

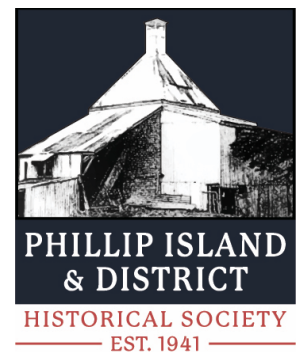
Phillip Island District Historical Society Inc.

Office: 0466 049 755

www.phillipislandhistory.org.au

President: Doug Waugh

Secretary: Pamela Rothfield



February 2025 Newsletter



Welcome to the February Newsletter. Here we are—well into February (perhaps a little later than desired), and what a fabulous start to the new year it has been! January kicked off with a bang as we hosted the **Gathering of Neighbours** event on Australia Day at Rhyll Park (left), attracting over 1,000 attendees. Sponsored by the National Australia Day Council and supported by the Rotary Club of Phillip Island & San Remo, it was a celebration to remember. See the article in the Phillip Island & San Remo Advertiser later in this newsletter

As January came to a close and we slowly settled back into the busy buzz of activity at Berninnet, we learned that our research rooms on the first floor would be unavailable for much of February due to air testing, which required cutting into the ceiling. While this temporary

setback meant our cataloguers had to relocate to a private home to continue their important work, it certainly didn't slow our momentum.

In February, we kept the energy going with a special historical walk through the Phillip Island Cemetery for the **Rotary Club of Phillip Island and San Remo**, as a token of our appreciation for their ongoing support of both the cemetery and the Historical Society. This led to two more requests for similar tours, which we are excited to consider. What a fantastic way to start the year!

But that's not all—we're gearing up for even more exciting things. From **April 18th to May 18th**, we'll be installing a new exhibition as part of the **National Trust's Heritage Festival**. Titled *'Unearthed'*, it will showcase some fascinating discoveries—you might be surprised by what we've unearthed for this exhibition! And soon after, we'll be unveiling another new installation focusing on the history of the **Warley Hospital**, timed to coincide with the opening of the Island's new urgent care hospital.

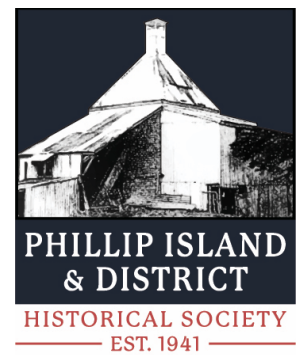
The **Historical Society's first Meeting of Members for 2025** will take place on **Thursday, 20th March** at the **Phillip Island RSL**, starting at **12:30 pm** (please note the change of time!). Come along and enjoy a bite to eat and catch up with fellow members in the Bistro before we head into the **ANZAC Room** for the meeting. After a quick update from President **Doug Waugh** on the latest happenings, we'll dive into a fun **Show and Tell** session. Do you have an odd or mysterious item tucked away? Bring it along and see if you can stump the group—**prizes** await for the best (or most confusing) items!

A big welcome to our newest member Kate Cleeland, who recently rejoined the Society. Great to have you back Kate!

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I have included a story this month about the sinking of the Eagle star in 1978 - which is an event many of our members will recall.

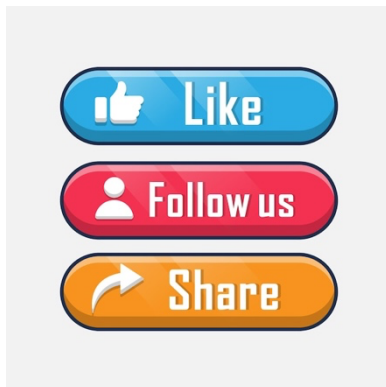
Don't forget to RSVP to Judy Gittus (j.gittus43@gmail.com) or phone: 0417 390 885 for your attendance at the RSL our **Meeting of Members on March 20th.**

Enjoy

Pamela Rothfield

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Don't forget to Like, Follow and Share:



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www.phillipislandhistory.org.au

[https://www.youtube.com/@PhillipIslandHistoricalSociety.](https://www.youtube.com/@PhillipIslandHistoricalSociety)

Membership Matters



Do you know someone who would like to become part of our Society? Every membership strengthens our ability to preserve the essence of Phillip Island. Let's make sure the voices of our past are never lost — encourage others to join us today!

Happy Australians Day! Reflect. Respect. Celebrate.



From left, Daryl, Malcolm, Bonnie and Donald give Estelle a look at the renovated Woodleigh Hall. Estelle was the star of the show at the Australia Day event.

Estelle steals the show at Woodleigh

AUSTRALIA DAY

Is Woodleigh the smallest town to host Australia Day celebrations?

With just a Public Hall and a couple of houses, the little hamlet hosted 100 people for an Australia Day breakfast and associated activities.

