

Illawarra Historical Society - The First Fifty Years

1944 - 1994

{Text of a talk delivered by Society Vice-President, F.W. Osborne, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Illawarra Historical Society}

As you are all aware, the inaugural meeting of the Illawarra Historical Society took place on 5th December 1944. Held in the Wollongong Council Chambers, the meeting was opened by the Mayor, Ald J J Kelly, who requested Inspector J N Harrison to preside. The meeting was then addressed by the General Secretary of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Mr C Price Conigrave, who outlined the aims of the RAHS. Following discussion, two resolutions were carried, the first being "that the Illawarra Historical Society be formed and affiliated with the RAHS", thus beginning an association with the parent body which remained very close indeed throughout those early years.

The second resolution was to appoint a provisional committee of seven (to which Alexander Fleming was "shanghaied" as secretary) to draft a constitution. This was duly presented and approved at the first General Meeting in February 1945. Doubtless this constitution owed much to the experience of the RAHS, just as the IHS constitution was used as a guide for Shoalhaven and Kiama Societies in 1955 and 1974 respectively.

Immediately following the adoption of the constitution, the first Council of the IHS was elected:-

Patron	Dr H C Maldon	
President	Mr J W Harrison	*
Vice Pres	Mr A G Higgins	*
" "	Mr A R Jones	*
Hon Sec	Mr A P Fleming	*
Hon Treasurer	Mr C Law	
Hon Research Sec	Mr R I Taylor	*
Councillors	Capt W B Nicholson	*
	Mr L A Maguire	*
	Mr W Simpson	
	Mr J S G Worland	

* members of Provisional Committee

Having been transferred from the district, Mr Harrison resigned his office in March 1946, to be replaced by Mr Worland who continued as President for 12 years. He was succeeded by Edgar Beale in February 1958.

The first Ordinary Meeting of the IHS, held in the Council Chambers, was subject to a rental of ten shillings. At its next meeting the IHS Council asked the City Council to refund the ten shillings and set about finding an alternative venue. This they did at the Industrial Management Rooms in Central Chambers, Crown Street, which was only seven shillings and sixpence. Meanwhile the Council was able to meet in the Illawarra Mutual Building Society's rooms at no cost.

The Industrial Management Room may have proved too small as attendances increased, for after an attendance of 75 at the August '45 meeting they moved to Brandon House where the rent was £1/10/- including hire of crockery. Presumably the crockery was an added attraction as the same meeting decided to provide supper for sixpence. At ordinary meetings in 1945 the average attendance was 49. In 1946 this rose to 69, obviously justifying the move. One cannot help wondering how much of this increase was due to the supper.

However, Brandon House proved too noisy, especially after a taxi rank was established right in front of it, so by the second Annual Meeting they had moved right out of Crown St to the Lady Wakehurst Girls Club at 65 Smith St, which by 1951 had become known as the YWCA Hall.

When the writer joined the Society in 1971 meetings were held in the Town Hall Meeting Room, where they had been since 1965, but the YWCA ladies were still providing the supper.

In 1989 when the City Council transferred its offices to the new building in Burelli St, a fivefold increase in rent quickly persuaded us to move. After one unfortunate meeting at Wollongong Primary School we settled for the Italian Social Welfare Centre where we continue to meet.

The aforementioned attendance of 75 was the occasion of an address by the Hon T D Mutch, FRAHS, Vice-President RAHS, MLA and Minister for Education, on the topic "Hamilton Hume's Award Grant". At this meeting were members of "the newly-formed Wollongong High School Historical Society", a Junior Society affiliated with the IHS. The Wollongong Home Science School also had a Junior Historical Society, both of these no doubt reflecting the involvement of their teachers in the IHS.

The following month, James Jervis FRAHS attracted 60 for his talk "A Century of Illawarra History". Published in the RAHS Journal, this became a basic reference for local historians.

In August '46 T D Mutch spoke again on "Some Tales of First Settlers" before an audience of 100. The peak of 110 was reached two months later for Dr Harold Norrie, Councillor and Past-President of the RAHS who spoke on "Romance of Wollongong", a history to 1834. In May '48 the President of the RAHS, Dr George Mackaness, OBE, MA, FRAHS, drew 81 for his talk on "The Canadian Exiles of 1839 who were transported to Australia".

Not only did the RAHS provide roughly half of the speakers in those early years (Price Conigrave spoke every March) but the two Societies also co-operated very closely with excursions.

The first IHS excursion was to Stanwell Park to the Hargrave Memorial, where 31 members and friends were welcomed by Mr Ryan, President of the Bulli Shire when the memorial was erected. The IHS President, Gordon Worland, then delivered an address on the work of Hargrave. This was in December 1945. This was followed in April 1946 by an excursion to Berrima, attended by 46 people.

By 1952 they had become so adept at arranging excursions they embarked on the first of their three-day Annual Tours, a 721-mile trip to the Snowy Mountains. This had been inspired by an address given by Colonel Ramsay, Liaison Officer for the Snowy Mountains Authority, in June of that year.

While Alex Fleming was secretary all excursions were described in the minute book, as were reports of ordinary meetings with summaries of the speakers' addresses. Early Bulletins (first printed in July '45) contained these excursion reports and copious transcripts or summaries of these talks. Covering a wide range of topics, they provided very useful historical material which still makes great reading to-day.

