

Betty, what do you remember of the Historic Society in its beginning?

Well, Noel Learmonth, who was a very able historian, was very interested in having a branch of the Historical Society in Portland and Colin Woolcock, the President of C.E.M.A. at the time, called a public meeting. There were fourteen people present and the society was formed. The first President was Tom Newton and Secretary / Treasurer was Dorothy Sandeman.

This was in 1964, was it not?

Yes

And straight away you started on major projects?

Yes. Ken Hodge of Ballarat gave us a lot of help. It was his idea that the 'Cottage in the Gardens' be our project. He put in an enormous amount of work towards it and gave us a lot of the furniture and fittings.

Ken Hodge was a Portland person?

Yes

But at the time he was living in Ballarat?

Living in Ballarat, yes.

And he had the Olde Curiosity Shop in Ballarat, is that right?

Yes, he did. He gave us the Cottage in the glass case, that we have down in History House. It was a model for a house that his grandfather later built, where Ron Hodge lives now.

That is Gawler Street?

Yes

Ken Hodge, when he moved to Portland he had an antique business, is that correct?

Well, I thought he was in Portland before he moved to Ballarat.

What type of things did he donate?

It was a bit hard to remember after all these years. I know he gave the bed upstairs in the main bedroom, but he gave a lot of clothes in the cottage.

Apart from the 'Cottage in the Gardens', there was a display at the Watchhouse?

Yes, we had that here for many years. We started off with one row and finished with several and then when the Tourist office wanted more space, we had to move out. We had nowhere to go and we were offered a small room at the Steam Packet, which was not practical and then the Council invited us to put our display in History House, so that is where it has been ever since.

It is a wonderful display, really interesting and a lot of those items were donated over the years from different people.

Yes

We will go back to the beginnings again in 1964 and Mr Newton was the first President – Tom Newton?

Yes

He was a Portland identity, was he?

Yes, he was a local person, a school teacher here at the Palmer Street school. Very interested in history. He brought out a copy of the Birmingham Map, which has been selling well ever since and a number of small booklets on local history, including the one 'A Hundred Places to See'.

I know that booklet. Dorothy Sandeman was the Secretary / Treasurer at the time?

Yes

Is she still a member of Historical Society?

No

She was for a long time?

Yes. She remarried and she has gone to live at Narrawong.

But up until that she was...

For the first year, yes, she certainly was. She was the driving force behind everything we did. Very efficient.

Then, when she resigned as Secretary, who took over then?

I have a list of Secretaries, but they may not be in the right order. We had John Van der Shaw, Allen Benson, Betty James, Ken Eiles, Eileen Convy (who was Secretary for 10 years), Norma Trangmar and just recently Ian Grant.

That is an impressive list of names. Eileen Convy was Secretary for 10 years?

Yes and she is now Treasurer. Joint Treasurer with her husband.

Goodness, that is along association. Some of the other projects that the Historical Society has been famous for are what?

We had the Learmonth Seat, which we had built in the gardens. A bluestone seat. It was placed in the place where the Learmonth family had their family picnics for years and that was in memory of Noel. We had a very impressive list of people here on that occasion. In 1972, the special guest were Marjorie Tipping (State President of the Royal Historical Society), John Beauchevais (who is an author who led several exhibitions to Antarctica), Phillip Brown (author / historian and friend of Noel Learmonth from Geelong Grammar), Mrs Crosbie Morrison (who planted a tree beside the seat) and Noel Learmonth's daughter and family and a large number of invited guest.

Noel Learmonth is a famous name in Portland because of his books.

He wrote quite a number of books and he was also a naturalist as well as an historian. He had a very interesting career and died when he was ninety. His last book was published after his death.

What was the name of his most famous book?

Portland Bay Settlement.

There are a few copies of that around the town?

Yes and it has been reprinted within the last two or three years.

Another thing the Historical Society has done is to place a number of plaques around the city.

We had another big occasion when we unveiled a plaque on the Almond Tree Reserve. It was to commemorate the site of the Immigration Depot and also where they sent sheep to Western Australia from Portland. There is another plaque in that same area on the almond tree that Gilbert Pritchard grew from the historic tree. There is also the wool wagon which was left to us by Councillor Husson.

The almond tree, the original almond tree?

That was said to have been planted at the time the Immigration Depot stood there. That was where all the early immigrants went to live, before they were hired for positions around the western district.

That tree died and the present tree is from that?

Yes. The early tree was there until quite recently and I think Gilbert Pritchard, the Curator, tried to grow one from it earlier, but that was not a success, but the one that is there now is very good.

