

## Marvellous Insulwool!



**T**HE recent donation of a watercolour painting of the Insulwool Factory sparked the realisation that WHS had no information at all on the presence and life of this factory in the archive. Coupled with the bad press, products such as ‘Mr Fluffy’ and ‘Insulfluff’ engender confusion with a still-used New Zealand product, also named Insulwool (and actually made from real wool!). The lack of information is, perhaps, unsurprising.

A search for information via various search engines was unproductive, although a court case on disputed patents, in America in 1949 gave an insight into Insulwool production from wood pulp. But not at all helpful for our purposes.

At last that great resource, TROVE, yielded some tantalising pieces of information...

The first mention of the Insulwool factory is in 1942. The Sunraysia Daily reported that ‘fibrous or woolen material...made from rock’, could be used in granulated

form in ceilings, wall cavities, pumped into buildings by a pneumatic blower. Its many advantages including being non-flammable, odourless, inhospitable to vermin and vastly superior in its insulating capabilities. A local hardware store was to commence retail distribution of this product produced by a factory in Blackburn, whose head office was in Queen Street, Melbourne. That same year, Box Hill City Council voted to make an electricity supply available to the factory.

Further articles described the product as being manufactured at Box Hill by Insulwool Products Pty. Ltd, the result of the blasting of molten rock by high pressure steam jets. Rocks were selected for their composition, combined with coke for use as a flux and spun into fibres. An exhibition held in 1947 celebrating all inventions and products benefiting from the wonders of chemistry, described the Insulwool Factory in

*Continued on page 6*

**NEXT  
MEETING:**

**Saturday 6 June 1pm**  
*Geoff Arnott – “Writing History”*



# FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

*Dear Members,*

IN February, Metro Trains Melbourne assisted local MPs and community members in Blackburn with the unearthing of a time capsule on Metro trains land, which was buried in 2001 to commemorate the centenary since Federation. Anne Payne suggested that the Society would be very interested in discovering, documenting and preserving the contents of the capsule and providing input as to which, if any, of the contents should be reburied. Between June and November this year The Minister for Public and Active Transport, Hon. Gabrielle Williams MP would like to participate in the reburial along with other Community members. Tom, from Metro Trains Melbourne, delivered the capsule and Anne joined us in the Local History Room for its arrival.

We have been documenting the items from the very full capsule and considering which items we think should be reburied for another 25 years. Anne is contacting local schools in Blackburn and members of the Blackburn community to see if they would like to add any items to the capsule.

There are two new displays in our Visitor Centre. One is a tribute to ANZAC Day and the other on fifty years ago – 1976.

An Easter Egg hunt held at the Complex organised by Whitehorse City Council drew 121 visitors on Easter Saturday. The Sunday and Monday also had good attendances of 48 and 78, but no Easter eggs.

We have some more new donations. One is a 1980s wedding dress made by a dressmaker in Heathmont, another a Mitcham high school girls uniform worn from 1964–1970, and a small Bisque doll from Germany.

Planning has also commenced for our annual Heritage Family Day on September 13 along with our application for a Whitehorse Community Festivals Grant for the Day.

The AEHS (Association of Eastern Historical Societies) is holding a Conference on 18 July from 9 am–4pm in Lilydale. The Theme for this year is “Local History: thinking outside the archival box”. Tickets are \$45pp for the day and includes lunch, plus morning and afternoon tea. If you would like to attend then please contact Kathy or myself.

*Vicki Jones-Evans*



(ABOVE) The Time Capsule;  
(BELOW) Mayor Jessie McCallum lowering the Capsule in 2001.



