



Historical Society

EST 1941

April 2024 Newsletter

Welcome to our April Newsletter.



Above from left: Lyn Skillern, Bruce Procter and Elly Berryman

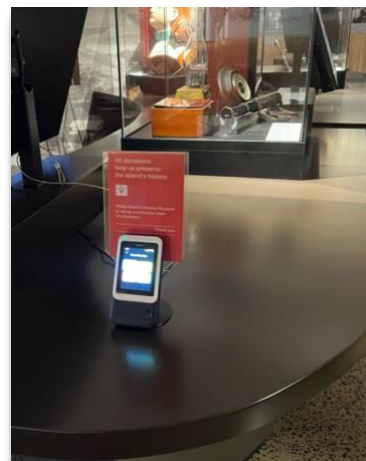
Last month saw our first Members Social Meeting for the year at the RSL which was highly attended by our membership. The feedback we have received attributes the popularity of these meetings to the informality of proceedings.

We were lucky to have Lyn Skillern OAM visit us and talk on the subject of her book *'Forgotten for too long: the Gippslanders in Lark Force 1941-42'*, which was an amazing story of the WWII Lark Force – a small ill-equipped force number about 1,300 including 79 Gippslanders, sent to Rabaul, where they faced the onslaught of a 5300 strong

Japanese force. On the day of the Japanese aerial bombardment, in January 1942, casualties were numerous, and the hugely outnumbered survivors received the chilling order: "every man for himself".

Members thoroughly enjoyed Lyn's presentation, as she introduced us to the personal stories of each of the Gippsland Lark Force members, bringing each one to life, evidencing her extensive research into the subject. If anyone is interested in purchasing a copy of Lyn's book, please just drop us an email and we shall put you in contact with her.

During the meeting, our President, Doug Waugh, summarized the exciting journey of relocating to the new research rooms. He also informed attendees that our off-site storage dilemma has been resolved, thanks to a generous benefactor who has agreed to cover the annual cost of \$6,000. Additionally, we have submitted a grant





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application to fund the necessary fittings for the research room and the installation of temporary exhibit displays in the museum. Doug concluded by announcing the installation of a new tap-and-go donation machine in the museum (pictured above), which will supersede the previous system of gold coin donations.



We're thrilled to announce our participation in this year's National Trust's Heritage Festival with a special event: a guided Heritage Walk Through Cowes. This engaging walk is scheduled for Thursday, May 9th, with two available sessions—one starting at 10:00 AM and the other at 1:30 PM. Both groups will convene at the beautiful Genesta House on Steele Street in Cowes.

Participants will be treated to either morning or afternoon tea, included in the ticket price. Tickets are \$35 for non-members and \$25 for members. Join us for a delightful exploration of Cowes' rich heritage!

Bookings to be made on <https://www.trybooking.com/CRBZT>



We are delighted to extend a warm welcome to four new members joining our Society: Greg and Carolyn O'Callaghan, Helen Smith, and Sharon Buxton. Greg, Helen, and Sharon are active members of the Rotary Club of Phillip Island and San Remo, known for their generous contributions to our local community. Carolyn is a respected artist on the island, whose work is well-known and admired. We are thrilled to have you all on board.



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This month I have included a story on Willian Watt, a young man who lived his early years in Ventnor and rose to the ranks of Premier of Victoria and Acting Prime Minister.

Enjoy.

Pamela Rothfield



MEETING NOTICE!

The next Social Meeting of the Society (formerly called a General Meeting), will be at the Phillip Island RSL on Thursday 18th July at 12 noon. Lunch can be ordered individually at the Bistro servery and the meeting will follow in the ANZAC Room.

Whilst RSVP is not essential – it would be good to have an idea of numbers who can attend. Please RSVP to Judy Gittus on: jgittus43@gmail.com or call Judy on 0417 390 885.



Membership of the Historical Society is not only vital for preserving our heritage but also plays a crucial role in securing funding through grants. A substantial membership base strengthens the Society's credibility and demonstrates widespread community support, increasing the likelihood of successful grant applications. These grants are essential for funding research projects, preservation efforts, educational programs, and the maintenance of historical sites and resources. By becoming a member, individuals not only gain access to the Society's resources and events but also contribute directly to its financial stability and ability to obtain grants, ensuring the continued preservation and promotion of our shared history for generations to come. Do you have friends or family who 'should' be members?