Now back to the RAHS. In April '47 local members joined an RAHS excursion which brought 182 people by special train from Sydney to Wollongong, whence five buses took them up "Balgownie Pass" to Mt Keira, Port Kembla, Windang (lunch), Shellharbour, Albion Park, Wollongong (afternoon tea at the station), then home.

In May 1948 the IHS visited the RAHS at History House, from which they were taken by James Jervis for a walk to historic points in the area, accompanied by Dr & Mrs Mackaness and Price Conigrave. Back at History House, C H Bertie followed up with a lantern lecture "Stories of Old Sydney". For this excursion the IHS had planned to travel by bus but were forced to travel by train as petrol for buses was refused. In these early post-war years they had to contend with power restrictions - one meeting had to be cancelled - and other shortages. Obtaining a screen for lantern lectures was a protracted process as nobody had either cloth or coupons to spare. Eventually Australian Iron and Steel made one for them. In March '49 the RAHS was back on the coast with 160 from RAHS and 30 from IHS for an excursion to

Dapto and Albion Park, a much more achievable itinerary this time.

Just as suppers became part of meetings, so also did Christmas parties, the first of which was held in December '47 at 65 Smith St with 67 members/friends being entertained by a musical programme. Alex Fleming concludes his report: "The gathering broke up at 11.30 pm." No 10 pm curfew in those days!

For many years Council meetings were held in Dr Maldon's rooms at his dental surgery. About once each year they were invited by Mrs Maldon to meet at the Maldon home, situated in New My Pleasant Rd under the big figtree near the overbridge.

While all this was going on, members were quietly gathering documents and photographs which were eventually entrusted to the City Library, to the staff of which (beginning with Margaret McDonald) the IHS is very grateful for taking such good care. Other items suitable for housing in a museum were stored in any available space, mostly in members' homes and garages. From time to time these were taken out and dusted off for an exhibition. Possibly the first of these was held over three days 5-7 April 1956 under the directorship of Edgar Beale with Alex Fleming as publicity officer.

Of course exhibitions just highlighted the need for a museum. In 1957 an unsuccessful approach was made to the Minister for the Army to secure the (then) Drill Hall, now known as the old Court House. In March '65 the IHS Council decided to press for the old Post Office in Market St, recently vacated by the Department of Labour and Industry. After many negotiations with the Lands Department through the City Council and Mr J Hough, MLA for Wollongong, the use of this building was secured in late 1966, thus marking an important milestone in the history of the Society. After 28 years of development, including a major refurbishment of the building, we have an excellent museum to-day.

From its inception, the IHS concerned itself with matters of civic and historic interest, fighting battles for the preservation of important buildings, the harbour, the forts, the environment, even a pair of pines in front of the Drill Hall; or by joining, through their members of parliament, the fight to preserve the Hyde Park Barracks from the depredations of the Sydney City Council. The battle for the Smith's Hill Fort was a saga of its own, not fully won, but at least the City Council was prevented from turning it into a car park.

Members' researches led to the correction of earlier errors like the confusion between Lake Illawarra and Tom Thumb Lagoon, Mt Keira and Mt Kembla, or the location of the Stockman's Hut plaque.

Memorials were erected at Collins Rock, Colcliff and Flagstaff Hill to mark historic events. The old band rotunda was too decrepit to be saved but another memorial to Bass and Flinders replaced it. Little Milton was saved, as were the rocks at Wollongong Harbour several times, but

Cormiston was lost. The Minutes are full of countless worthy causes, including the naming of streets. Through it all, close co-operation with the City Council has always been enjoyed.

The IHS has always sought to publish the results of research. The Bulletin from its inception in July '45 was of course its first publication, faithfully recording not only the activities of the Society but also the addresses delivered by its speakers. Some of the longer pieces of research were duplicated privately, but in August 1949 the Council decided to publish in full Rev Bro O'Malley's work on the Old Dapto Smelters. Issued in 1950, this 16-page booklet became the Society's first official publication. Most of the early booklets produced by the Society originated from talks given by its own members. Alex Fleming alone produced eleven of them between 1966 and 1975, the year of his death.

The arrival of Bill McDonald and Bill Bayley in the mid fifties gave new impetus to publications which for many years were shepherded through the presses by Bill Bayley. For example, the Annual Report for 1974 showed two books published that year: W G McDonald's "Lawrence Hargrave of Stanwell Park" and W A Bayley's "Children's Illawarra"; A P Fleming's "The Wollongong Pilot Service 1840 - 1867" was at the printer, "Bass and Flinders on the Illawarra Coast" was in manuscript and "Illawarra Mountain Railway" was in preparation.

Recent ventures into the publication of source materials like "Backhouse and Walker in Illawarra 1836" or "The Paulsgrove Diary" have culminated this year in the Society's most ambitious project, a reprint of Arthur Cousins' "The Garden of New South Wales".

Money from book sales has been ploughed back into new books, but these days a new publication does not produce the same degree of financial headache it did 25 years ago. Aided by the Crocket Bequest, the IHS is now in a relatively sound financial position even though it still suffers from a lack of "person power", particularly in the museum where all work and supervision depend on volunteer helpers. Many stalwarts have come and gone, such as Mrs Mackreth, Mrs Evans, Ken Thomas, Edgar Beale, Fred Healy and lots of others, but more seem to come forward to take their places.

On the brighter side, an expanding interest in local history studies in schools promises well for the future. It is expected that the reprint of "The Garden of New South Wales" will fill a big need in that expansion. Historically speaking, the Illawarra Historical Society can well look forward quite confidently to the next fifty years in this Garden.
