

CURATOR'S ANNUAL REPORT

Merimbula Old School Museum

1 July 2025 – 30 June 2026

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Curator's opening remarks

The 2025–26 year has been one of considerable activity, reflection and forward planning for the Merimbula Old School Museum. The most visible achievement was the commemoration of 150 years since the completion and occupation of the former Merimbula Public School building. At the same time, a substantial amount of less visible work was undertaken to improve collection records, strengthen conservation planning, develop future exhibitions, activate the Museum grounds and raise the overall quality and consistency of interpretation.

Across these projects, my aim has been to help the Museum move beyond the presentation of individual objects towards a more connected account of the Merimbula–Pambula district - including its people, industries, environment, institutions and changing communities. Efforts have been made to keep this work grounded in the Museum's volunteer character and in the knowledge, memories and generosity of the local community.

Exhibition highlights and development

Lessons for Life: The Story of Merimbula School

A major exhibition achievement during the year was the development, production and installation of *Lessons for Life: The Story of Merimbula School*, commemorating 150 years since the original school building opened in 1875. The exhibition opened in November 2025 and occupied the four rooms of the former teacher's residence, creating an extended journey through the history of education, the building and the community it served.

The project required extensive historical research, exhibition planning, text and label writing, image and object selection, layout development and consultation. Its narrative extended from the campaign to establish a public school and the experiences of early pupils and teachers, through school life, discipline, curriculum and the teacher's domestic circumstances, to the building's later use as a residence, community venue and museum. Community call-outs sought memories, stories and artefacts from the many generations connected with the old school. Although the response was less productive than hoped, the contributions received nonetheless added valuable personal perspectives to the exhibition.

The anniversary provided an important opportunity to interpret the Museum building as a significant collection object in its own right: not simply the place in which history is displayed, but a surviving expression of nineteenth-century civic aspiration, education and community effort. The project created a substantial body of research and interpretive content that can support future education displays, public programs and proposals to activate the wider Museum site.

Whole-of-museum exhibition renewal

Alongside the anniversary exhibition, planning continued for a broader renewal of the Museum's displays. The developing approach, *From Ancient Shores to Settled Streets: The Living Story of the Merimbula–Pambula District*, proposes a layered history extending from the district's geological

foundations and enduring Djiringanj and Thaua connection to Country through settlement, migration, industry, community life and contemporary change.

This planning has focused on stronger narrative connections between rooms, more accessible language, improved visual consistency and interpretation that explains why objects matter rather than merely identifying them. It has also considered how digital storytelling, oral histories, photographic slideshows, listening posts and QR-linked content could complement – but not replace – the Museum’s objects and historic setting.

Caring for Community: Health, Distance and Resilience of the Far South Coast

Research, narrative planning and content development were undertaken for *Caring for Community: Health, Distance and Resilience of the Far South Coast*, an exhibition examining how people in the Pambula–Merimbula district sought, provided and improved health care in the face of distance, limited services and changing medical knowledge. The project drew on collection objects, local records, newspapers, photographs and biographical research to connect formal medical services with the often less visible work of families, neighbours, midwives, nurses and community fundraisers.

The exhibition narrative was developed around care before hospitals; midwifery and maternity; doctors working in relative isolation; the establishment of the Pambula Cottage Hospital in 1899 and Pambula District Hospital in 1917; ambulance services; women in medicine; and the continuing challenge of accessing care in a regional community. Particular attention was given to personal stories, including Nurse Lily May Cousemacker and the maternity home *Martinmere*. Panel text, object and image selection, layout and visual hierarchy were refined for the compact gallery spaces of the former kitchen and the Heber Perrin Room, allowing the exhibition to present medical history as a story of resilience, advocacy and collective effort.

A Taste of the Tides: Oyster Delights of Pambula and Merimbula

A Taste of the Tides: Oyster Delights of Pambula and Merimbula was researched and developed as the food and dining component of the Museum’s broader oystering story. Installed in the former Museum entry area, it explored oysters as a food source connected with Country, household life, hospitality, celebration and the changing identity of the Pambula–Merimbula district.

Research and interpretive development ranged from Aboriginal shell middens and the long history of harvesting oysters, through oyster farming and the idea of “merroir”, to opening, serving and eating oysters. Exhibition content addressed the farm-to-feast journey, oyster etiquette, the traditional “R-month” rule, recipes and changing tastes. Oyster knives, photographs, menus and decorative oyster plates were used to connect work on the lakes with meals at the table. Panel writing, object research and label development culminated in a compact exhibition that complements the outdoor punts and the wider Working the Waters interpretation.