What are some of the plaques that you placed?

First of all, we had marble plaques which were made for us by the stonemason Mr Tom Parker. We had one on the site of William Dutton's house, the site of the first doctor's home (that was Dr Byass), the site of the first cemetery, where Major Mitchell met the Henty's (on two whale boilers), one with a list of Curators of the cottage, the ones I have mentioned with the sheep to Western Australia and the site of the Immigration Depot and the almond tree, then there is the Noel Learmonth's memorial tree.

Also, the plaque that as beside the Admella.

Our society was given the plaque from Melbourne many years ago. It was in the Seamen's Mission in Melbourne, until that building was closed down and we gave it to the Council as a gift to the People of Portland and part of it was erected in the Admella enclosure.

And that was the State?

Memorial to the Admella.

And what are some of the other plaques that the Historical Society?

The last few years we have changed to having bronze plaques. We put one on the site of the gaol, on the wall that is still standing. There was one given to the Technical School for the site of Captain Fawthrop's house. In Julia Street we have them on the home of John Jones the stonemason, on Dr Greer's home, on Annesley, there is one on the Mac's Livery Stable site, one on the Gordon Hotel which had the earliest continuous licence, one on the Watchhouse and one at the Caledonian Inn and at the moment there are three more being prepared.

Where will they be placed?

One for Victoria House and there is one going on the stone which was the distance marker on the railway bridge, then there is one for the Royal Hotel.

Really interesting. The Historical Society has done a lot to make Portlander's realise their history.

Yes, they have certainly tried very hard. We can only do what our finances allow us to do. We would like to do a lot more.

It is a big job keeping volunteers in the Cottage too.

Yes. Most of our members now are not young and it is quite difficult to find people to do these things.

How many years have you been opening the Cottage?

Since 1965.

Miss Vivian, you have been the President of the Historical Society for a long time?

Yes, I am into my nineteenth year now. WE have had five Presidents in the period we have been going and three of them have been women. Greta Cameron was our early President and he was Treasurer for seventeen years and she was also the Cottage Manager during that period. When we opened the Gardens Cottage in 1965, we had a big procession and an opening ceremony with a lot of people.

Just while we have been sitting here, we have had one person come into the door asking for historical information and another telephone call and I think that your life is completely, a lot of it is taken up with historical matters, is that correct?

I think so, yes. It's my life's blood.

It is very nice sitting in this room that is surrounded by your memorabilia.

In the early years, we held a large dinner every year on Henty Day and had members from the Henty Family present and folk from throughout the western district. For many years, during that week, we decorated a lot of shop windows in the town. We had an historical section every year at the Portland Show and that is very well supported and attracts a lot of interest.

That has been an ongoing thing?

For many years now, yes.

And you are just asked for a particular item each year to be on display?

Well, we have twelve items each year and we change it every year. We might come back to something after a number of years, if it has been popular.

Some of the things that you have had? Scissors I remember.

Everything from under the sun, I think.

Candlesticks?

Yes, all sorts of things. Sometimes we would find something was not popular. There are not a lot of things, but something like a bedroom jug or a cup and saucer, they would bring numerous entries.

Yes it is a very interesting way to keep people interested in Portland and its history.

Going back to the beginners. Some years ago, we had a bus load of the Royal Historical Society who came us for a weekend and we had a dinner for them. They brought Professor Geoffrey Blainey with them as guest speaker and he was very popular of course.

Who are some of the other speakers that you have had at the dinner?

Loney— wrote all the books on shipwrecks. We had Mrs Millier from Lenora. We had Nancy Edgar from Nareen. Peggy Silvester from Merino. We have had quite a lot of interesting speakers over the years.

In your first Annual Report here, I see that there was quite a celebration for Henty Day. Is that day still held?

Henty Day, of course was the 19th November, the date when Edward Henty landed in Portland, but because there has been a bit of local controversy in recent years, it is now known as Pioneer Week.

Can you tell us a bit about the controversy?

Well, really all it was, was that some people think Henty was here first and some think Dutton was here first. That is really all it was. I think that honour is due to both.

Yes. They were both here for different reasons, were they not?

Yes. They both made a bit contribution. It is a shame that people have to get upset about it.

It was quite something a few years ago, it seems to have quietened down a lot now.

Yes. I have not heard anything about it for a long time now.

The Historical Society looks like going on from strength to strength.

I feel so, yes. We have got about twenty members, or a few more and although most of them are older they are very enthusiastic and quite happy with all the things we do.

Good and I am quite sure they are appreciative of all your years of service.