



Historical Society

EST 1941

May/June 2024 Newsletter

I am writing this newsletter from afar, as I am currently on holiday in South Australia. Nevertheless, I have been kept well-informed about the happenings within our Society.

Earlier this month, the Phillip Island and District Historical Society hosted the inaugural 'Walk Around the Block' guided tour, delighting participants as part of the National Trust's Heritage Festival celebrations. The event began in glorious sunshine with a sumptuous morning tea at the charming Genesta House in Steele Street, hosted by Simonne and Marcus Liberman. As one of the few remaining historic guesthouses in the area, Genesta House (pictured below) provided a perfect start for the walk, with its beautifully appointed setting evoking a step back in time.



Above: Society member Sally Whitehead enjoying morning tea before the walk.



The tour continued along Chapel Street, down Thompson Avenue, and towards the Esplanade. Participants were treated to insightful commentary from our President, Doug Waugh, and Committee member, Elly Berryman. They learned about many historic buildings and sites, enriched by stories and recollections from individuals deeply connected to Phillip Island's past.

Elly remarked, "It was a pleasure to co-host such a fabulous morning, celebrating Cowes' heritage," emphasizing the importance of participating in events that



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honor Cowes' history. She thanked everyone who joined the tour and contributed to this memorable 'walk through time'.



During the walk, participants Keith and Rhonda Jobe shared their memories of the Continental Hotel, which was in the Jobe family for many years. Rhonda also reminisced about the dances held at the Old Post Office in the late 60s. She informed us that these vibrant events were organized by brothers Jim (aka Arb) and Bill Broadbent, both born on the Island. Rhonda mentioned that

a participant on the walk had inquired about Jim and Bill upon hearing their names, prompting her to reach out to Jim after the walk. Jim too, was flooded with memories of the former dance venue.

Jim said, "The Old Post Office brings back a lot of memories, especially with the recent deaths of Judith Durham and Olivia Newton-John, who both performed there when we ran it as a dance hall. It's amazing to think about the 'who's who' of the entertainment world that passed through those doors during the few years it was open, including Johnny Farnham, Normie Rowe, and others. Many locals might not know this piece of its history."

This information helps fill in some gaps about the Old Post Office before it became a restaurant and adds to the rich tapestry of our island's history and a big thanks to Rhonda for sharing.

The Walk Around the Block event was supported by the Bass Coast National Trust and the Bass Coast Shire Council, and concluded with all participants receiving a glossy booklet featuring the history and historic photographs of the places visited. President Doug Waugh noted that the excellent feedback from attendees bodes well for similar future events.



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Being away from the island in May meant I missed the transition from our temporary premises at the Genealogical Society's rooms to our new research rooms in Berninneit. Doug, Judy, Anne, Graeme, and Elaine have done a marvellous job moving all our records and organizing them into our new filing cabinets. I'm sure all members join me in thanking them for their hard work and dedication.

It is also wonderful to see our beautiful bookcases (left) once again full with our wonderful book collection. If any members would like to visit our rooms please do so – first floor at Berninneit. On Wednesdays you will find the hard working cataloguing team toiling away.



We are delighted to extend a warm welcome to another two new members who have joined our Society this month: Stevie and John O'Reilly. Long time residents of Newhaven, Stevie and John have a great interest in the local history and are very active members of the Rotary Club of Phillip Island and San Remo. Welcome aboard Stevie and John.

This month I have included a story I wrote for the Phillip Island Vibe last year on the Oystermen of Rhyll.

Enjoy.

Pamela Rothfield



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**MEETING
NOTICE!**

The next Social Meeting of the Society 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: j.gittus43@gmail.com or call Judy on 0417 390 885.

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Annual membership fees are due in July, and we hope all our members will renew their commitment. Your membership is the lifeblood of our Society, enabling us to preserve and celebrate our rich history. Thank you for your continued support.

**Newsletter written and edited by
Pamela Rothfield**

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PHILLIP ISLAND AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Oystermen of Rhyll By Pamela Rothfield

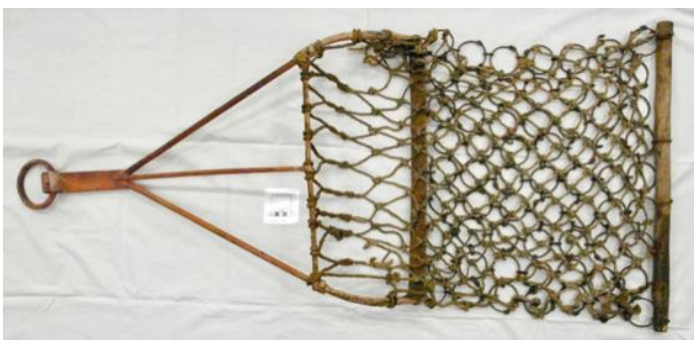
Transport yourself to the year 1858 and envision the sun's gentle ascent over the serene waters of Rhyll. A multitude of small boats silently toil, reaping the abundant oyster beds concealed just beneath the water's surface. These are the diligent oystermen, over a hundred in number, who would become the cornerstone of the soon-to-be village known as Rhyll. Their ceaseless efforts sustain them by capitalizing on the tranquillity of these waters.