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# APRIL MEETING REPORT



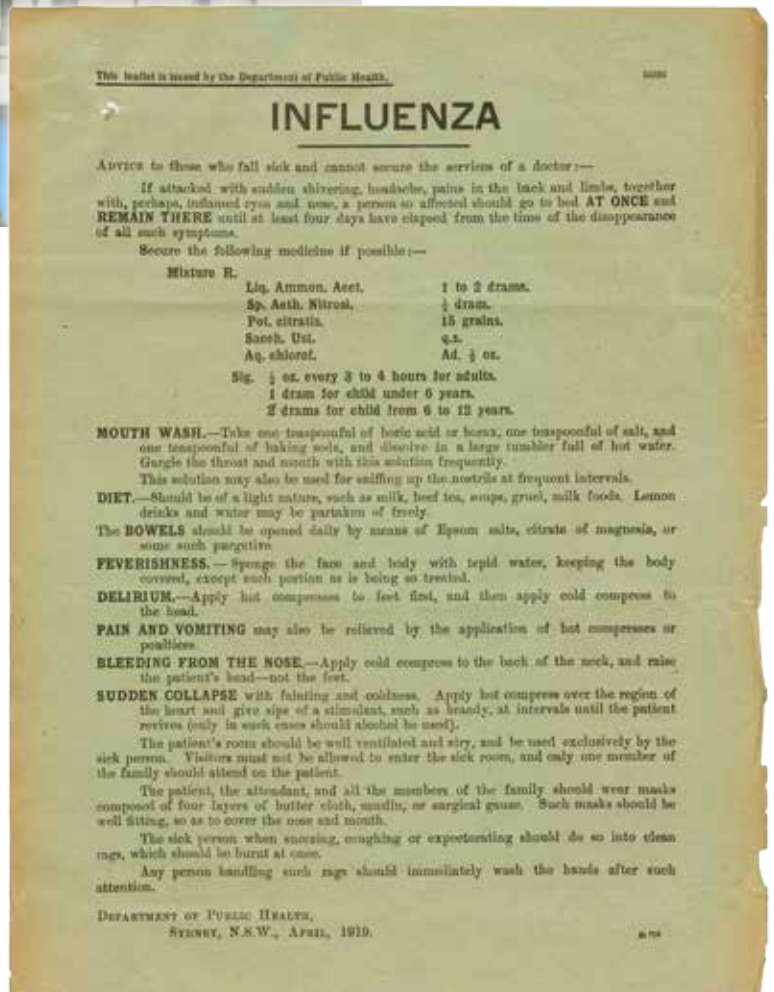
OUR April Meeting usually has an Anzac theme, in tribute to Australian and New Zealand forces for their service and their sacrifice.

Our speaker was to talk on his service in Afghanistan. Sadly, he was unable to speak, as he was taken ill a few days before the meeting. One of our Wednesday Workers, Giselda Bannister, had recently come upon and researched local families the Honeybuns and Sloans, exploring, in particular, the service of their sons in the First World War, and the so-called Spanish Flu pandemic that spread around the world with repatriated servicemen after hostilities ended.

We enjoyed a treat. Giselda had prepared a detailed and very informative presentation. We saw historical photos of the treatment facilities for influenza, some taken in places very familiar, and certainly not now hospitals. A needed reminder that we all want to forget the unpleasant things that affect our community. I was especially interested in the number of people in our local area affected by flu in 1918 and the precautions and potions used, at the time, to stem the spread of the outbreak.

Thank you, Giselda, for taking on the role of Speaker at short notice and for giving us all a timely reminder of our brave local servicemen, their service, their sacrifices and personally, for us to take advantage of our annual flu vaccinations!

*Margaret Graham*



**PICTURES (clockwise from top):** Giselda presenting the talk; Flu home treatments 1919; Flu inhalation chamber, Victoria 1919.



# 1960

## the story of a special someone I was privileged to know

WHEN we built our first home, many years ago, we were invited to have tea and scones with the old lady next door.

She was without doubt the most untidy, dirty old lady I had ever seen. Her finger nails were deeply imbedded with a mixture of flour and mud. She wore dreadful old high-heeled cast off shoes, usually odd, always coated with mud. Always she wore a wide brimmed hat and, falling from her nose, she struggled to wear a very strong pair of glasses.

