



The Old School Report

merimulahistoricalociety.org.au

Merimbula –Imlay
Historical Society

August 2025

History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

[James Joyce, 1882 - 1941]

From the Editor -

As you can see from the contents of this newsletter, things are moving on at the Merimbula Old School Museum. The committee offered expressions of appreciation and gratitude to retirees, Lis & Don Bretherton and Colette and Garry Moorhead, and acknowledged the work they did during their time at the museum.

The General Meeting of the society on 29 September will feature Andrew McManus speaking about the history of cuta boats including snippets of a recording with Jack Grey talking about the *Alma Grey*. The usual raffle and quiz will also feature.

Nancy needs to know your preference for the Christmas Lunch this year. Suggested dates are either Friday 28 November or Friday 5 December, with the choice of venues either a set menu at Aqua Café, Pambula Beach or a la carte menu at the Top Pub, Pambula. Please let Nancy know your choice by 15 October by email Nancy.richards@bigpond.com.

The opening of the exhibition *Lessons for Life: the Story of Merimbula School* commemorating 150 years from 1875 to 2025 will be held on Saturday 15 November from 11am –2.00pm. The display will continue until March 2026. If you or anyone you know can contribute a story or an object relating to the school, please contact Angela George on teaghan11@yahoo.com.au.

Olwen Morris

Retirements from Committee -

At the Annual General Meeting of M-IHS Inc held on Monday 28th July 2025, a motion was passed unanimously, expressing appreciation of the work Don and Liz Bretherton have done at the museum since joining the Society in 2014. Liz was appointed Curator that year and Don joined the Committee, becoming President in 2016. They have been an efficient team, with a reputation for warm hospitality and great catering skills, amongst their other attributes. Liz was faced with the onerous task of updating the artefacts catalogue, a process that went from the original card index and donations book register, through the spreadsheet stocktake and Mosaic system to transferring to the ehive online program. This is still a work in progress. Acquisition of new donations and general management of the collection have been time consuming procedures, as was working with Angela George on the Significance Assessment in 2021 and 2022. That project was completed this year. Numerous exhibitions have been prepared and mounted and the museum updated with new display cases, resulting in a fresh modern presentation. A major advancement has been the modification to the entrance to three quarters of the display areas of the museum, to improve accessibility by means of ramps and a designated parking space. This project was made possible because Don was a very proficient writer of grant applications and was successful in getting the necessary finance. All of the major improvements and acquisitions at the MOSM since 2016 have been made with grant funding. Other examples are the solar panels, shipping container storage, Brown's punt installation. Two generous donations – the Kenndy oyster plates collection and the Alma Gray – were made during this period and both Liz and Don will be remembered for their efforts and dedication to the MOSM. Thanks are extended to them both, with best wishes for a future of improved health and happiness. Also on Monday there were tributes paid to Colette Moorhead, who had announced her retirement as Archivist. She and Garry have worked tirelessly over the years, collecting and cataloguing the paper records pertaining to the local area, that are a valuable research resource and Colette has curated the photographic collection. She was the first to use the Mosaic cataloguing system, then transferring records to ehive. They both have served on the Committee and their contribution to the Society and MOSM has been invaluable.

From the Committee

Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society

Diary -

- 29 September 2 pm - General Meeting at RSL
- 8 November 10am - SEHGI meeting Cobargo RSL.
- 15 November - opening of 150yr anniversary display of Merimbula School.

Committee members -

President - Peter Clancy

Vice-President—Nancy Richards

Secretary - Andrew McManus

Treasurer - Adrian Pitt

Committee member - Shirley Bazley

Curator/Collections Manager - Angela George

Non-committee position -
Old School Report - Olwen Morris

News -

- Batemans Bay Heritage Museum *Cats and Dogs All at Sea*. Travelling exhibition from Australian National Maritime Museum. Launch Fri 17 October 12 — 1.30 p.m. Registration essential.
- Vale Jimmy McGrath who passed away on 1 August 2025.
- The Bird Olympics will return on 23 October at Potoroo Palace which will see local Primary School students test their skills in a bird calling competition! This was originally founded by the Gould League of Bird Lovers to divert children from collecting wild birds' eggs.
- Sometime in October two representatives from the National Maritime Museum will come to assess the *Alma Grey* and make a conservation management plan.

