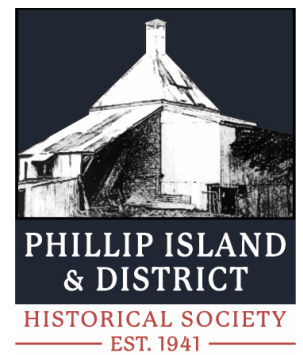


Phillip Island District Historical Society Inc.

Office: 0466 049 755  
www.phillipislandhistory.org.au

President: Doug Waugh  
Secretary: Pamela Rothfield



## Welcome to our December Newsletter



And just like that, we find ourselves standing at that familiar edge of the calendar again, peering into the final weeks of another very full year.

Since our last newsletter, we've packed in quite a bit. Our end-of-year luncheon and meeting has come and gone, the museum has welcomed four busy days of Cowes Primary School visits, a local history walk through the Phillip Island Cemetery was enjoyed by members of the Phillip Island Probus Club, and - behind the scenes - the

steady work has continued. Questions have been answered, stories researched, cataloguing rolled on and history-related essays - including one in this edition - have been written and share with various publications, as they always are.

In this edition we're delighted to welcome eight new members (a couple of them a little belatedly - our apologies!). It's wonderful to see new faces joining our community of history lovers.

Looking ahead, the New Year will see us once again hosting the Gathering of Neighbours on Australia Day in Rhyll, along with continuing what we do best - working with our community to uncover, preserve and share Phillip Island's stories. More information about Gathering of Neighbours follows on the next page.

As mentioned in our previous newsletter, autumn will also see us take part in the National Trust's Heritage Festival from 18 April to 18 May. This year's theme is Change, and our exhibition will explore how the island has evolved over time, pairing historic photographs with their modern-day counterparts - a thoughtful look at what has changed, and what has endured.

And while our magnificent avenue of golden cypress didn't quite take out the National Trust's Tree of the Year award, in our eyes it remains firmly in a league of its own.

Enjoy the read and thank you for being part of our year.

Best wishes for safe and peaceful holiday period and New Year

Pam Rothfield

Secretary

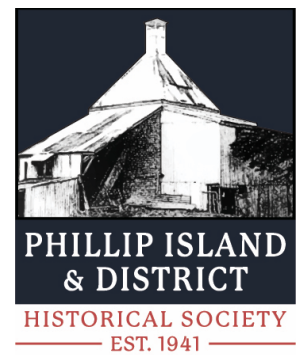
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The Historical Society is eagerly looking forward to the return of our fourth annual Gathering of Neighbours event to be held on Monday 26 January at Rhyll Hall and Park. The festivities will begin around 11am, bringing our community together for a day of reflection, respect, and celebration this Australia Day.

This much-loved family event offers something for everyone - live music, plenty of fun activities for the children, food vans, and a complimentary sausage sizzle. For the adults, the Society will be running a bar with a selection of local wines and beers to enjoy while soaking up the atmosphere.

Rhyll Park will once again come alive with the warmth of friendship and community spirit. We hope you'll join us for this perfect blend of fun and reflection - a day to celebrate our shared home and the people who make it special.



### Membership Matters

Do you know someone who shares a love of Phillip Island's history? Every new member helps us protect, share, and celebrate the stories that make our community unique. **Invite a friend to join the Society** - together, we can ensure our island's past is preserved for generations to come.

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

We are delighted to welcome several new members to the Society: Nancy Cosentino, Geoffrey de Jonge, Elizabeth and Noel Fenton, Sharon Davie, Howard Dixon and Richard Casbolt.

A special (and slightly belated) welcome to Sharon, Howard and Richard, who joined us back in August - apologies for our oversight. We're very pleased to have you all as part of our community and look forward to sharing many more stories together.



Cowes Primary students from Years 3 and 4, left no stone unturned as they delved into the island's colourful past at the Phillip Island History Museum at Berninnet. More photos at [pisra.com.au/education](http://pisra.com.au/education)

## Detectives dig up our history

**COMMUNITY**  
By Jason Cameron

Phillip Island's recent history has been subjected to intensive scrutiny by 175 freshly minted history detectives.

No questions were off limits as Cowes Primary students from Years 3 and 4, left no stone unturned as they delved into the island's colourful past at the Phillip Island History Museum at Berninnet.