Inside the house was the most appalling smell of dogs. Two great strong rascals guarded the doors of this old lady's domain, and you were friend indeed if you could pass those dogs.

Overcome with the stench, the dirt and everything I, in my pregnant state, vowed that was not a friendship I would encourage.

However, how soon were my ideas to change! As we got to know this old battler, we grew to love her. Brought up on the smell of a meal in the Mallee, she used to say to me, "Jenny, it's only hot when the birds fall out of the trees, dead". What hardships she must have suffered! Her husband was an alcoholic, known at every pub between Kew and Ferntree Gully. He always had plenty of mates – particularly after they won £110,000 in Tatts. 'What did they do with the money?' you ask. The first thing they did was pay for loads of broken tiles to make the mud track that was their road into a negotiable road. They then bought a car. As neither Mr. or Mrs Bereton drove (Mr. Bereton having lost half an arm in the war) they were unable to drive themselves.

Mr Bereton's familiar figure rolling along the road, singing at the top of his voice with the accompaniment of his precious dogs was a sight. His shopping bag fitted very neatly just below the elbow where the arm had been severed. Because of his rolling gait he had been christened "Wingy Bereton".

Having bought the car, the couple relied on friends and neighbours to take them out, and many were the adventurous drives home from the pub, with good friends and true on board! They bought an electric sewing machine, which they never learnt to use, a Mixmaster, and a television set. As the house had no bathroom we suggested a bath might be a good idea. But "No, dear, them things is no good for my back" was the quick reply.

We grew to love this brave old lady, who, though she was albino and could hardly see, lived life to the full. She was always up at five, working in her huge garden, cutting the long grass with a bread knife. All the money in the world could not change her. What if the chooks did venture inside the back door? If she did see them she just shoed them out, and after a while the smells of the house went unnoticed. It was she who taught me how to make the best scones in the world, how to make jams and cakes.

And when our little babies arrived, she was fascinated. Never having anything to do with children before, she spoke to them like the dogs, patting them and calling them. What a wonderful sense of humour she had, and such fun we all experienced together.

Every Sunday morning, left on our front step would be a batch of scones, a jam tart, and a cake or two. What if our guests, while eating their fruit-cake, did find a mouthful of newspaper, used as the tin lining? "Improves the flavour", we'd say.

One day the old dear, unable to see a swarm of bees ahead of her, walked right into them. Her long fair hair, which she swore had never seen peroxide, was a mass of angry swarming stinging bees. A short stay in hospital ensued, and then she was up and about again, her familiar stooped reed-like figure complete with wide brimmed hat and ever-faithful dogs by her side.

Everyone loved her. She was wonderful at crochet. During the great depression she crocheted baby clothes to keep from starving, and all our neighbours had to do their homework or Mrs Bereton was in to see why not. We all learned to crochet very well while having innumerable cups of tea.

She never paid a doctor's bill in her life. Instead she kept him in scones and jam. He loved her too, just as we all did. "Eat plenty of onions", she said, "And you'll live to be a hundred".

Then one day we heard the dogs howling inside the house, and there she was as if asleep in the hall. She had been making a cake, and feeling unwell, got as far as the hall, where she died. Those dogs howled for three days. I think I did too.

I shall never forget that funeral. Anyone who was anyone and everyone was there. And the flowers! She would have loved to have seen them herself. It would have greatly amused her.

And so one of the really great characters of my life was gone, but never forgotten. The greatest lesson she ever taught me was, "Money isn't everything".

*Jenny Brash*

# From THE REPORTER.

CIRCULATING IN BOX HILL, SURREY HILLS, CANTERBURY, BALWYN, CAMBERWELL, DONCASTER, BURWOOD, BLACKBURN, MITCHAM AND RINGWOOD

VOL. XII NO. 47

FRIDAY, JUNE 14, 1901

ONE PENNY.