Note to Members July 2025

Though it is only 2 months since the last General Meeting, there has been quite a bit happening, both with workshops, attended also by members from several other Societies, and with projects involving just the MOSM.

Curator's Exhibition Plans. Angela has prepared a plan for revamping the displays in the MOSM, that will show a timeline of local history from First Nation occupation, early settlement, local industries and stories, with exhibits in the grounds featuring the oyster industry. If you are interested in more details, the full plan can be emailed to you, so please just ask.

Grant application. Angela is working on a submission for funding for display panels for the exhibits in the grounds and improved signage for museum access. Committee members will give her relevant material for this application that closes in August.

Significance Report. Angela has completed the Significance Assessment of the MOSM collection that was funded by a grant. She worked with Liz in 2021 and 22 and completed the Report this year. It is available if you want a copy.

Strategic Plan Workshop. Joan Kelly, Museums' Advisor, ran this session at the RSL on Friday 27th June and is drafting the updated MOSM Strategic Plan. 10 members attended this and the preliminary discussion session, when Angela was also present.

2025 Anniversaries. It is 150 years ago since the first classes were held in the newly fully completed schoolroom at Merimbula and 80 years since the last classes were held in that building. The school had been operating since 1870, with classes held in the wooden Presbyterian church building, which stood where the gum trees are now on the south east corner of the block, but in 1875 both the residence and schoolroom were in use. By 1945 some classes were also being held in the residence and the new school, further east along Main Street, was ready for occupation the following year, so 2025 celebrates a beginning and an end. Angela is planning an exhibition, using the 4 rooms of the residence, so it will be a busy period ahead.

Disaster Preparedness Workshop. This was run by Museums and Galleries NSW at the Pambula Courthouse on Tuesday 22 July. Nancy and Shirley attended with volunteers from 4 other Societies and Angela George from EKWM. We will be working on a Disaster Plan for MOSM and there will be a follow up, practical restoration workshop held in November.

Alma Gray donation. This project is being finalised, with the cradle made and the boat restoration complete. There will be a decision made next month about the placement in the museum grounds.

SEGHI August meeting. The regular quarterly meeting and AGM will be held on Saturday 9th August at EKWM at 10am for 10.30 start.

AGM & General Meeting. A final reminder that the combined AGM and General Meeting is on Monday, with a quiz and a raffle.

Note to Members August 2025

The new M-IHS Inc Committee, comprising Peter Clancy, Nancy Richards, Adrian Pitt, Andrew Mc Manus, Angela George and Shirley Bazley, has been busy since the July AGM, with 2 meetings being held on site at the museum. The second one, on Saturday 16/8/25, addressed the following topics.

*Brown Punt. This is listed on the Historic Vessels Register, but has not yet had a conservation plan undertaken by the ANMM, owing to the current lack of staff. It is expected that eventually a roof will be erected over it, to prevent the current pollution by leaves, bird droppings etc.

*Angela envisages the courtyard area and side veranda will eventually feature the fishing and oystering industries with appropriate interpretive signage. She is submitting a grant application for signage for the expanded oyster industry displays.

*Oyster sculpture. It was agreed this should be relocated from beside the front steps to the courtyard, possibly on the punt enclosure.

*Alma Gray positioning. Two possible sites were discussed - 1. between the front fence and the dray 2. between the dray and the Brown punt. Discussion was about the wish to keep as much of the front curtilage clear for events and the view of the building from Main St as clear as possible, with balancing the need to display an artefact effectively. Eventually the second option was agreed on, with the stern as close to the western boundary fence as possible and the hull to the south. This will be discussed with the artefact donor, Dr John Stephen, at the museum on Wednesday 27th August. Arrangements will then be made for preparation of the site and installation of the cradle and boat. There will also be discussion about the date for the official "launch".