Archaeologist and former teacher and university tutor John Buttrose from the Phillip Island and District Historical Society challenged the young minds by posing the deceptively simple question, What is history? John said that the key to discovery was to ask lots of questions. He soon found himself on the receiving end of a very spirited discussion.

But so much for theory, these junior detectives were keen. It was time to start interrogating the exhibits in the museum and what better way than a scavenger hunt.

Armed with questionnaires and clipboards, they swarmed around the many historical themes on display in search of answers to multiple choice questions.

The History Museum's resident taxidermy mount Edward the koala was subjected to rigorous questioning. Was he a bear? A marsupial? And even though he came and went from his tree at a popular

guesthouse many decades ago, was he free?

Many a jaw dropped in amazement upon learning that the majestic figurehead, salvaged from the 1906 shipwreck of The Speke, was restored by their predecessors at Cowes Primary, a mere 85 years ago.

A 1940 class photo from Ventnor Primary proved popular with several students proudly identifying grandparents, aunts or uncles.

Solving the mystery of how a baby came to be named after Phillip Island's first hospital Warley, took a while, given the size of the current exhibition and many a young head was scratched trying to work out whether Chicory Devils were a football team, a pop group or a special shovel.

Farewelling the students, Historical Society volunteers Marian Wallace, Doug Waugh, Elaine Alexander, Judy Gittus and Jason Cameron suggested they could put their new detective skills to work immediately, by investigating their own family history, asking parents and grandparents about how the world has changed since they were young.

The Phillip Island History Museum visit was conducted over four days in conjunction with Cowes Primary School Year 3 and 4 classroom studies of local history.

Article (left) in the *Phillip Island and San Remo Advertiser*, 26 Nov 2025

Images (below) of the Cowes Primary School excursion to the museum - courtesy of Jason Cameron



## Christmas in Rhyll, A Hundred Years Ago

By Pamela Rothfield

A hundred years ago, Christmas in Rhyll was a quieter, simpler affair - without the bustle of holiday traffic, music playing from every shopfront, or the endless swirl of invitations and events. In the 1920s, Rhyll was



Above: Traditional Christmas tree c. 1900. Walter Hodgkinson, courtesy State Library Victoria

little more than a scattering of houses around the foreshore, a couple of shops, a jetty, and wide stretches of bush and farmland. Yet for all its simplicity, Christmas was a time of anticipation, preparation, and community spirit.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, families would begin gathering what they needed - much of it made by hand or sourced locally. Children kept watch for the first cherries from the mainland orchards arriving by boat, a sure sign that the festive season was near. Mothers baked early in the morning before the summer heat set in, filling their kitchens with the smells of fruitcake, boiled puddings, and jars of preserved berries. Eggs were carefully saved up, cream skimmed from the top of the milk, and butter patted and wrapped, all ready for the Christmas table.

One of the most eagerly awaited events of the season took place at the Rhyll Hall, where the school community gathered to mark the end of the year. Each December, Percy McFee would provide a large Christmas tree - freshly cut, fragrant and proudly standing almost as tall as the hall itself. The children decorated it with handmade paper chains, saved

scraps of ribbon, and whatever cheerful touches they could create. In the weeks beforehand, the School Committee would make a special trip to Wonthaggi to purchase gifts for every child in Rhyll - only two dozen or so, but enough to fill the hall with a sense of magic. The distribution of these gifts, presented with great ceremony, was the highlight of the annual school concert. Proud parents, shy performers and much giggling filled the hall as the children sang, recited poems and performed their carefully rehearsed pieces before finally claiming their treasured Christmas parcel from beneath the glittering tree.

