

The Old School Report

merimulahistoricalociety.org.au

Merimbula –Imlay
Historical Society

November 2025

In every age 'the good old days' were a myth. No one ever thought they were good at the time. For every age has consisted of crises that seemed intolerable to the people who lived through them.

[Brooks Atkinson, 1894-1984, *Once Around the Sun* (1951) American theatre critic who worked for the New York Times.

From the Editor -

Another year has come and gone far too quickly and this is the last newsletter for 2025. Much has happened this year with many changes from retirements to a whole new committee. Angela George has made great improvements to the look of the MOSM with much more to come. Check out her article on page 4 for her ideas on redevelopment. Thanks Angela for your input to the newsletter, and Pam Pitt for her report on the visiting group from Victoria. Also a late arrival from Shirley who has submitted more information about Jack Gray. Please note the next SEGHI meeting will be on the first Saturday in February not the second. This was decided at the last meeting as Beverley Holland will be at the Cobargo Show which is on 14th February. The Christmas Lunch is at the Top Pub and bookings are essential so please email Nancy Richards at nancy.richards@bigpond.com

if you plan to attend. I will be on crutches over Christmas following my knee replacement so Merry Christmas from me and see you in the New Year!

Committee Report -

Even though the launch of *Lessons for Life* unfortunately had to be cancelled owing to bad weather, at least about 30 people visited the museum on the day thanks to Pam. George and Adrian who volunteered their time in case! Keep advertising the exhibition and take your friends and family for a special treat over Christmas! I will give another plug at the ABC History talk on 21 November.

President Peter has been working on the mould issue on the ceiling of the kitchen area of the building using a special treatment recommended by the Curator and in accordance with the mould prevention and management strategy.

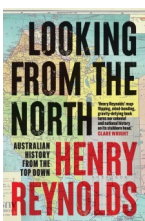
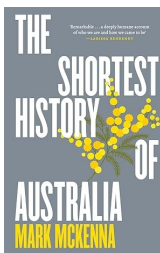
The advertised talk on 'coutha boats by Andrew McManus was unfortunately unable to go ahead at the last general meeting in September, but instead members were treated to an interesting visual and oral history of the *Alma Gray* which was presented by Adrian Pitt. The Bird Olympics went ahead at Potoroo Palace on 23 October attended by two student bird callers from Merimbula school. The museum arranged for the Dawson Shield and Bird Banner to be on loan for the day.

Merimbula Old School Museum Committee

Books -

I recently went to the Headlands Writers" Festival which was held on the weekend of 17 - 19 October. Unfortunately I could only attend one talk between Hugh White, previously Deputy Secretary for Strategy in the Department of Defence, Linda Jaivin, an expert in all things Chinese and Isla Evans, a reporter with ABC South East. It was a fascinating insight into current US/China politics and a slightly concerning look into the future!

There were many other items on the programme I would have loved to see but arthritis stopped me in my tracks this year. However I did pick up a new book by one of the other authors in the event. Historian Mark McKenna has chosen some main themes in Australian history that have shaped the nation - First Nations, settler and migrant. The First Nations narrative of the longest continuous cultures on Earth underpins the whole book. The arrival of the British and their institutions and the consequent 'dispersal' of the First Nations peoples and stories of the third influx of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic migrants combine to tell the story of modern Australia. It is a brilliant, mind-opening read.



If you wish to learn more about First Nations history in Queensland, Henry Reynolds's recent book is a revelation. He shows how the economic development of the north was only possible with non-white labour. The pastoral industry relied on Aboriginal labour, sugar on Pacific Islanders, pearling on Japanese divers. The Chinese, originally drawn by gold-mining, became the backbone to northern towns. The book ends with the militarization of the north with full legal rights without traditional Aboriginal landowners being consulted yet again. **OM**

Diary -

- **Friday 5 December 12.30pm** - Christmas Lunch at Top Pub, Pambula
- **Saturday 7 February 2026** - Sehgi meeting with Bombala Historical Society