*150 and 80 years school Anniversaries. The opening of the displays in the 4 rooms of the Residence will be held on Saturday 15th November from 11am to 2pm. It is hoped to secure some local dignitary to perform the opening at 11.30am and it is envisaged there will be music, a BBQ and Coffee Van.

SEGHI meeting. This was held at the Eden Killer Whale Museum on Saturday 9th August. Unfortunately our Museums' Advisor, Joan Kelly, was unable to attend for health reasons. One topic discussed was the uncertain future of the Kameruka church. Subsequently, a letter was sent to the Anglican Diocese, opposing the proposed sale. The latest news on that front is that there is to be more community consultation.

Social Gathering. There will be the opportunity to keep in touch this month with an informal gathering in the RSL lounge on Monday, 24th, at 2pm. Come and have a chat. The next General Meeting will be on Monday 29th September in the William Dawes Room at 2pm.

M-IHS Committee

The Facts! -

In 1830 one of Australia's most notorious penal stations was established at Port Arthur on the windswept Tasman Peninsula. George Arthur was Lieutenant-Governor at the time. He also established Port Puer for child convicts whom he described as "little depraved felons.." Port Arthur was famously difficult to escape from but one convict tried by dressing in a kangaroo skin and hopping out. He surrendered after a guard, mistaking him for a kangaroo, tried to shoot him for food!

Curator's Report

Lots of projects going on in the background in preparation for new exhibition and interpretation projects. These include:

☐ **Merimbula School 150 th anniversary exhibition** – This is planned to commemorate completion of the Merimbula Public School building in 1875. I have circulated a written exhibition project proposal for comment and am now working towards developing the content, based on member feedback. At the same time, research, text and label drafting, image and artefact sourcing and planning are also progressing. It is envisaged that the exhibition will be installed in the four teacher's residence rooms of the Merimbula Old School Museum building, and will broadly cover foundations and the first school-house (former museum entrance); school days – teachers and students (Munn Room); teachers' lives and living conditions (former kitchen); and community, culture and legacy (Perrin room). The actual anniversary is in October, so there's not a lot of time to spare, but I'm comfortable that it will all come together. I'm hoping that the exhibition will stay in place for up to six months

(until March 2026).

☐ **Oysters and oystering exhibition** – I am envisaging that this exhibition will be mainly outdoors in the museum grounds and on the school room veranda with a small section in the former school room. A written exhibition project proposal has been circulated to the committee and members for comment and feedback. I am also in the process of competing an application for funds from the Museums and Galleries NSW Project Development Grants for the cost of producing the outdoor content. At the same time, historic research into the industry and oyster farmers themselves is also continuing.

☐ **Alma Gray** – I am continuing research into this outstanding gem for production of an object file, drafting of a significance statement, and development of interpretive material.

☐ **Whole of museum exhibition redevelopment** – I'm working on aspects of this, mainly focusing at the moment on content for the former schoolroom space, given that the residence portion of the museum building will be devoted for a period to the expanded 150 th anniversary Merimbula school narrative.

☐ **Potential interactives for the former school room** – Neil Burnham, Ian Battersby and I are currently looking into options to develop interactive oral listening posts for the former school room. We're currently investigating utilising a collection of old black bakelite telephones from Dad's collection, with visitors able to listen to select memories through each telephone handset.

☐ **Slideshows** – I'm also working on a series of photographic slide shows with voice overs to interpret a number of different narratives and themes.

☐ **eHive** – I am continuing to update records as time allows.

☐ **Merimbula RSL display case** – I am still working on developing a display about the Merimbula Old School Museum and our need for volunteers to replace the existing Anzac Day exhibition.