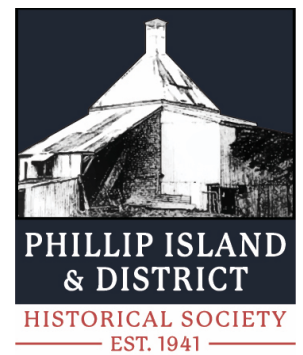
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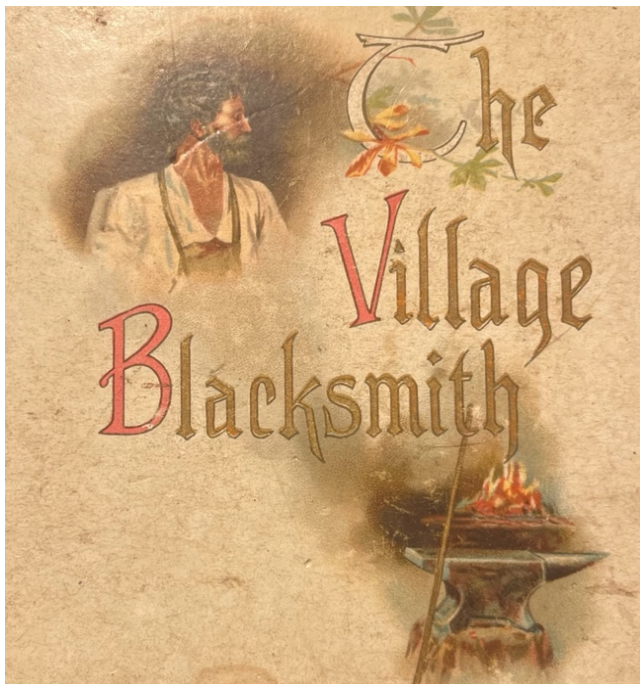
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The Rhyll store, run by local man Stan Walton, stocked small treasures for the season: tins of boiled lollies, packets of coloured streamers, a handful of toys, and perhaps a new enamel jug or a bolt of fabric. Most gifts were simple and practical - new socks, a hand-sewn shirt, a wooden toy, some made by father in the shed, or a carefully chosen book that might be shared by the whole family.

Christmas Eve was a day of last-minute chores. Animals had to be fed and tended, gardens watered, and fishing nets mended. There was no escaping daily work, even at Christmas. But as evening settled over the inlet, families stepped out onto their verandahs to feel the cool breeze off the water. The village felt close-knit, even without a single streetlight.



A book given to a young Eva McFee from her grandmama in 1890

On Christmas morning, the sounds of excited children carried across the quiet settlement. Families gathered for a modest but heartfelt breakfast - freshly laid eggs, bread baked the day before and maybe sausages or slices of cold roast kept aside specially for the day. After church services in Cowes or sometimes the Rhyll Hall, Christmas dinner was the centrepiece. The wood-fired oven was cranked up in the kitchen for the roasts (sometimes turkey, sometimes chicken) and the Christmas pudding was on the boil - for hours - and would later contain a number of threepence pieces, buried under lashings of custard and cream. Bowls of summer fruit, jugs of homemade cordial, and

freshly churned butter turned the day into a feast, even without all the luxuries we now take for granted. In the afternoon, families often walked down to the foreshore. The children paddled in the muddy shallows or hunted for shells, while the adults sat under the shade of the old cypress and ti-trees, grateful for the sea breeze. Some years, neighbours gathered for a cricket match or a friendly game of rounders on a cleared patch of grass, ending with laughter, sunburnt noses, and even shared leftovers.

Without televisions, phones, or the rush of modern life, Christmas in Rhyll a century ago unfolded at a gentle pace. It was shaped by the land, the tides, and the closeness of a small community where everyone knew one another. It wasn't fancy, but it was full of meaning - woven from simple pleasures, shared effort, and the knowledge that, on this day at least, work could pause and families could come together.

Perhaps, in the midst of our modern celebrations, there's something lovely in remembering that quieter kind of Christmas - one shaped by connection, care, and love of our own little village by the sea.

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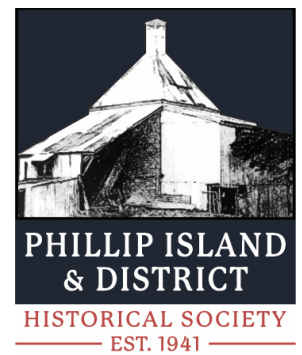
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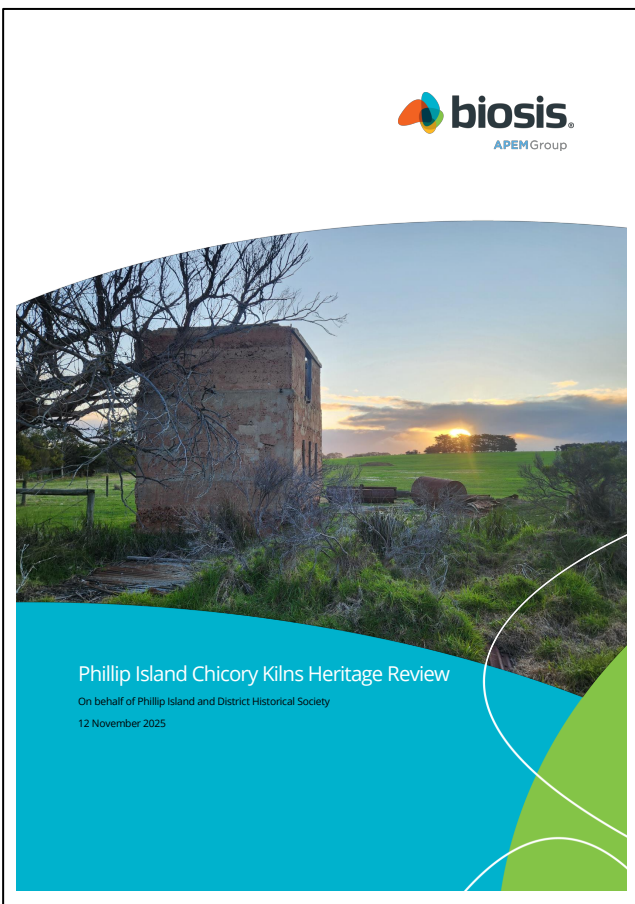
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## Summary End-of-Year Lunch