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** -

News -

- Apologies for the late cancellation of the launch of the *Lessons in Time* display but it is still on until March 2026 so there is plenty of time to bring visitors to enjoy the experience!
- I also apologise for not reporting the tragic death of Geraldine McCann in the last issue. Geraldine died on 8 June from a relatively short but devastating illness. She was my friend but also a stalwart member of the MOMS, having served for a time on the committee and always ready to help when she could. Geraldine was a lay preacher with the Anglican Church giving spiritual and pastoral guidance to aged care facilities. Her favourite pastime was embroidery and her cross-stitch work was stunning. Vale Geraldine!

150 Years of Learning -

As I have mentioned the launch of the display by the Merimbula Old School Museum curator, Angela George, due to be held on 15 November, was cancelled owing to bad weather. However the exhibition titled *Lessons for Life: the Story of Merimbula School* is now on display until March 2026. The display celebrates a significant milestone commemorating 150 years since the completion of the original public school building.

The exhibition has been installed throughout the former teacher's residence section of the museum building, transforming the four adjoining rooms into an immersive journey through a century and a half of education, community, and memory. This exhibition is not only about a building - it's also about generations of students, teachers, and families whose lives were shaped within its walls. We want visitors to step back into those school days, relive their memories, and reflect on how learning has evolved and community spirit has endured.

A tribute to education and community

The exhibition celebrates the school's educational, social, and architectural legacy from 1875 to the present day. It explores how a small seaside school became a cornerstone of community life - from its early days as a one-room classroom to its later transformation into the museum we know today.

Visitors will encounter stories of teachers and students, classroom routines, playground antics, and community events that made the building a hub for the region's growing township. Themes of *change and continuity, resilience and adaptation, teaching and learning, and everyday voices* guide the exhibition's storytelling.

Inside the 150th anniversary exhibition

The exhibition spans four themed rooms, each offering a unique perspective on Merimbula's schooling past:

- **Room 1: Foundations and the first schoolhouse** - The origins of Merimbula Public School, the 1875 building, and the community campaign that made it possible.
- **Room 2: Life inside the schoolhouse** - Daily school life through the decades, from slates and ink wells to recess games and report cards, with photographs and hands-on activities.
- **Room 3: Behind the blackboard** - The lives of teachers in regional NSW - the challenges, expectations, and contributions of those who educated generations of local children.
- **Room 4: Community, culture and legacy** - The building's continuing impact as a civic and cultural centre, its transition into a museum, and its place in the hearts of Merimbula families today.

Interactive features such as audio recordings, a digital slide show, memory walls, and hands-on learning stations invite visitors to share their own stories and connect across generations.

Preserving the legacy of learning

This special anniversary exhibition is more than a commemoration - it's a reminder of how education has shaped Merimbula's identity for a century and a half. By preserving and sharing these stories, the Merimbula Old School Museum continues its mission to honour the past while inspiring future generations.

Olwen Morris gratefully acknowledging notes supplied by Angela George

TOUR GROUP VISIT TO MUSEUM 12 TH NOVEMBER 2025 -

On Wednesday 12 th November, a group of 32 senior citizens from Woorayl and Foster Probus club in Victoria visited the Old School Museum as part of their 3 day programme in the area. Debbie Balcombe from Spirit Travel & Tours was their tour leader. Interestingly, she brought a group here a few years ago, so nice to know she thought our little museum was worth including once again in her programme.

As their schedule for the day was tight having many places to visit, they only had an hour allotted for the visit, arriving at 8.45 in the morning. Pam and George Pitt and Neil Burnham were their hosts, and were able to mingle separately among the visitors and explain things as they wandered around the residence and school room. Coincidentally, the last time they visited was on a day that Pam and George were on duty.