Angela George

Chinese wooden shoulder yoke statement of significance -

The handmade timber shoulder yoke in the Merimbula Imlay Historical Society's collection is a rare and evocative object that reflects the lived experiences and enduring legacy of Chinese market gardeners in the Pambula district and wider Bega Valley region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

As an essential traditional tool, it contributes to our understanding of the work practices of Chinese migrants locally and beyond. A tangible reminder of the hard manual labour they performed, it speaks to the resilience, industry, and contribution of a marginalised group who, despite racism, discrimination and social exclusion, became valued members of rural society.

The yoke has strong historic and social associations with individuals such as Joe Ah Yup and Lamie, both well-known and respected Chinese gardeners in Pambula who are remembered with great affection by the community. Their lives, and those of many unnamed others, illustrate the valuable role Chinese migrants played in the development of the region's agricultural, economic, and social fabric.

Indicative of Chinese journeys and settlement patterns, the yoke contributes to our understanding of cultural diversity in Australia generally and the Bega Valley in particular, providing valuable insight into and evidence of the traditions, customs and practices imported by these settlers and maintained by them after settlement.

With technical and aesthetic value, the yoke demonstrates traditional Chinese ingenuity and craftsmanship in the ergonomic design that enabled heavy loads to be carried efficiently across uneven terrain; while its worn and weathered form and handmade finish speaks to years of hard manual labour. An excellent representative example of a once common but now increasingly rare piece of traditional Chinese equipment, few such yokes survive locally today, particularly with such a strong provenance.

As a physical link to Chinese-Australian heritage, it is a powerful interpretive object, offering rich opportunities to explore and communicate a range of interconnected themes and narratives, including migration; migrant groups and journeys; cultural diversity; cultural exchange; labour, work and employment history; rural economies; rural and regional industries; land use patterns; food production and distribution; developing settlements, villages and towns; and community life in Colonial and Federation-era Australia.

An outstanding part of the Merimbula Imlay Historical Society's collection, it adds depth and meaning, providing a compelling lens through which to recognise, appreciate and celebrate the often-overlooked multicultural foundations of local and national history; as well as the Chinese contributions to the region's history.

Angela George



*Chinese yoke as used by market gardeners
(c.19th?)*

William Dawes lifejacket significance statement -

This World War II-era cork and canvas life jacket is a rare and valuable object of local, state and national significance. Worn by a survivor of the United States Army Transport (USAT) *William Dawes*, it is directly connected to a major wartime incident that brought the global conflict to the doorstep of the Sapphire Coast.

On 22 July 1942, the 1,176-ton *William Dawes*, a Liberty ship on route from Adelaide to Brisbane, was torpedoed by Japanese submarine I-11 about 12 miles off Turling Head between Merimbula and Tathra. The vessel, carrying military cargo and mainly American personnel, had been diverted to Twofold Bay following intelligence of enemy submarine activity, but without visible navigation, the decision to hold offshore proved fatal. The resulting explosion killed five men and seriously wounded several others. Survivors escaped in lifeboats and were later rescued and brought ashore to Merimbula Lake by local fishermen. There they were either taken to hospital for medical treatment or were billeted in local homes.

A rare surviving relic from the ill-fated vessel and possibly the only surviving life jacket from an American Liberty Ship lost off Australia's east coast during WWII, it is a valuable link with a pivotal point in the nation's war and defence history. Not just a personal artefact of survival, this lifejacket is a touchstone to a broader historical moment: the incursion of World War II into civilian Australia and the extraordinary response of local communities. The *William Dawes* incident activated coast watchers, Volunteer Air Observers Corps members, commercial fishermen, and townspeople who mobilised quickly to rescue, treat and accommodate survivors. Local residents offered homes and care, and the incident remained etched in local memory as a time of shared courage, sacrifice, and compassion.



Cork & canvas life-jacket from WWII

A symbol of a period when armed conflict came to Australian waters, it is closely associated with war time activity off the coast and contributes to understanding the impact this had on the local region. It also links the district with significant events in national and international history.