The inception of Rhyll's oyster industry can be traced back to the early 1850s, when European settlers began to explore the fertile waters Western Port. Among them was John McHaffie, an astute businessman with intimate knowledge of Phillip Island and its shoreline, thanks to his pastoral license secured from the Government in 1842. McHaffie, a shareholder in the St. Kilda Oyster Company, recognised the potential riches hidden within the calm and sheltered waters on the island's eastern side. This marked the genesis of oyster dredging operations in Western Port during the early 1850s. The oysters harvested were destined for Victoria's larger townships and often found their way to the bustling Victorian goldfields.

Initially a modest undertaking, oyster harvesting soon gained momentum due to surging demand. The allure of gold drew hordes of people to Melbourne, propelling the expansion of the oyster industry in Rhyll and across Western Port.

By the late 1850s, Rhyll had emerged as a prominent hub for oyster harvesting within Western Port. The vicinity teemed with around 100 oystermen and 25 to 30 vessels engaged in a substantial oystering enterprise. Reports indicated that the man-made oyster beds stretched almost from one shore of Western Port to the other. These oysters were meticulously gathered and prepared for transport to Melbourne and Geelong, where they graced the tables of restaurants and seafood markets.

The oyster extraction process in Rhyll involved the use of a contraption called a "dredger." This tool, a triangular arrangement of iron bars about a metre long, sported a ring at its upper end for attachment to a rope. The bottom bar, wide and hoe-shaped, scraped the seabed. Numerous iron rings dangled from this bar, holding a net to collect oysters and other marine treasures. As oystering vessels cruised along, these dredgers were cast overboard, trailing behind and scouring the seafloor. A skilled oysterman on deck managed the operation, intermittently hoisting up the laden dredge, emptying its contents, resetting it, and sorting the oysters, discarding



An Oyster Dredger used by the Richardson family.

debris.

For a decade, the burgeoning oyster industry in Rhyll thrived. However, the early 1860s ushered in challenges that would severely impact its fortunes. Oyster drills, voracious borers armed with hard radular (or teeth), infiltrated oysters, inflicting fatal damage. These drills bored into the oyster's shell, released digestive enzymes, and ultimately killed the oyster.

Simultaneously, a devastating disease named QX, caused by the parasite *Marteilia sydneyi*, decimated oyster populations across Australia, including Rhyll. The affliction took a substantial toll on oysters and hindered the industry's recovery. These twin scourges decimated Rhyll's oyster industry for decades, prompting operators to dismiss their staff, liquidate their vessels, and abandon the once thriving oyster haven.

In July 1862, Dr. Louis L Smith, M.L.A, penned a report for The Illustrated Melbourne Post, documenting his visit to the deserted oystering settlement in Rhyll. He described well-constructed cottages, some with intact doors and windows, surrounded by neat gardens boasting peach and apple trees. These cottages, once home to oyster fishermen, reflected the decline of the oyster fisheries.

While oystering persisted in other Western Port locales, concerns over the depletion of Sydney oyster beds prompted governmental action. In 1884, prohibitions on dredging in Western Port were enacted to counter overfishing. These restrictions constrained the areas eligible for dredging licenses. Eleven years later, in 1895, the ban on oyster dredging in Western Port was lifted, reviving the industry.

By 1910, Rhyll's oyster beds experienced a revival, yielding a remarkable harvest of five million oysters in 1914 alone. Excessive dredging, however, depleted supplies, dwindling to 120,000 by 1924. Oystering persisted in Rhyll through the 1930s, with local men engaging in a profitable part-time endeavour. Licensing requirements and bag limits of seven bags (each containing about 300 oysters) per man per week, curbed the activity. Nevertheless, this limit still allowed the sale of each bag for a tidy sum of between 30 to 40 shillings each. Rhyll's oystering tradition endured until the 1960s, carried on by figures like Jim Osterlund, Frank Jansson, and Ken Wood.

As the sun sinks and darkens Rhyll's tranquil waters, one can almost hear the echoes of past oystermen resonating in the gentle cadence of the tides.



Ozzie Underdown's oyster boat operating from Rhyll.