They were a lovely group, very interested in everything and extremely appreciative, thanking everyone as they left. It was a good time for a group to visit, being only 3 days before the 150 th Exhibition "Lessons for Life" on 15 November, which would have been a rehearsal for the big day with all the many exhibits and stories that Angela George has spent many hours preparing and displaying. Unfortunately, due to inclement weather, the event had to be cancelled at the last minute, hopefully to be rescheduled for another day. However the display remains until March 2026.

Pam Pitt



*Photos of group from Victoria visiting the Merimbula Old School Museum
Courtesy of Debbie Balcombe*

Curator's Report -

Angela George is working to improve the vitality of the Merimbula Old School Museum! Her report shows her current and future projects:

Conservation planning underway for the 'couta boat *Alma Gray*

The Merimbula Old School Museum recently welcomed Jeff Hodgson and Liam McGeagh from the Australian National Maritime Museum, marking an exciting new stage in the care of the museum's treasured 'couta boat, *Alma Gray*.

Their visit was supported through the Maritime Museums of Australia Project Support Scheme (MMAPSS), which provides funding and professional expertise to museums preserving significant maritime heritage. The resulting Vessel Management Plan will guide the long-term preservation, research, interpretation, and display of the *Alma Gray*, ensuring that this remarkable vessel remains part of the Sapphire Coast's maritime story.

Built for barracouta fishing, likely around Port Phillip Bay in Victoria, *Alma Gray* was previously owned and operated by Jack Gray, remembered as Merimbula's last commercial fisherman. Jack's life and work reflected the town's deep connection to the sea and the small-scale coastal fishing traditions that sustained the community well into the 20th century. Today, the *Alma Gray* stands as a tangible link to that history - a symbol of craftsmanship, resilience, and the coastal lifestyle that shaped generations of Merimbula residents.

The Merimbula Old School Museum extends its thanks to the Australian National Maritime Museum and the MMAPSS program for their generous support, and to Jeff and Liam for their time, expertise, and enthusiasm during their recent visit.

"We're thrilled to have expert advice guiding the management of *Alma Gray*. It's a wonderful opportunity to ensure this beautiful piece of Merimbula's working history is protected for future generations," said Museum Curator Angela George.

"Having this input from Jeff and Liam is an invaluable step in preserving *Alma Gray* and honouring Jack Gray's legacy," Angela added.

Treasures in stone: The pyrophyllite turnings of John Mcllwraith Smith

Among the Merimbula Old School Museum's most distinctive treasures is a trio of finely crafted stone objects - a candlestick holder, a goblet, and an ashtray - each turned from local pyrophyllite by resident craftsman and philanthropist John Mcllwraith Smith. Together, these pieces are far more than examples of regional craft: they express the deep connections between landscape, creativity, and community life on the Sapphire Coast.

Material and maker

Pyrophyllite, sometimes known by Mcllwraith Smith's registered trademark name "Merimbulite," is a soft, fine-grained metamorphic rock found in the region's ancient geological formations. Its subtle hues, silky texture, and ease of shaping made it a favourite among stone turners and sculptors. Where others might have seen an industrial mineral, Mcllwraith Smith saw artistic potential - a way to transform a local material into objects of both beauty and meaning.

A skilled turner with a generous community spirit, Mcllwraith Smith registered the Merimbulite trademark in 1958, promoting the use of the local stone while raising funds for Bimbimbie Retirement Village and Imlay House aged care facility. Under the Merimbulite name, his handcrafted items were sold or exhibited to generate financial support for these services - a creative model of philanthropy that united craft, commerce, and compassion. Each object thus carries not only aesthetic value

but also a legacy of social purpose, reflecting the cooperative and civic-minded ethos of small coastal communities in general and John Mcllwraith Smith in particular.

Craft and design

The candlestick holder displays elegant balance - a flared base, slender shaft, and softly polished surface that accentuates the stone's natural veining. The goblet, with its thin walls and even symmetry, showcases both the translucency of pyrophyllite and the turner's steady precision. The ashtray, a hallmark of mid-20th-century domestic design, gains sophistication through its fine workmanship and material refinement. Together, these forms demonstrate Mcllwraith Smith's ability to merge functionality with artistry, transforming everyday objects into timeless works of local craftsmanship.

