

# The Old School Report

[merimulahistoricalociety.org.au](http://merimulahistoricalociety.org.au)

Merimbula –Imlay  
Historical Society

May 2024

*Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe. [H G Wells, 1866 - 1946: The Outline of History (1920)]*

## From the Editor -

I'm back! But please help by sending me any newsy items you'd like to impart to fellow members. I'll take anything - stories from personal memories, books you've read, political anecdotes, jokes, quizzes, recipes or photos! Anything - preferably to do with his/her-story!

This newsletter contains an article on the shipwreck of the *Corsair* in 1874, a report from the Events Committee, Curator's report and Archivist's report. Also an article on the *Alma Gray*, which has been acquired by the museum.

Don has reported that the *Alma Gray* is in storage in Merimbula and is expected to be on site at the Museum by the end of the year. Don has applied for an in-kind grant from the National Maritime Museum for a Vessel Management Plan.

A main objective of a museum is to tell stories that are significant to a local community. A museum should contain objects that are complete with the stories surrounding them. Museums are also repositories for



LAUNCH DAY "ALMA GRAY" CIRCA 1896 MERIMBULA 26-3-2009

Unfortunately the region has said goodbye to Museums Advisor, Greg Lissaman, but he left with some good advice for local museums. His mantra of "Change isn't failure, especially if it means you survive", is vital to progress museums into the future while securing the stories held in collections. He also stated that the most important step in securing collections is documenting them on eHive and sharing them with the world. Hopefully a new advisor will arrive via the Council and Museums & Galleries soon.

**Olwen Morris**

## Events Committee Report

The last Members Meeting had to be cancelled for reasons beyond our control but I have been able to reschedule Mick Brosnan for August.

The U3A visit was quite successful despite more people booking in at the last minute than we had anticipated. Weather being dicey on the day, we had to pile 16 people into the reception area, and split them up into 2 groups for the tour. However, Liz and Don and Collette managed splendidly and afternoon tea was not too crowded. The visitors expressed that they were more than satisfied with the day. We have learned a few things from the exercise for the future .

Mother's Day was a bit of a fizzer, only 3 people and no book sales. Don and I agreed that we are not displaying sale items successfully and we need to improve.

Next Members Meeting will have Pam and George Pitt presenting the Oral History recording of Chappie Munn, with George filling in the gaps where the recording quality is poor. I believe Gary is intending on giving a short talk before afternoon tea break and because of this I feel we maybe should postpone the quiz until next time. I am also intending to bring back the RAFFLE! I am going to raffle one of the prints of a painting that Pam's brother did when he was visiting from the UK. As it was donated originally for a raffle prize, I have Pam's permission to go ahead. I propose we put in the members notes to bring \$5 for a ticket in the raffle and a cuppa. We could potentially add some \$30 to the pot ,after paying the club their tea money. If we get a good response I can continue a once popular activity.

On the subject of response to members meetings, if numbers continue to be small, I will propose cutting back to every other month next year. My first thought was once every 3 months at different venues along the lines of SEHGI meetings, but that might cause a lot of conflict. Maybe have to go baby steps.

**Nancy Richards**

## Diary -

- 24 June general meeting RSL. John McKay from McKay's Oysters to speak.
- 29 July AGM RSL. No speaker.
- 26 August general meeting RSL. Speaker Mick Brosnan fro Social Justice Advocates of Sapphire Coast.

## Committee members -

**President** - Don Bretherton

**V-P** - Andrew McManus

**Secretary** - Don Bretherton

**Treasurer** - Adrian Pitt

**Curator** - Liz Bretherton

**Committee members** - Nancy

Richards, Peter Clancy

**Archivist** - Colette Moorhead

**Events** - Nancy Richards

**Public Officer** - Adrian Pitt

**Non-committee position:**

**Newsletter ed.** - Olwen Morris

## Society News -

- The Raffle is back! Remember to bring your \$5 for ticket & tea!
- Next speaker is John McKay telling us about oysters.
- Working bees restart Tuesday 4 June. Help needed!
- New displays coming including items from Mrs Mac's collection.
- Covington items replacing Munn display
- Anniversary of 1st display at Old School Museum coming up!!



## Curator's Report -

Because I've been pretty slack and up to my usual standard of prevarication and procrastination, I've included two month's worth of reports from Curator Liz!