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South Eastern Historical Association General Meeting will be held at Wonthaggi Historical Society *at the Railway Station Museum* on Sunday 19th May. SEHA are pleased to announce Sam Gatto as the guest speaker, whose presentations are always engaging.



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William Watt – The Boy from Ventnor

By Pamela Rothfield



As the state election approaches, it's a fitting time to reflect on the legacy of William Alexander Watt, affectionately known as "Billy," whose early years on Phillip Island shaped a career that would see him ascend to the roles of Victorian Premier and acting Prime Minister of Australia. In recognition of his accomplishments, Watts Road in Ventnor bears his name.

Born in 1871 in Barfold near Kyneton, William was the youngest of eleven children. His Scottish father, James Michie Watt, was a farmer who had acquired 159 acres in Ventnor on Phillip Island's south coast in 1869. The family was still residing in Barfold when James passed away suddenly in 1872, leaving William, then only five months old. William's mother, Jane, originally from Northern Ireland, raised her eleven children alone, never remarrying.

Following James's death, Jane moved the family to Phillip Island. They initially settled in a modest wattle and daub house in Cowes, where William attended school. His education involved a daily four-mile trek to school from their later home on the family farm in Ventnor, as recounted in Joshua Glidden's book, *Phillip Island in Picture and Story*.

In his youth, William was sometimes looked after by Annabel Violet Jeury, a lifelong resident of the island, who fondly recalled stories of him in later years. The Watts left the island when William was about seven, moving briefly to the Wimmera district before settling in North Melbourne. Here, William became known as something of a larrikin and joined a local gang. He continued his education until age 14, after which he took on various jobs, including working as a newsboy and an ironmonger. Despite his busy work schedule, he attended night classes at the Working Men's College (now RMIT University), studying subjects like accounting, philosophy, and elocution. William also joined debating societies, refining his skills to become an eloquent and effective debater.

William's political career began when, at 26, he was persuaded to run for the Victorian seat of North Melbourne in 1897, which he won, making him one of the youngest ever to enter parliament. By 28, he was a Cabinet Minister. He later became Victorian Treasurer in 1909 and served as Victorian Premier from 1912 to 1914, during which he was



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instrumental in establishing state secondary education and was recognized as a progressive liberal.

In 1914, William transitioned to federal politics, winning the seat of Balaclava. He served as acting Prime Minister for sixteen months under Billy Hughes during a tumultuous period marked by personality clashes. William eventually resigned from Hughes' Government and was later appointed Speaker of the House in 1923. He was described by one commentator as 'the finest talker in the Federal Parliament distinguished by a gift of speech that is often startlingly and beautifully vocalised and demonstrates an avoidance of the humdrum.'

William revisited Phillip Island as Premier in August 1912 to inspect the *Inishowen* estate after William Harbison's death. He retired from politics in 1929 due to ill health and passed away in 1946 in Toorak, survived by his wife and five children. His life, marked by early personal challenges and later professional achievements, exemplifies the enduring impact of those formative years on Phillip Island.

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AEHS The Association of Eastern Historical Societies
presents

The Value of Local History – Into the Future
2024 Conference

Saturday 29 June 2024
9 am – 5 pm

Lilydale Lakeside Conference Centre
1 Jarlo Drive, Lilydale

Speakers include:

- Bryan Kalms – Keynote
- Richard Broome
- Anthony McAleer
- Rosalie Triolo
- Janice Newton
- John Peterson
- Graeme Davison
- Val Polley
- Patrick Ferry - NAA
- David Taylor – PROV
- Kitty Owens – Yarra Ranges Regional Museum
- Christine Barker Byrnes / Chris Byrnes - Malmesbury Historical Society
- Jackie Fraser - Victorian Collections

For more information:
associationofeasternhistorical@gmail.com

Supporters:

To book tickets:

<https://www.trybooking.com/CQJSC>
Tickets \$55 pp (lunch included)

Newsletter written and edited by Pamela Rothfield

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