Meaning and significance

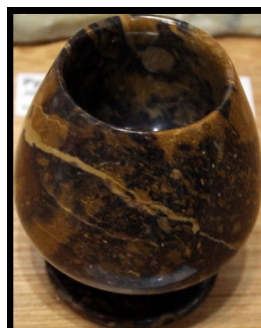
The significance of these three objects extends well beyond their physical form. They encapsulate a period when local artisans worked with local materials to express identity, ingenuity, and pride of place. Each piece is a dialogue between the natural world and human hands - the ancient geology of the Pambula district reimagined as objects of daily use and beauty.

In a museum context, they illustrate multiple layers of story:

- Geological heritage, linking the region's unique stone to its cultural landscape;
- Artistic innovation, where traditional turning techniques meet new material challenges;
- Social and philanthropic history, representing community generosity and volunteerism;
- Domestic life, recalling the forms and fashions of mid-century homes.

Legacy

Today, the "Merimbulite" collection serves as a tangible reminder of the Sapphire Coast's resourcefulness and creative spirit. Modest in scale but rich in meaning, these objects capture the essence of a place where artistry and empathy intertwine. They stand as enduring symbols of how a community's landscape can inspire its craftsmanship - and how craftsmanship, in turn, can strengthen the community itself. **Angela George**



More from the Curator -

Looking Ahead: a new chapter for the Merimbula Old School Museum

The Merimbula Old School Museum is preparing for an exciting transformation, with plans underway for a full redevelopment of its exhibitions. The proposed renewal, titled *From Ancient Shores to Settled Streets: The Living Story of the Merimbula -Pambula District*, will reimagine how the region's history is shared with the community and visitors alike.

The project envisages a revitalised and immersive approach to storytelling - one that connects the district's deep past with its living present. The new exhibitions will trace the story of the Sapphire Coast from its geological foundations through thousands of years of uninterrupted Djiringanj and Thaua Indigenous presence to the waves of subsequent settlement, industry, and community life. This redevelopment is about creating a more dynamic, layered experience - one that honours and recognises our First Nations Peoples, celebrates the resilience of settlers, and reflects the diversity of our community.

A living story of place

The proposed redesign weaves together key themes such as *Connection to Country, Encounters and Upheaval, Pioneers and Persistence, Migration and Belonging, and Water and Work*. Each narrative invites visitors to reflect on how people have lived with, shaped, and been shaped by the Merimbula - Pambula landscape over thousands of years.

Exhibits will move beyond static displays, using digital storytelling, oral histories, and QR-linked interpretive content to create a more accessible and interactive experience. Visitors will be able to explore history both chronologically and thematically - from ancient coastlines and early Aboriginal life to agriculture, dairying, oystering, tourism, and modern community growth.

Reimagining the museum experience

The redevelopment plan includes redesigned exhibition spaces throughout the historic school building, including:

- An Indigenous space: Honouring the Djiringanj and Thaua peoples and their enduring connection to land and sea.
- Education and domestic life rooms: Re-creations of an early classroom and a kitchen, linking everyday life to broader social change.
- Settlement, growth and development: Exploring European settlement, local industries such as dairying, fishing, milling, and tourism, war and defence, religion, medical and health care and social, sporting and recreation narratives that have shaped the region.
- Outdoor displays: Highlighting oyster farming, fishing, tanning, and other coastal industries unique to the region.

Each space will be carefully curated to balance authenticity with storytelling impact, blending artefacts, personal stories, and interpretive panels.

Connecting community and country

The redevelopment is also about community engagement. Local families, schools, and volunteers will be invited to contribute stories, photographs, and artefacts. Indigenous history will be respectfully foregrounded, while ongoing migration stories and everyday voices will help visitors connect past and present. We want the museum to feel alive - a place where everyone can see themselves reflected in the stories.