### Hurricane at Mitcham.

Some lop-eared lunatic sends along the following screed, and threatens to wreck the office if it is not inserted: - "The heavy gales which passed over the state of Victoria on Thursday, the 6th June, have played up old Harry with some of the mountainous country towns. 'Tis true that the remains of some of the decorations on Princes' Bridge fell before the blast, thus saving the labor of taking them down, but when it comes to the destruction of valuable property, that is a horse of another color. The very highly-elevated town of Mitcham, which is 460 ft. above Collingwood Flat, and in latitude 37.56 south of the equator, being in longitude 145.12 east of Greenwich, also 15 miles east of the Melbourne morgue, and about 5 miles from a little Wesleyan village called Box Hill, on the Lillydale line, is well-known to fashionable tourists, being one of the few stations that the Duchess of York passed through at lightning speed. The above mentioned township was severely dealt with by the gale, and for a short time the inhabitants were all driven to despair by the violence of the wind. Among the palatial buildings which were more or less severely damaged was a well-known and very toffy hotel, which was frightfully torn about by the tornado. The magnificent verandah, which sheltered this hotel and its contents from the sun and rain, was completely torn off by the terrific gale, and was said to be last seen travelling at the rate of 156 miles per hour towards the Carrum swamp. The place at the time was packed with people, who had evidently sought shelter from the stormy blast. They had hardly got over their fright concerning the flight of the verandah, when bang went the chimney; and the rattle of the bricks on the iron roof, along with the roaring of the wind,

and the smashing and banging of tins, nearly produced a panic. Small wooden houses with tin roofs were flying in all directions over the Mitcham oval. A rumor was in circulation that a well-built craft of great tonnage had been blown clean away, but it was found that though caught in the gale she had safely weathered the storm through, carrying ballast in the shape of a basket of cakes not made by Professor Harris."

### Gembrook Grievances.

On Wednesday, says the Age, Messrs. Cameron and Keast, M's.L.A., introduced to the deputy commissioner of railways a deputation which was almost formidable in proportions. The requests of the deputation had relation to facilities on the Gembrook line. Mr Fitzpatrick, in reply, stated that the "local rate" for goods was out of his jurisdiction. He admitted that a rate which might not be so great a disability on a branch line 150 miles from Melbourne became a serious matter when added to a line only 22 miles from Melbourne. That aspect of the case had probably not suggested itself to parliament when the rates were fixed, and he would make strong representations on the question. He would also endeavor to meet their wishes in regard to a more adequate train service, recognising that the present one had been arranged more in the interests of tourists. When the business warranted, he would be glad to provide a crane at the station, and also any platform accommodation that might be considered necessary. Money had been placed on the estimates for a new station at Fern Tree Gully.

WASTE PAPER FOR SALE at the "Reporter" office.

### Death of Corporal J. Blackham.

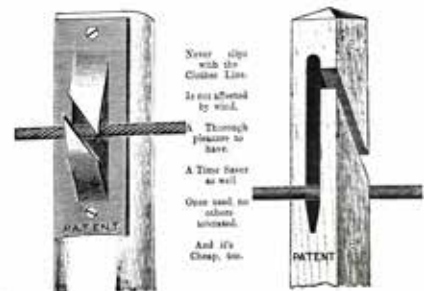
Authentic news has just been received of the death in battle in South Africa of Corporal John Blackham, brother-in-law of Cr J. W. Aspinall, of Box Hill. Corporal Blackham left Australia in the "Orient," and when he arrived in South Africa he enlisted with the 2nd Scottish Horse. Major T. D. Murray, the officer commanding, writes to Mrs Blackham (mother of the dead soldier) as follows: "It is with the greatest regret and deepest sympathy that I write to inform you of the death of your son, Corporal Blackham, of C Squadron 2nd Scottish Horse, who was killed in action near Dullstroom on April 30. It will, I feel sure, be a great relief to you to know that his death must have been painless, and that he died doing his duty in the firing line. I had his body brought in, and we buried him near the church here. The chaplain of the Royal Scots took the service, and the Royal Scots kindly sent their pipers to the funeral."