Stud Jersey cow Estelle stole the show. She was patted, photographed and hand milked ... "until the cows came home".

Many in the rural commu-

nity, and visitors, had never had the challenge of squeezing milk from a cow's udder.

Long time residents Will Hunter and Blanche Chambers had the crowd enthralled, and they revelled in the opportunity to relate stories of growing up on a dairy farm.

Other activities included gumboot throwing, archery, and hayrides behind farmer Ron's vintage Grey Fergy tractor.

The event was organised by the Woodleigh Hall committee.

New citizens welcomed

At a special ceremony on Australia Day in Wonthaggi, 24 new citizens were welcomed to Australia.

The new Australians came from Nepal, United Kingdom, Italy, Philippines, New Zealand, Myanmar, Republic of Ireland, Mauritius and India.

Bass Coast Mayor Cr Rochelle Halstead officiated at

the ceremony, with Deputy Mayor Cr Brett Tessari presenting certificates and hampers to each new citizen.

Melina Bath MP also attended and addressed the new citizens and their friends and family.

The next Citizenship Ceremony will be on May 22 at 3.30pm at the Wonthaggi Workmen's Club.



Jim and Sandy Innes from Rhyll in front of their beloved classic car, part of the display by the Classic Car Club at the event.



The Gathering of Neighbours event in Rhyll was a resounding success, with over 1000 attending on Australia Day.



Bob Pascoe from Rhyll getting into the spirit of the day. More photos at pisra.com.au

Neighbours gather to celebrate

AUSTRALIA DAY

The Gathering of Neighbours event at Rhyll on January 26 was a resounding success, with over 1000 people enjoying an afternoon filled with music, laughter, and community spirit.

Families, friends, and visitors gathered at Rhyll Park to soak up the sunshine and celebrate the wonderful place they call home.

The event was proudly hosted by the Phillip Island and District Historical Society in partnership with the Rotary Club of Phillip Island and San Remo. Together, they created an inviting atmosphere that encouraged locals and visitors alike to relax, connect, and appreciate the rich heritage of the island.

The Rotary Club's complimentary sausage sizzle proved so popular that extra supplies had to be purchased after selling out within the first two hours.

The unmistakable aroma of sizzling sausages and onions filled the air, drawing in hungry crowds eager to enjoy the classic

Aussie treat.

Entertainment was in no short supply, with two live bands keeping the music flowing throughout the afternoon. Many locals simply relaxed in the sunshine, enjoying the tunes and the stunning surroundings of the Rhyll Park.

Meanwhile, children were captivated by a towering stilt-walker who dazzled both young and old with his impressive skills. Jules, the face painter extraordinaire, was also a major hit, with a steady line of eager children waiting to be transformed into their favourite characters.

The event wasn't just about music and entertainment.

Classic car enthusiasts from the Classic Car Club proudly showcased their prized vehicles, drawing plenty of admiration from attendees. Adults found their own oasis at 'Bill's Bar', which proved to be a popular spot for catching up with friends and neighbours while enjoying a refreshing drink.

Gea Lovell, President of the Rotary Club of Phillip Island and

San Remo, reflected on the success of the day.

"This is an event where locals and visitors can come and relax, enjoying the magnificent place we call home. It's everything we hoped for and more."

The Gathering of Neighbours event was supported by a grant from the National Australia Day Council, whose generous assistance helped bring the community together for this much-loved day of connection and celebration.

The Phillip Island and District Historical Society, deeply committed to preserving and sharing the island's history, was thrilled to see such a positive and respectful response from the community.

Secretary Pamela Rothfield shared her thoughts.

"We are so delighted that this event has clearly cemented itself as a cherished tradition, bringing together the community to respectfully reflect on our shared past and celebrate what makes Rhyll and Phillip Island so special."

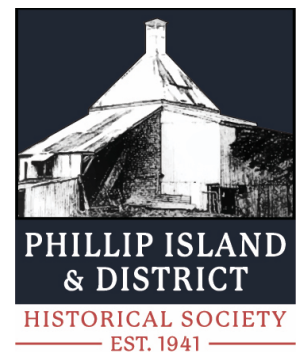
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The Sinking of the Eagle Star

By Pamela Rothfield



Older residents of Phillip Island may remember the hulk of the *Eagle Star*, which sat in the waters off Rhyll for many years. This is the story of what happened to that ferry and how the events of December 30 1978 unfolded resulting in a near disaster.

The *Eagle Star*, formerly a Sydney Harbour ferry, was a 50 tonne passenger ferry which had commenced service from Stony Point via

Tankerton (French Island) to Cowes in 1949 with a capacity to carry 270 passengers.

It was operated by Harry Crole and his son Mervyn, as a passenger ferry until early in 1978, when it was purchased by the newly formed French Island Co-operative.

