Mitcham, England to the North Blackburn district in the 1860's and called his property "Mitcham Grove" after the estate of Major Moore of Potter & Moore. He had worked as a contractor for Potter & Moore, distillers of oils for perfumes.

WILLIAM SLATER'S MITCHAM - IN ENGLAND

The Society has been given "Mitcham - a brief history" by its author, E.N. Montague of the Merton Historical Society. Published in 1987 it outlines the story of an area 2 miles by 3 miles, bounded by the River Wandle and its tributary the Graveney.

The earliest graveyard uncovered is of heavily armed men with their womenfolk and possessions, probably Anglo-Saxon mercenaries intended to defend Roman Londinium from attacks from the sea. The Danes demolished most of the early village, but in 976 a royal charter referred to it as Michamingemerke - the boundary of the people of Mitcham. After 1066 the area was given as a reward to William's half brother Bishop Otto. Domesday found a community of 250 people, with home farms and much common ground. In 1088 the Bishop was disgraced and some landowners were reinstated.

The 13th, 14th and 15th centuries found the manorial system flourishing - with some quarrels over common ground. It is noted that the church was strong in the defence of the rights of common people. One great family was probably responsible for the Early English church demolished in 1819 - now the site of the present church.

The court rolls of the manors survive almost intact from the late Middle Ages, and parish registers start in the mid 16th century, so a good picture is provided of the people who lived and wished to live in Mitcham. It was ideal - an hour's ride from the capital - for those seeking preferment at court and those with legal and commercial interests. "Moreover - it is commented - it had fresh air and pure water both scarce in Tudor London". Elizabeth Throgmorton, maid of honour to Queen Elizabeth I and the courtier and poet John Donne were two notables.

The Civil War brought changes for all - Merton Priory was garrisoned by Parliament, villagers suffered billeting and the loss of stock, and there were difficulties for the family who had appointed the vicar - a Royalist supporter!

With the Restoration came a new era for Mitcham dubbed "the Montpellier" of England by an eminent physician of the day, on account of its fine air. So the wealthy and influential still sought healthy residences away from the perpetual threat of plague in London. Turnpike trusts, inns and posting houses made travel much speedier. Before the Napoleonic Wars, stage coaches left for London at half hourly intervals during "rush hours" reaching Gracechurch St. within the hour.

Mitcham was best known in the 18th and 19th centuries for the cultivation of medicinal and aromatic herbs and the distillation of essences and perfumes. The industry began in the 14th century, when Merton priory's Biggin estate grew "spikings" or lavender, and "physic" gardeners are known in Mitcham from the early 18th century. In 1749 the distillation of lavender water began on an industrial scale, the innovators being Ephraim Potter and William Moore. Although lavender was to become synonymous with Mitcham, it was exceeded as a crop by peppermint, the oil from which was in demand from makers of cordial waters as well as from apothecaries in the 18th and 19th centuries. The rich dark loam in one area of Mitcham and the dry gravelly soil in other parts favoured the growth of a variety of other herbs including camomile, wormwood, damask roses, aniseed and liquorice. In the 1750s only a small acreage was used for herb growing, 250 acres of physic grounds existed in 1796 and by 1802 a further 240 acres of meadow, pasture and arable had been taken over including much of the open common fields. [Mitcham covers only 2916 acres, so almost 500 under this cultivation is considerable].

Topographical writers around 1800 commented on the extent and beauty of the herb gardens where, it was said, the art of cultivation has been brought to a state of perfection unrivalled in the kingdom. Hassell, the water colour artist described the colours in late summer as "particularly diversified", the blue from the ripe lavender, and the red and brown from the ripe herbs contrasting with the golden yellow of the cereals and the purple of the seed clovers. Potter and Moore's copper stills are described, and the wells, and later pumps which were necessary to tap water from over 200 feet below ground level. Other industries included brewing, soft drink manufacture, milk bottling, butter and margarine processing and the production of sugar confectionery and paints. Textile manufacture and printing reached a peak in the 18th century, skills having been introduced and continued by Huguenot families fleeing religious persecution in the Spanish Netherlands in the 16th century. Snuff milling was also long lasting.

Much is said about the work of the Vestry - an elected and largely voluntary body, with only the clerk and beadle paid. The vestry of Mitcham, precursor of local government was described by the Webbs, historians of local government, as a model of conscientious parish administration. They had numerous distinguished and able parishioners to call on for help and advice in the provision of compassionate help for the poor and destitute. Their projects are described and the families mentioned.

Water power had helped many industries and the idea of a canal from London to Portsmouth in 1793 to help the war effort failed; but an iron railroad was developed - the first public railway in the world - the Surrey Iron Railway ran from Wandsworth to Croydon through Mitcham.

Victorian life had its colourful times, with cricket on the Lower Green played by all classes. Mitcham vied with Hambledon for the distinction of being cradle to club cricket in the 18th century. The Annual Fair on three days in August still remains, and then gypsies came attracted by the chance of work in the herb gardens, after the Epsom Races. Dozens of tents and caravans could be seen on the Common with the gypsies providing their own entertainment.

The arrival of more railways brought other "less desirable" industries, such as paint, varnish and linoleum factories, so the area lost some favour with the wealthy and the population began to change. Although Potter and Moore's was sold up in 1886 other firms continued into the 1950s by diversifying into vegetable and plants for horticulturalists.

The book gives a delightful description of an extremely pretty village in the closing years of the 19th century. Also outlined is the variety of nonconformist churches which worked "evangelising" the working classes, the development of National Schools and the urban development of Mitcham which by 1911 had a population of 29606. World War I brought changes in social attitudes which meant that the old Mitcham, dominated by the squire and a few long-established families could never return.

The history progresses into modern times and the problems of post war English society as shown in a "suburban" area on the edge of Greater Metropolitan London. But our William Slater came here in the 1860s when changes in the make-up of Mitcham, England were only just beginning, Potter and Moore's were still strong and Mitcham was still an agricultural village.

Joan Roczniok

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