History of education across the Pambula–Merimbula district

Preliminary planning also commenced for a new exhibition examining the history of education across the broader Pambula–Merimbula district. This work builds on the research and interpretive material developed for *Lessons for Life*, earlier Pambula Public School anniversary projects and continuing research into the many public, provisional, half-time and one-teacher schools that served scattered communities throughout the district.

The developing concept will consider how distance, transport, population change and government policy shaped access to schooling; the experiences of teachers and pupils; classroom routines and resources; and the role of small schools as centres of community life. A preliminary exhibition structure

and research framework were prepared during the year, establishing a basis for further consultation, object and image selection, and detailed text development in 2026–27. This will be installed in the Munn Room.

Future and dispersed exhibitions

A major strand of work during the year was the planning and development of exhibitions that use the building, grounds, veranda and outdoor collection as combined active interpretive spaces. This addresses the Museum's limited indoor area while giving greater meaning to the significant large objects already on display in the grounds.

Planning and research progressed across several connected themes:

- oystering, using the Cole and Brown punts to explore oyster leases, punt design, family operations, estuarine ecology, the long history of harvesting and farming oysters in the district, and oysters as a food source;
- commercial fishing, with the *Alma Gray* as a central object through which to interpret Jack Gray, local fishing families, small-scale coastal fishing and changes in the maritime economy;
- dairying and the Pambula Co-operative Creamery and Dairy Company, linking cooperative enterprise, transport, refrigeration and rural development;
- Baddeley's Tannery and associated bark-crushing machinery, connecting labour, enterprise and the district's rural economy; and
- the old school building itself, interpreted as both a heritage place and a symbol of education and community development.

A detailed proposal was prepared for a dispersed oysters and oystering exhibition, together with research, draft interpretive content, an indicative budget and funding material.

Planning and preparation also began for an exhibition entitled "*From Surf to Snow: Cooper Woods and the Road from Pambula Beach to Olympic Gold*," focusing on Pambula Beach resident and 2026 Winter Olympic gold medallist Cooper Woods, proposed to open in early November 2026, subject to the necessary permissions and the availability of essential images and artefacts.

Collections management and research

Collections documentation remained an ongoing priority throughout the year. Work continued on eHive records, object files, physical descriptions, provenance and contextual research, object locations, and the preparation of material suitable for both collection management and public interpretation.

The Significance 2.0 framework was used to guide object research and the preparation of Statements of Significance. As an accepted benchmark for assessing collection significance, it helps identify the historic, social, research and interpretive values of objects, supports conservation priorities and provides a clearer basis for future display and collection decisions. Particular focus was on the *Alma Gray*, along with locally significant objects associated with dairying, maritime history, domestic life, education and community experience.

Attention has also been given to fact-checking recorded information and, where necessary, correcting documentation relating to collection items.

Work also progressed on improving the organisation of collection storage, including separating catalogued and uncatalogued material, checking locations and strengthening the link between physical

storage and eHive records. Although this remains a long-term undertaking, it is essential to making the collection more accessible, accountable and useful.

Conservation and large-object planning

Alma Gray Vessel Management Plan

An important conservation milestone was the successful involvement of the Australian National Maritime Museum through a 2024-25 Maritime Museums of Australia Project Support Scheme grant. The Museum welcomed Jeff Hodgson and Liam McGeagh to inspect the *Alma Gray* and contribute specialist advice towards a Vessel Management Plan.

The *Alma Gray*, formerly owned and operated by Jack Gray and remembered as Merimbula's last commercial fishing vessel, is one of the Museum's most significant maritime objects. The resulting plan will guide its long-term preservation, research, interpretation and display. The project has also strengthened the Museum's relationship with the Australian National Maritime Museum and demonstrated the value of specialist support for complex collection items.

Protective shelters for historic vessels

Concept planning and formal descriptive work commenced for roofed, open shelter/s for the *Alma Gray* and the Brown oyster punt. Both vessels are listed on the Australian Register of Historic Vessels and require improved protection from weather while remaining accessible as outdoor displays.

The work included consideration of sympathetic materials and design, the heritage character of the site and the relevant planning pathway. Advice was sought from Bega Valley Shire Council, confirming that the heritage listing of the site and the scale of the proposal would require careful assessment. Although the structure/s remain a future project, the research and documentation completed during the year have clarified the conservation need and the steps required to progress it.