The Society's end-of-year lunch at the Phillip Island RSL on November 27, provided a relaxed and friendly setting, with members arriving in good spirits and enjoying the chance to catch up. President Doug welcomed everyone and spent some time meeting our guest speaker for the afternoon, Gary Vines from Biosis, who attended with his wife, Helen. Gary immediately impressed as both knowledgeable and passionate about his work on the Chicory Kiln project.

Once everyone was seated, Doug formally welcomed members and introduced Gary, noting that we were looking forward to his after-lunch talk on the Chicory Kilns project. Before the presentation began, Elaine Alexander was presented with a bottle of Baileys in recognition of the wonderful work she does for the Society - a gesture that came as a complete surprise and was met with warm applause.

Following lunch, Doug introduced Gary's talk with a light-hearted comparison: Ballarat and Bendigo may have had gold, but Phillip Island's own "gold" was chicory.

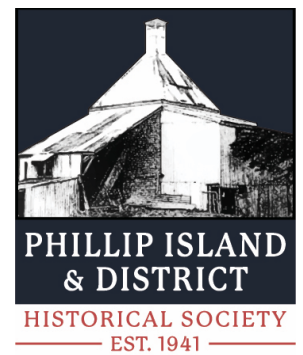
Gary's presentation closely followed the Chicory Heritage Review he recently completed for the Society. He outlined the background and the methodology used to assess each individual kiln, and how this information fed into the overall condition report. The presentation included images showing all kilns assessed in the study, including individual reports on each of the kilns.

The talk prompted thoughtful questions and commentary from members throughout. Gary concluded by outlining both general and site-specific recommendations, acknowledging that while these were necessary and valid, they represented a significant ongoing commitment. He finished by noting that, in effect, the ball was now in our court.

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Doug thanked Gary on behalf of the Society and presented him with a bottle of red wine. In doing so, he reflected on how far the Society has come since its formation in 1942 - from simply collecting and storing items in a museum to commissioning major heritage studies of this significance.

After the formalities, Doug circulated among the tables and found that Gary's presentation had been very well received. There was strong agreement that the chicory kilns are truly iconic, and Gary left two hard copies of the Review with the Society. All members will be provided with a soft copy for which we would encourage any feedback or information they deem appropriate. Doug also had a conversation with a member - let's just call him 'Steve', who expressed a strong interest in becoming involved with the Phillip Island & District Historical Society committee - something that we shall certainly explore further!

As a history event, the afternoon was clearly a success, particularly given that the project was undertaken on behalf of the Phillip Island & District Historical Society - something Doug noted was unprecedented in his time with the Society.

o000o

### Cemetery Tour for Probus



The Historical Society recently enjoyed guiding around 35 members of the Phillip Island Probus Club on a morning walk through the cemetery, which began rather civilly with a glass of bubbly. From there, stories were shared about a number of local identities - people whose lives helped shape our island in ways both familiar and surprising. It was a relaxed and engaging outing, with plenty of interest, conversation and the odd "I didn't know that!" moment, and we were delighted to share these stories with such an enthusiastic group.

**Newsletter written and edited by Pamela Rothfield**

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[www.phillipislandhistory.org.au](http://www.phillipislandhistory.org.au)

[hello@phillipislandhistory.org.au](mailto:hello@phillipislandhistory.org.au)

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