Indicative of the dangers associated with maritime activities, it illustrates the tragedy and loss often associated with the narrative.

The jacket, marked "S. S. *William Dawes*" and produced by Atlantic Pacific Manufacturing Corp. or Brooklyn, New York, is a typical WWII-era floatation device constructed from cotton canvas and cork blocks. Its form and markings speak to standard U. S. Navy and merchant marine safety protocols of the time. While such jackets were widely issued, few survive today with such an extensive provenance to a documented wartime attack in Australian waters.

An excellent representative example of the canvas and cork life preservers produced by the Atlantic Pacific Manufacturing Corporation during the 1940s, it is typical of those issued to sailors and seamen aboard American naval and merchant vessels during WWII. Well provenanced, in good condition with excellent integrity, the life jacket clearly illustrates its purpose.

Its physical condition, clear identification marks, and strong link to a known maritime disaster make this life jacket an outstanding artefact of maritime, military, and community history. It is particularly significant to the Far South Coast region, which bore witness to this little known yet devastating moment of wartime action.

Further enhancing its value is the survival of rich contextual material: eyewitness accounts from survivors such as Signalmen Bill Minton, civilian observers like Lorna Stafford and Chappie Munn, and heartfelt letters of gratitude from American families. These narratives transform the life jacket from a simple object of function into a deeply human story of endurance, loss, and solidarity.

An evocative item, it has outstanding interpretive value with strong links to maritime, defence, social and community narratives of the area. It has the potential to highlight and communicate a range of themes and storylines, including war and peace, defence, war on the home front, local civilian responses to emergencies and tragedies, maritime transport, shipwrecks and maritime disasters, birth and death, working, communication, social institutions, and community organisations.

Today, the *William Dawes* wreck lies at a depth of 135 metres and is protected under the Commonwealth Historical Shipwrecks Act 1975. This lifejacket stands as one of the few accessible, tangible links to the ship and its story, offering a unique entry point for engaging the public in Australia's wartime maritime history and the legacy of community response in times of crises.

Angela George

Vale Jimmy McGrath -

Local legend, Jimmy McGrath, passed away on 1 August 2025. Well-known and loved in the community, Jim the mechanic was best known for keeping many a car on the roads in Merimbula and Pambula. He was the longest serving member of Pambula Surf Life Saving Club with more than 50 years of patrol service and was awarded Life Membership of Surf Life Saving NSW as well as Pambula SLSC and the Far South Coast Branch. He was also passionate about helping to support and inspire young lifesavers. In 2014 he was awarded joint Bega Valley Senior Citizen of the Year for his services to the community.

Jimmy was also interested in the history of the local area. I remember a bus trip organized by the M-HIS for which he was the tour leader, giving an amusing but knowledgeable commentary on various points of interest around Pambula, Towamba and finishing with a lunch at Boydstown. Another outing I recall was to Pambula Cemetery where Jimmy led us around various notable graves including that of Syms Covington.

RIP Jimmy McGrath.

Olwen Morris

Archivist's Cataloguing Procedure -

At the Museum we receive or develop documents of historical significance which we retain, catalogue and index. These can be publications, letters, reports, notes from conversations or newspaper cuttings. If they are flimsy we glue them onto backing paper. There can be several items on one sheet of paper.

The next step is to put them into archival sleeves and sort them into the Index folders. A document can be relevant in two or more folders in which case we put it into the most relevant folder with cross references. They are then numbered and added to the typed index. One copy of the Indexes is placed in the red or white files and one in the front of each relevant folder.

Some of the Indexes have already been added to eHive, which is an ongoing task. The actual folders, eighty-three in number, are kept in the Filing Cabinets in the Office. Any person can search a topic by checking the relevant Index for the right number of the item in the actual folder. Any item can be copied but the original must be carefully replaced and not removed from the Office.

This system was originally developed by George Punshon with help from Jack Burns and Colette about 1990.

There are now at least 6600 items catalogued and in addition more waiting to be dealt with.