Interpretation and visitor experience

Considerable time was devoted to researching, drafting and refining exhibition panels, object labels, image captions, promotional material and collection descriptions. A consistent objective has been to balance historical accuracy with clear, engaging language and a strong sense of place. Interpretation has increasingly been organised around people, choices and lived experience, helping visitors understand the relationship between objects and the district's wider history.

Planning commenced for a 10 to 12-minute introductory audiovisual presentation on the history and development of the Pambula–Merimbula district. Work has included a storyboard framework, thematic structure, draft voice-over material and the identification of image and object pairings. The presentation is intended to orient first-time visitors and school groups and provide a coherent introduction to stories encountered throughout the Museum.

Options were also investigated for interactive oral-history listening posts using historic black Bakelite telephones, as well as narrated photographic slideshows. These concepts offer practical, characterful ways to introduce local voices and memories while remaining sympathetic to the historic museum environment. Work will continue on these into the next year.

Digital access, promotion and community engagement

Online collection access and public communication were strengthened during the year. eHive records continued to be reviewed and updated, while work on the Museum's Facebook and Instagram presence included revised introductory information, promotional content and posts highlighting exhibitions, objects and local stories. A digital promotion for the Merimbula RSL was also developed to highlight the Museum and encourage new visitors and volunteers.

Several attempts to engage the broader community in the Museum and its activities did not achieve the level of participation hoped for. This experience has highlighted the need for a more concerted and targeted approach in the coming year, with activities shaped around the interests, needs and preferred forms of participation of our different audiences.

Funding, planning and organisational development

Grant and project-development work continued across heritage interpretation, collection conservation, infrastructure and digital engagement. This included preparing project descriptions, statements of significance, budgets and explanations of community benefit and educational impact. A MMAPSS grant was secured through the Australian National Maritime Museum for Stage 1 of the conservation of the *Empire Gladstone* signal flags, with volunteer education and skills development forming a major component of the project. An application to Museums & Galleries of NSW for the proposed outdoor oystering interpretation was unsuccessful; but the project will be refined and resubmitted in the program's second round, closing in September 2026.

With considerable assistance and input from Bega Valley Shire Museum Advisor Joan Kelly, the Museum's emerging strategic direction was further developed around high-quality collections, rigorous research, responsible conservation, increased digital access, education and outreach. This work has helped connect individual projects to a longer-term vision: a museum that is more cohesive, accessible and responsive, and that serves as both a visitor attraction and a useful historical resource for the community and local schools.

Initial work also began on a clearer visual identity and more consistent presentation across the Museum's exhibitions, signage, promotional material and online communication. Together with improved fundraising and donation messaging, this work aims to make the Museum more identifiable and recognisable and communicate its purpose and needs to the local community more effectively.

Priorities for 2026–27

My principal curatorial and collections priorities for the coming year are to:

- continue improving eHive records, provenance, object locations, significance assessments and stored-collection documentation;
- complete the *Alma Gray* Vessel Management Plan and advance protection and interpretation of the historic vessels;
- produce the next stage of the oystering, fishing and wider *Working the Waters* interpretation;
- complete and install *From Surf to Snow: Cooper Woods and the Road from Pambula Beach to Olympic Gold*;
- continue research and development for an exhibition about education across the Pambula–Merimbula district;

- continue developing the introductory audiovisual and oral-history concepts as resources permit;
- strengthen digital access, promotion, visual identity and donation communication;

Complete the makeover of the Museum entrance to provide a more welcoming and comfortable experience for both visitors and volunteers; and

- pursue grants, partnerships and specialist advice for conservation, exhibitions and infrastructure.

Acknowledgements

I extend my thanks to the Museum committee and volunteers for their practical assistance, knowledge and commitment throughout the year. I also acknowledge the community members who have shared memories, photographs, artefacts and information.

Special thanks are due to the Australian National Maritime Museum, the Maritime Museums of Australia Project Support Scheme, Jeff Hodgson and Liam McGeagh for their expertise and support for the *Alma Gray* project, and to Bega Valley Shire Museum Advisor Joan Kelly for her ongoing suggestions, advice and support across many aspects of the Museum's operations.

Conclusion

The 2025–26 year combined a major public commemoration with sustained behind-the-scenes work. *Lessons for Life* celebrated the 150-year history of the old school and demonstrated the value of research-rich, community-centred interpretation. Conservation planning, collection documentation, outdoor exhibition development and strategic preparation have laid the groundwork for the next stage of the Museum's development.

The progress made this year reflects a shared belief that the Merimbula Old School Museum should remain more than a storehouse of objects. It should be a place where local stories are carefully preserved, clearly interpreted and made meaningful to present and future generations.