

Balwyn Historical Society News August 30, 2020

Greetings to members and friends,

We are now over half way through the stage 4 lockdown in Melbourne and stage 3 in regional Victoria and hope you are all coping, keeping busy and staying in contact with friends. We will not hold our regular meeting in September and it is far from clear whether regular meetings will be held for the rest of this year. However, your committee has been kept busy answering queries posted on the website and distributing printed material to those BHS members who do not have access to email. There seems to have been a resurgence of interest in family history and the history of local houses given the increase in queries we have received. This is in addition to sending you light-hearted items by email which (hopefully) amuse and interest you.

We have heard from Boroondara Council that the Canterbury Community Precinct tender has been awarded to Harris HMC and that they will begin establishing the site with fencing in early September and building will commence in the last week or September/early October.

Recently, our web manager Sharon Bondy informed us that she would be unable to continue managing the BHS website. Sharon has undertaken the task for over 5 years. She put in a lot of hard work and modernised our original site and we are very appreciative of her contribution. Many thanks Sharon for your dedication and all your hard work. Fortunately, Philip Mallis has offered to take over the task of web management for us. Many thanks Philip! Great news!

The article by Philip Mallis in this newsletter is pertinent given the fact we have received a generous donation of original drawings (see below). Our committee no longer has an archivist. If any one of you can help in cataloguing items please let one of the committee members know.

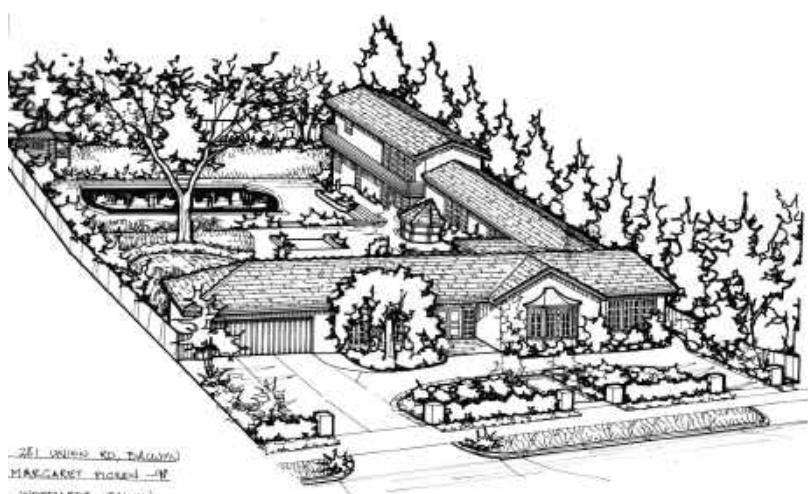
Best wishes from your committee,
Marilyn, Pat, Matthew, Barbara and Heather

Donation

We have been very fortunate in receiving a donation of a number of delightful sketches of houses by Margaret Picken, a Property Illustrator. Margaret began her career as a Cartographic Draftsman working in the mining industry. When busy with a family of three young children she was able to transfer her skills by providing sketches of houses for sale to local real estate agents. Her lovely sketches were used by the real estate agents. Apparently, she began her work taking a Polaroid photograph of the house (this is in the days before mobile phones and computers), then making a sketch in pencil. The sketch was then overlaid with drafting film and the 'pen and ink' sketch completed. With the introduction of mobile phones and the ability to scan and send via the computer the process was streamlined. Not only were sketches of properties for sale required but also floor plans and site plans.



Margaret Picken has been incredibly generous and donated her sketches to all the historical societies in Boroondara and also to Box Hill historical society. The sample sketch below is one of many donated to BHS and is of 281 Union Rd, Balwyn.



Local history in a time of pandemic

By

Philip Mallis

COVID-19 has thrown many things into a state of uncertainty. In an atmosphere of 'social distancing' and minimising in-person contact, libraries, archives and other facilities have been forced to close their doors.

So, what does this mean for local history?

The pandemic has been a wakeup call for us to recognise the value of digital preservation. Now that physical buildings are shuttered for the foreseeable future, the only way to access the troves of information contained within is remotely by using a computer or other electronic device.

In the days before the pandemic, there were concerted efforts to digitally archive and preserve documents and artefacts. These ranged from scanning slides into digital files to photographing objects for online databases. While great progress was being made on the huge amount of information waiting to be processed, there was not nearly enough support for these projects to be completed within any sort of reasonable timeframe – if ever.

This is especially true for local history. Small societies and museums often do not possess the resources, time or equipment needed to properly create or store digital records. The result is that collections are only accessible to a small number of people who are able to physically attend a location; or, as at present, nobody at all. This begs the question: if a local history archive exists but nobody can see it, what is its purpose?

Our current predicament should act as a call to action on this issue. We need to redouble our efforts to get as much as we can into digitised spaces to promote and ensure access for all. This will require considered and strategic investment into key areas that need it the most, including local history collections.

The author must qualify this point by stating that digital preservation should by no means diminish the value or importance of physical archives, libraries or museums. It should be seen as a supplement to traditional practices rather than as a replacement.

There are many examples around Australia and the world for how such a task can be accomplished well. Readers may be familiar with the National Library of Australia's 'Trove' website. It provides a centralised point for anyone to search for subjects of interest by pulling together information from hundreds of different sources into the same place.

However, much of the rich information contained in local history collections is not included in these searches simply because it has not been digitised. There are some exceptions but this situation largely results in significant barriers for people to access information.

During the current pandemic, such online tools are invaluable. It means that local history research can continue. Important information can be unearthed and stories can continue to be told. This easy and equitable access is what makes digital preservation so important – both during a crisis and afterwards.

The thrill of seeing or handling objects in local museums or the Public Records Office is irreplaceable, but we should recognise that this may not be desirable or practical for many people. Easier access to resources in as many media as possible means a wider reach for the fascinating stories that every item has to tell and a greater chance that local history continues to thrive. We should do all we can as soon as we can to make this a reality, even beyond the current lockdown.