The French Island Co-op had owned the ferry not twelve months, when in the last days of 1978, the *Eagle Star* set off from Stony Point for Phillip Island, carrying over 190 passengers. It arrived at Tankerton and dropped off 65 passengers there. Leaving French Island on what was expected to be a routine trip, the first sign of trouble was the public address system failing. Captain Brian Peters, a 30-year-old from French Island, went to investigate the problem and found a metre of water flooding the generator room, jeopardizing the engines. He started the pumps and notified Harbour Control of the problems, assuming the pumps would contain the issue.

Twenty-four-year-old Joe Ferris and his wife, were among the passengers enjoying the journey, eagerly looking forward to New Year's Eve celebrations on Phillip Island, and blissfully unaware of the drama unfolding below deck.

Determined to keep the vessel going, Captain Peters, who had only been the ferry captain for one week, stripped to his underwear to work in the flooded engine room, frantically trying to

keep the pumps running and the vessel afloat. Despite his heroic efforts, the water continued to surge in, until finally the engines cut out —signalling a worsening of the situation.

The ferry continued drifting until it collided with the Cowes jetty. The impact sent it bouncing back, but with the tide going out and the engines dead, the vessel began drifting out into the depths of Westernport once more, pulled by the outgoing tide.

As the *Eagle Star* approached Cowes, it was evident that something was wrong. The Cowes Yacht Club, observing the ferry's unusual angle and speed toward the pier, acted swiftly. The yacht club's sailing master, Ian Samuel, noted the vessel's low position in the water and raised the alarm. Seconds later, he witnessed the ferry ramming the Cowes jetty, which left it dead in the water and listing heavily.



Passengers, including Joe, began to realize the peril they were in. Ferris recalls the chaos and fear, particularly when he went below deck to find his wife, only to see water surging through the doorway, blocking their escape. With quick thinking, he smashed a window, allowing his wife and others to climb to safety. As they scrambled for life vests, which had been stowed 'a bit too securely', a community of onlookers and nearby boats began to gather, alerted by the ferry's distress call and

the sight of it sinking lower into the water.

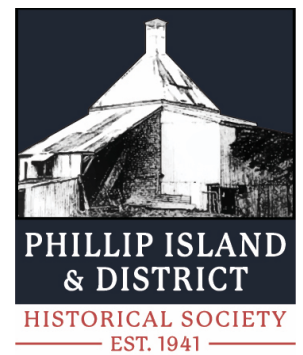
The Cowes Yacht Club's patrol boat, skippered by Howard Smithson immediately set out to assist. Smithson's team managed to secure a tow line, and despite the increasing weight of water pulling the ferry down, they were able to pull it closer to the beach. By this time, passengers clung desperately to the railings or jumped overboard in a bid for safety. Other boats, paddleboarders, and swimmers joined the rescue, creating a chaotic scene with luggage, life rafts, and people scattered across the water.

In one heart-stopping moment, a man in the water handed a baby up to rescuers, while other vessels struggled to navigate the crowded waters safely. The Cowes Yacht Club patrol boat took on as many people as it could, though it nearly capsized under the strain. Despite the

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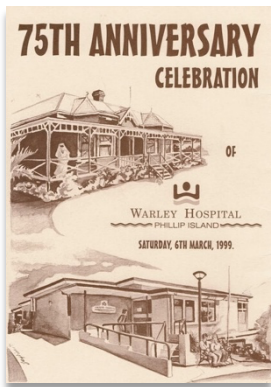


confusion and the jostling for safety, no lives were lost—a testament to the courage of the rescuers and the cooperation of the passengers in a tense, life-or-death situation.

As the incident unfolded, local doctors and nurses vacationing on the island hurried to Warley Hospital, preparing for potential casualties. In the end, it was a miraculous outcome: ten people were treated at the hospital for minor injuries and shock, yet no one was seriously harmed.

Following the rescue, the *Eagle Star* was ultimately deemed unseaworthy and towed to Rhyll, where its hulk stood as a stark reminder of the near disaster that Christmas. It was sold to a private owner and transported to northern NSW. In 2014, the vessel was destroyed by fire, concluding the final chapter for the *Eagle Star*. Today, the Phillip Island & District Historical Society preserves the story, recently enriched by Joe Ferris's recollections, reflecting both the courage of the crew and the swift and courageous response of the Phillip Island community.

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Call for Artefacts and Memorabilia: Help Us Tell the Story of Warley Hospital

We are excited to be preparing an exhibition on the history of **Warley Hospital**, and we're reaching out to our members for any **artefacts, photographs, stories, or memorabilia** related to the hospital's history. Whether it's an old photo, a personal story, or an item that holds significance, we would love to include it in our exhibition.

If you have something to contribute, please get in touch with us! Your memories and items will help bring this important part of our local history to life.

Newsletter written and edited by Pamela Rothfield
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