We also have at least 3000 photographs, many of which also are now on eHive. The originals are kept in black archival albums on the bottom shelf of the bookcase in the office.

The maps too are catalogued in the old system and are stored in the bottom shelf of the cabinet in the Annex.

These archives constitute a valuable resource, much of which is not available elsewhere, and should be maintained. They represent twenty-five years of work.

We badly need someone to take over this work as Colette is now retiring.

Guide to Cataloguing Documents.

1. Decide if the document is relevant for the history of the Bega Valley Shire.
2. Write down reference name and date of document on list.
3. Sort documents into groups relating to the area involved e.g. Bega, Tathra, Eden etc.
4. Place document in separate named files.
5. From time to time move sorted documents to main named files and add them to the Index of those files.
6. Print completed index and add to front of red and white index books.

Colette Moorhead

For the Term of her Natural Life -

Probably the youngest girl ever to be transported to Australia was Mary Wade, who was originally sentenced to death at the age of eleven for "assaulting" and "feloniously taking" the clothes of eight year-old Mary Phillips. Her sentence and that of her co-conspirator, fourteen year-old Jane Whiting, was later changed to transportation "for and during the term of her natural life to the Eastern coast of New South Wales..." Mary Wade was lucky to survive her journey in the *Lady Juliana* of the Second Fleet, (the first convict ship to carry only women and children), and was put ashore at Norfolk Island. She went on to have two children by the age of seventeen and when she died in Sydney at the grand old age of 82, she had more than 300 descendants!

As a child Mary spent her days sweeping the streets of London as a means of begging. On 5 January 1789 Mary and Jane stole one cotton frock, one linen tippet and one linen cap from Mary Phillips, who was collecting water in a bottle at a privy. The two girls sold the frock to a pawnbroker. Mary was later reported to an Officer of the Law by another child who found the tippet in Mary's room, whereupon she was arrested and placed in Bridewell Prison.

Bridewell was originally a palace built as a residence of King Henry VIII where he lived early in his reign for eight years. In 1553 Henry's son, King Edward VI gave the palace to the City of London Corporation for use as an orphanage and place of correction for wayward women.

On 11 March 1789 King George III was proclaimed cured of an unnamed madness, assumed to be porphyria, a degenerative mental disease. In the spirit of celebration all the women on death row, including Mary Wade, had their sentences commuted to penal transportation to Australia.

One of Mary Wade's descendants went on to become Prime Minister of Australia—Kevin Rudd!!



*The Pass Room at Bridewell Prison
drawn by Thomas Rowlandson and
Augustus Pugin*

Convict Garb -

When the convicts of the First Fleet arrived in Port Jackson, most wore clothes made out of a cheap, flaxen cloth known as osnaburg. However this rotted easily and the convicts were soon looking ragged. Extra clothing was not carried on the convict ships so blankets and old clothes were cut up and made into 'new' clothing. On 5 July 1788 Governor Philip wrote back to England saying "a great part of the cloathing [sic]...was very bad, and a great part of it was likewise too small for people of common size". Governor Macquarie first introduced a striped convict uniform in 1810. The uniforms came in just one size and were marked 'PB' for prison barracks. Prisoners on Norfolk Island and Van Diemen's Land wore yellow and black felt uniforms known colloquially as 'maggie suits'.

The colony was rife with robbery. One prisoner, James Daly, attempted to forge the discovery of gold by grinding down brass shoe buckles and a golden guinea. He was later flogged for his trickery and eventually hanged for stealing clothing from another convict.

John Hudson was the youngest convict sentenced to transportation. He was just 8 years old when he was sentenced for stealing a linen shirt, one pistol, two aprons and five silk stockings.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

THE STORY OF MERIMBULA SCHOOL



COMMEMORATING 150 YEARS - 1875 TO 2025
NOVEMBER 2025 - MARCH 2026
MERIMBULA OLD SCHOOL MUSEUM

Honouring generations of education, community & resilience