A number of events since the last meeting. We hosted Merimbula Public School in the two weeks prior to Easter and both were successful. The teachers were very pleased with both days and the children all seemed to enjoy the time. There were certainly some questions asked! Thanks to Jean and Geraldine who helped Don and I for each visit.

On Tuesday 23rd MOSM are fortunate to be hosting a visit by an assessor of indigenous artefacts. He will be accompanied by two employees of BVSC. Peter will speak to me about the artefacts and compile a Significance Statement on each one which will be given to us to keep at the Museum. I am very happy about this as there are quite a lot of questions from visitors about these artefacts and it will really expand our knowledge.

The Museum also had a visit this month from a group from Balmoral Retirement Village in Wantirna. There were about 40 people which went very well in spite of being cut short with problems with the bus on the day. Thanks to Garry and Colette for their help in informing the visitors about our Museum.

Not very much progress being achieved with the cataloguing and restocking of the Annex and the Container. Hopefully with the scheduled visits almost complete (apart from U3A on May 8th) we can spend time on this essential task.

The only other event was the regular Object Lesson on ABC Radio on April 9th. I spoke about the mannequin from the window of Mrs Mac's shop which is a recent donation.

### Liz Bretherton (April 2024)

Very little cataloguing this month I'm afraid, but a number of other events.

The first was the visit of the assessor of our indigenous artefacts which was organised by BVSC. Peter Kabaila is an archeologist based in Canberra and his information was interesting although not all was expected. A number of artefacts were judged to be not authentic. The information was excellent though and gives us a lot to work with as far as exhibiting the artefacts.

The visit by the local branch of U3A was very successful and enjoyed by us all. The parts of the afternoon not usually included, a short explanation of conservation with two examples and a brief introduction to eHive regarding online access were both successful and I would certainly include them again for group tours.

Don, Colette and I attended a Museums Catch Up at Tura Marrang Library last Monday. It was an all day session including some members of BVSC in the afternoon. As always, these catch ups are very valuable both as comparing and chatting with other Museums and new ideas. It was also the last meeting with Greg Lissaman, our Museums Advisor, before his departure to take up a new position at the National Gallery in Canberra. Greg will be much missed for his support and friendship.

On Tuesday Don tuned in to a Zoom Workshop on Volunteers. This was a two hour session run by a Victorian organisation which he found useful.

We have been contacted by the VIC and told we may have some members of a bus tour call into the Museum on Sunday. These people are profoundly deaf and have Auslan interpreters with them. Hannah suggested they would most likely to be happy with a 'cheat sheet' and if any questions, would use their interpreters. Sue Donnelly and Martin Thomas are the duty volunteers on the day and have been advised and are happy with the situation. I will provide more copies of the 'cheat sheet'.

### Elizabeth Bretherton (May 2024)



#### Garry Moorhead

I want to show appreciation for our wisest elder, Garry Moorhead, who has had to resign from duties at the Museum. In spite of his great age I am sure he has yet many years of wisdom to impart to us lesser mortals. Garry has taken on various roles during his time at the museum from Treasurer to President and to helping Colette with the archiving. He has been a great friend to me and will hopefully continue to send me interesting articles as he discovers them in the annals! Salut  Garry!

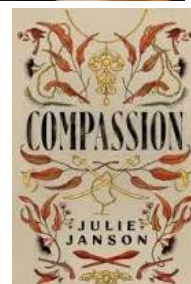
OM



## Books -

Anyone interested Aboriginal literature may like two books I've read recently. Julie Janson is a Burrugerongal woman of the Darug nation who has written two excellent novels set during the time of first contact. **Benevolence** spans the years 1816 - 35 and tells the story of Darug woman, Muraging, who was born into a time of cataclysmic change & violence, but also of survival and resistance. **Compassion** takes in the years from 1836 - 53 and follows the life of Duringah, or Nell James, outlaw daughter of Muraging. It is an exciting story of anti-colonial revenge.

Julie Janson is one of the guests at this year's Headland Writers' Festival in Tathra on the weekend of 18 - 20 October. If you've never been & love books google [headlandfestival.com.au](http://headlandfestival.com.au) for details! OM



## The Wreck of the *Corsair*

One hundred and fifty years ago this month (May 2024) there occurred the only shipwreck recorded as happening at Merimbula (spelt in the records "Mirrim Bulla")

The wreck actually occurred near Bournda. The ship was a brig, the hundred and eleven ton *Corsair*. She had been built as a whaler equipped with two whale boats but there is no actual account of her ever hunting whales.