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# Marvellous Insulwool

(continued from page 1)

Nunawading's product as being derived from Silicious Limestone from Lilydale, Horsefelt from Lysterfield and slag.

An enthusiastic article appeared in The Lilydale Express in August 1942 describing the factory and the process for turning rock into 'wool'. A reinforced concrete tower, 60 feet tall, dominated Whitehorse Road, between Blackburn and Tunstall. A marvel of modern engineering it was attached to a ramp angling steeply up from ground level and which joined the main structure near the top of the tower. The name: 'Insulwool Products' appeared on the high wall of the edifice.

Limestone from Lilydale, was conveyed to the factory in trucks that backed up the ramp; the rock was unloaded from them on the top floor of the tower. Fed in carefully weighed quantities into a large steel 'cupola', alternate layers of rock were added to alternate layers of coke were shoveled into the furnace whose temperature reached a maximum of 2000° Fahrenheit. A large fan provided pre-heated air that, piped to the bottom of the 'cupola', kept the coke and rock as a white-hot mass. The hollow-walled 'cupola' received a supply of water that produced steam. A jet of steam played on the molten rock broke it into a fibrous-like material. Treated with starch and oil components, the fibres were conveyed into an oven, emerging as compact slabs. The slabs were sawn into widths according to the requirements of the job for which they were needed.

A fan, acting like a vacuum cleaner, apparently ensuring healthy working conditions, solved the problem of dust. The writer was impressed that the workforce were provided with hot and cold showers, lavatories and locker-room for the comfort of the workers.

In 1995, Bunnings opened its fourth hardware store, 'the largest of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere', on what had been the site of this once-impressive factory.

More understanding of the dangers of Insulwool, Rock Wool and any other fibre 'wool' leaves a stain on the memory of this once revolutionary product.



© Giselda Bannister  
2005

(Left): 1949  
advertisement for  
Insulwool.

# Edith Coleman Part 2

*With this article we continue the story of Edith Coleman and her contribution to Natural History (see previous newsletter).*

## The Australian Natural History Medallion

ON 24 March 1939, John Kenmont Muir wrote to the Secretary of the FNCV, suggesting the establishment of an award. Letters were written to over thirty natural history clubs, including Mitcham Field Naturalists Club, to amass support for the proposal.

The medallion was to be awarded annually to the person judged to have made the most meritorious contribution to the understanding of Australian Natural history. The recipient was to have:

- assisted notably in the protection and understanding of Australian native flora or fauna, or to have discovered new species of Australian plants or animals,
- devoted considerable time and care to the study of any Australian natural history, or engaged in dissemination of knowledge through publishing articles, books or photography.

Edith more than met the requirements for this award. She often contributed articles to various publications; an example of which is quoted below.

*The Age* Saturday, 29 March 1924

### 'Birds at Blackburn' by Edith Coleman

*'Our once popular little picnic spot is rapidly becoming suburbanized. Though only eleven miles from Melbourne, Blackburn was, until a few years ago, a veritable paradise for the nature lover. Within a few minutes walk of the station one could observe a wide variety of birds, many of them quite rare; and the student of insects, beetles or butterflies could add a wealth of material to his collection...our little creek sides were often gay with brilliantly-coloured fungus growths...the rich velvety bracket fungus were especially plentiful...In those days too, one could gather large bunches of wild flowers including many of our lovely little Orchids. Plenty of Maidenhair fern grew on the banks of the creek nearby, and we then had no need to go to Croydon or Ringwood for beautifully coloured gum tips. They grew at our door. But times have changed. Most of the timber within*