Strengthening a cultural hub

This renewal aligns with the Merimbula Old School Museum's mission to preserve, present, and promote the region's rich history. It positions the museum as a key cultural hub for education, tourism, and local heritage - a place where visitors can engage deeply with the landscape and people of the Sapphire Coast.

The redevelopment will proceed as funding and community partnerships allow, with temporary updates and pilot exhibits already being planned.

Angela George



Jeff Hodgson & Liam McGeagh from Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney carrying out their inspection of the Alma Gray. The resulting Vessel Management Plan will guide the long-term preservation, research, interpretation and display of the Alma Gray ensuring this vessel remains part of the Sapphire Coast's maritime story.

The Merimbula Old School Museum is grateful to MAAPPS for funding and professional expertise for this project.

(Photography by Angela George)

Jack Gray & Alma -

Jack Gray was born in Bairnsdale, Victoria on 13 June 1920. His father was a fisherman and at one time, mate on the supply steamer on the Gippsland Lakes. Jack was one of eight children and went to school at the public school in Lakes Entrance. He went to San Remo in Victoria where he learned to sail and catch fish. Mullet was the main catch as it was the staple diet in those days. Jack also did some cray fishing in San Remo.

During WWII Jack was classed as medically unfit for the army, but when the Japanese threatened Australia he was recruited as a guard.

He came to Fishpen, Merimbula in 1945 after the war ended and brought the boat, *Alma*, with him. His brother Rupert was already in Merimbula but Jack never worked with him. The boat was built around the 1890s as a 'couta boat. A large fleet of these boats worked out of southern Victoria fishing for barracouta, which gave the boats their name.

In order to register the boat in New South Wales it had to have a name so Jack decided that ALMA would be the easiest to paint having all straight lines! He confirmed this in a recorded interview with the Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society in 2010 when he was ninety years old!

The *Alma* came from Port Albert in Victoria, powered by a Studebaker engine. After the war there were virtually no marine engines available. A local oyster farmer known as "Brownie" knew Jack and said he never saw *Alma* under sail.

In Merimbula Jack went into longline fishing. He had 800 hooks on the line which was two miles in length. A buoy with a weight was dropped and at the other end of the line was a buoy with a flag. He mainly caught gummy shark and barracouta with mullet bait. Once Jack broke the record by catching twelve and a half boxes of 'couta, each containing twenty fish, in half an hour. At that time there were fourteen boats in Merimbula and twenty-seven in Eden as well as forty-six trawlers. Jack took his catch to Mitchie's jetty where the buyer was waiting then the fish were taken by truck to Nimitybelle and from there by train to Sydney.

Jack was also involved in many sea rescues but would never accept a gratuity for his efforts saying it might be he who needed rescuing one day.

Thank you Colette, Shirley and Nicky for supplying this article taken from MOSM's oral history CD.

SEHGI and Workshop: Preparedness and Recovery -

On 8 th November SEHGI members met at the Cobargo RSL Memorial Hall for the quarterly meeting. This was followed by Part 2 of the "Preparedness and Recovery" workshop supported by MGNSW and conducted by Dale and Tegan. A small group stayed for the workshop, including reps from Merimbula, Eden and Cobargo.

Part 1 had identified the need for a "Team Approach" in the recovery phase of a disaster especially in managing potential damage or risks to our collections. This was put in to practice as our group worked together to deal with a scenario where a collection of items was affected by water damage. Members were allocated or chose roles according to their strengths and experience. These included triaging of items by prioritising their value to the collection, documentation, identifying methods for drying depending upon what material the item was constructed from eg paper, cotton, silk, wood, metal etc. And measures to consider for preventing further damage. A fun, interactive and team building exercise. The next SEHGI meeting will be hosted by Bombala Historical Society on Saturday 7 th February 2026. Yes, we know it's a week earlier than the usual weekend but Bombala has agreed so members otherwise busy on the 14th can attend. Hope to see you there.

Bev Holland
Secretary, SEHGI



Happy Holidays
And
A
Healthy safe
2026!