She first appears as a pilot boat for the port of Calcutta in India, where she served for about three years. She was then bought by three Maoris and used in the coastal trade around New Zealand. She came to grief with a collision in Lyttleton Harbour below what was the Gas Works and it is still called Corsair Bay. She was laid up for a number of years until bought by Messrs Dale & Martingale. They made her seaworthy and plied her on the Sydney/Melbourne run. On the last of these voyages from Melbourne to Sydney with a general cargo and under Captain Hill, she encountered heavy weather off Bermagui. Captain Hill decided to run south to the safety of Twofold Bay, however he did not get there and was forced ashore somewhere near Bournda. All the crew managed to escape but the ship was a total wreck.

The next time she was noted is when a search party, looking for what happened to the *SS Bega* thirty years, later noticed the wreckage still on the shore. [OSM Ref. File 58 item 5].

**However.....**

Our Editor, in checking the facts above, found an account of the wrecking of a ship also called *Corsair* on 24 May 1874 on Point Nepean reef! I do not think it is the same ship as it was a cutter, not a brig, and spent its whole career as a pilot ship in Port Phillip.

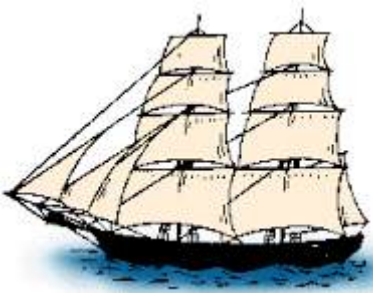
The *Corsair* wrecked off Bournda was mostly based in New Zealand, where there is a bay called Corsair in Lyttleton Harbour, while Corsair Rock is a well known hazard at the entrance to Port Phillip bay.

I think we have this remarkable coincidence of two ships both called *Corsair* wrecked on the same day. Any further information that members may have would be appreciated!

**Garry Moorhead**

**Editor's comment -**

What a mystery! Garry's evidence was taken from a hand written report found in our files as quoted. It was also recorded in one of Jack Loney's many books on shipwrecks. I discovered my story from Heritage Victoria's website [http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/shipwrecks/result\\_detail/144?print=true](http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/shipwrecks/result_detail/144?print=true). A coincidence or a confusion of stories?



*A brig is a type of sailing vessel defined by its rig: two masts which are both square rigged.*

*As a sailing rig, a cutter is a single masted boat with two or more head sails.*

*Brigs originated in the second half of the 18th century & were a common type of smaller merchant vessel or warship from then until late 19th century.*

*Cutters, also in use during 18th & 19th centuries, were designed for speed and were mostly involved in smuggling, both by the smugglers and the navy & coastguards.*



## Archivist's Report -

This is Colette's report from April 2024.

Since my last report, I have been working steadily on posting the MIHS photos on eHive, preparing the File Indexes and then posting them on eHive too. This is a demanding task which is also time consuming.

Apart from that, Garry and I have kept up collecting and adding items of interest as they appear.

We have also continued with museum duty and have frequently had the help of Bob Dye. He has spent a lot of time attending the garden, but has also gone around the building clearing gutters, removing spiders' webs and even sweeping and dusting. He has done an excellent job.

When I can manage it, I have attended the museum on the Tuesday morning working bees to help Liz when visitors come. Also there have been a few queries to follow up and report on to interested parties.

I think we have a few more visitors coming now and most have been very interested and have admired our displays.

**Colette Moorhead**

And this one from May 2024.

As usual Garry and I have attended to Museum duty, but sadly, due to insurance problems after the age of 95 he has been forced to resign as a volunteer. He will however remain as a member and a visitor. This has meant that Bob Dye is now assisting me more.

At home I have continued working on eHive and have been delighted to find items like all our catalogued maps and plans were successfully transferred from Mosaic. This does make finding individual items easier. Gradually more and more items missed in the professional transfer are being transferred by Don & I.

Along with the Brethertons, I attended most of a workshop on eHive at the Tura Marrang Library organised by Greg Lissamon, which was helpful and interesting.

There have been a number of research enquiries which I have worked on; always interesting but time-consuming. Also there have been a number of events such as the U3A visit where I have assisted, and at home, when we had our third great-grandchild!

I am still sorting out material brought here when we emptied the old office. Amongst them I discovered the 'lost' Oral History CDs! In addition there have been more interesting historical documents donated by Val Russell, which are now partially sorted and will be indexed in our files in due course.

**Colette Moorhead**

# The *Alma Gray* couta boat -

## The Victorian Couta Boat:

The couta boat is a distinct Australian designed working boat which plied the Bass Strait area, originating in the latter part of the 1800s. The name come from the fish *barracouta* (not to be confused with the ferocious *barracuda!*), which grow up to 1.2 metres long and are found in the seas off the Victorian coastline. It was a popular, inexpensive fish used to supply the fish & chip industry. The fish were caught on hooked trolling lines using rawhide for bait.

Queenscliff was a fishing community which initially worked local areas within the bay. To fish outside the Heads required a boat that could negotiate the Rip and the rough offshore conditions. In 1874 the railway between Melbourne and Queenscliff provided access to the Melbourne market which saw an increase in the fishing fleet. A larger, more seaworthy craft was required to pass through the notorious waters of the Rip in order to chase the barracouta which gathered in huge schools in the open sea.

So the Couta Boat came into being. Commonly 26 feet in length, 10 feet wide and over 3 feet of hull draft with “square or almost vertical transoms, deeper draft, with slack bilges, a significant dead rise in the floor and a clean run aft with the stem clear of the water.” [The Couta Boat: an Historical Overview, <https://www.coutaboat.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Couta-Boat-Historical-Overview.pdf>]

These simple boats were usually planked in New Zealand kauri around a hardwood keel and were capable of being operated by two men working side by side. A high mast set about one third back from the bow carried a large sail area. By the 1890s a fleet was operating into the Bass Strait catching large numbers of barracouta to freight to the ever-expanding market in Melbourne.

A major change occurred with the introduction of the engine, which became widespread after the First World War. Many craft were adapted to be fitted with engines but new boats were built with a properly fitted aperture for the propeller. This did not result in abandoning sail as it was still needed for drift fishing, but the rig was reduced in size.

## The *Alma Gray*:

The *Alma* as it was originally called was already an old boat when local fisherman, the late Jack Gray brought her to Merimbula in 1945. A classic couta boat measuring 25 feet in length with a 10 ft beam & 2.6 ft draught, it was most likely built using NZ kauri in the 1890s in Queenscliff. Under Jack Gray's ownership it was used as a commercial fishing boat for over 50 years, becoming a Merimbula icon on the NSW coast. Jack said “I bought the boat for 190 pounds and was offered 1000 quid for it as we drove through Eden!” There was no special reason for naming her *Alma* other than it had four square letters that were easy to paint! In the 1940s Merimbula's population numbered 180 made up of fishermen, sleeper cutters and employees at the Bacon Factory. “The 36 professional fishermen could land 200 boxes of barracouta in a morning”, said Jack.

In early 2000 the *Alma* was bought by Dr John Stephen & his wife, Christina. She was fully restored in 2008 by carpenter, Don O'Connell at a cost of \$70,000. Dr Stephen renamed the old boat *Alma Gray* in honour of Jack. While he mainly used her for fishing he also took her to Melbourne for the traditional couta boat races in the regattas.

In 2024 *Alma Gray* was assessed by Merimbula based surveyor, Andy Duvall, who determined her overall structure is in very good condition given her age.

Today the *Alma Gray* is listed on the Register of Historic Vessels and has been donated to the Merimbula Old School Museum by Christina and Dr John Stephen. Currently it is stored awaiting assessment by a conservator from the National Maritime Museum and could be on site by the end of this year.



## Barracouta: The Fish

The barracouta (*Thyrsites atun*) is a long slender fish up to four feet (1.2m) in length or nine pounds (4 kg) weight, although more commonly about three feet and weighing six pounds, armed with a jaw full of sharp needle-like teeth. It has a coarse white to pink flesh with long bones, and is a rapid swimmer known for its voracious appetite and aggressive feeding habit. Whilst today it has lost popularity, it was for many decades the mainstay of the Melbourne fish and chip market.

Barracouta ('couta) were found in large schools, usually at dawn and dusk. When a boat came on a school, she would sail back and forth over the fish, trailing lines with barbless hooks and lures made of white rawhide or similar.

The barracuda (*Sphyræna barracuda*) is a large (165cm), predatory, ray-finned fish known for its fearsome appearance & ferocious behaviour found in tropical and sub-tropical oceans. Barracudas are targeted by sport-fishing enthusiasts.



*Thyrsites atun*



*Sphyræna barracuda*

## Common sayings and their derivations -

As we have a fairly nautical theme in this edition I thought I'd repeat an item I included in a past newsletter! Following are some words and phrases often used in conversation with their meanings and sea-faring derivations.

**Garbled (muddled)** - garbling was the prohibited practice of mixing rubbish with cargo.

**Over the barrel (caught in a situation when one cannot change one's mind)** - The most common method of punishment aboard ship was flogging. The sailor was tied to a mast or over a barrel before flogging began.

**Chock-a-block (filled to capacity)** - if 2 blocks of rigging tackle are so close together they can't be tightened any further, they are chock-a-block.

**Shiver me timbers (expression of surprise)** - in rough weather, heavy seas pound against a ship's hull, causing the timber frames to 'shiver'.

**The whole nine yards (everything)** - square-rigged ships have three masts with three yards (sails) on each mast. If all the square sails are raised, all nine yards are in operation.

**The bitter end (keep going until the job is finished)** - the end of an anchor cable is fastened to the bitts (bollards) at the ship's bow. If all the anchor cable is let out you have come to the "bitter end".

**At a rate of knots (moving very fast)** - a ship's speed was measured by rolling a line, knotted at regular intervals, into the sea. The number of knots passed in half a minute, measured using a sandglass, indicated the ship's speed.

**Flah in the pan (short-lived success)** - flintlock muskets were notoriously unreliable. When fired the gunpowder often caught alight and made a lot of smoke but failed to fire the bullet.

**Loose cannon (someone out of control, unpredictable)** - cannons are very heavy. In rough seas a loose cannon could be thrown about, causing great damage on the deck.

**High and dry (stranded, without resources)** - a beached ship is left 'high' by the receding tide and 'dry' by being out of the water.

**Clean slate (to start over)** - ship watch-keepers recorded everything on a slate. If there were no problems during a watch, the slate would be wiped clean so the next watch started with a 'clean slate'.

**Grog (alcoholic drink)** - in 1740 British Admiral Vernon, whose nickname was Old Grogam, ordered that the sailors' daily ration of rum be diluted with water. The men called the mixture 'grog'.

**Slush fund (money kept for a rainy day)** - slush was the fat skimmed from the surface of cooking liquid or scraped from empty salted meat casks. It was sold by the cook when the ship came into port for the benefit of himself and the crew.

**Three sheets to the wind (very drunk)** - 'sheets' are ropes used to hold the lower corners of sails in place. If the sheets are loose, the sails flap in the wind and the ship may lurch around like a drunken sailor.

**Chew the fat (talk endlessly)** - salted meat was often hard and took considerable chewing before it could be swallowed.

**Figurehead (leader with no real power)** - a 'figurehead' is an ornamental carving on the front of a ship. It has no functional purpose.

**Fits the bill (a good match)** - a 'bill of lading' listed the cargo carried on a ship. Upon delivery the cargo was checked against the bill to see if all was in order.

**OM** [copied from information labels at the 'Sydney Cove' display in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston]



*Nothing to see here! Curator Liz performing her magic as she explains a story of some artefacts in the MOSM to some really interested members of U3A!*



*Is Nancy conducting these U3A members in a chorus or giving an intense description of the school room wall?  
[Photos taken during U3A visit 8 May 2024]*

### Alma Gray extra -

Updated information re the *Alma Gray*! An application for a Vessel Management Plan has been lodged and approval given to transfer the boat to the Museum and placed where the *Dray* is now situated. At the moment the vessel is being looked after by Chris Habil at South Coast Hire and is on a trailer covered with a tarpaulin. Any fuel will be removed from the *Alma Gray* and she will remain in position pending the design of the supporting structure. Don will seek a grant to build a support for the boat.

A new Yanmar 3YM20 diesel engine was installed during the reconstruction but Chris is endeavouring to find the original Simplex twin cylinder 7hp motor which is possibly at Broadwater.