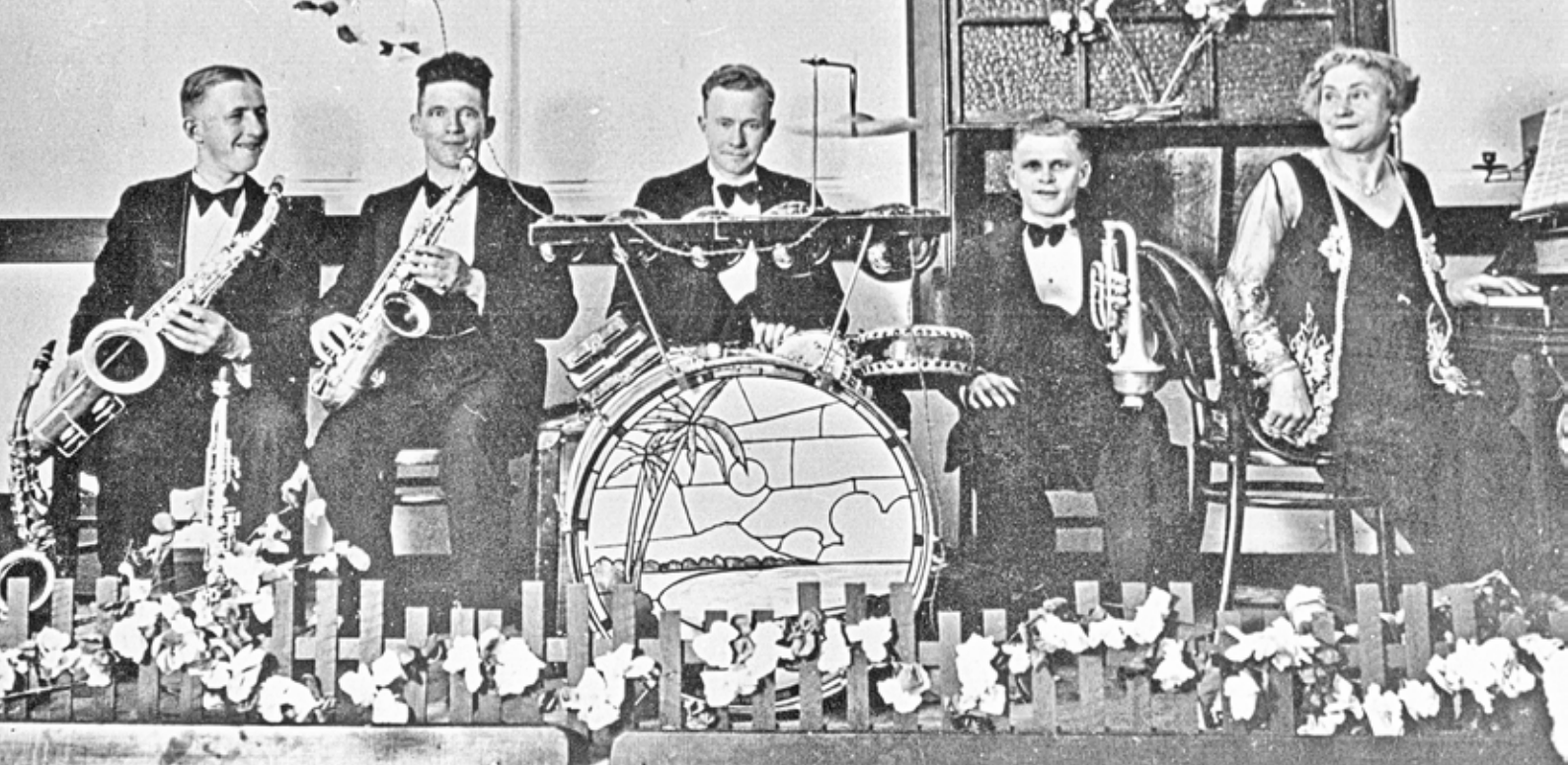
half a mile of the station has been cut down to make room for villas and bungalows, with neat gardens and trim hedges. A row of houses...is standing on the land where only a few years ago the auctioneer held up a bunch of Orchids as an added inducement to the would-be purchaser to make up his mind. "Gathered, Ladies and gentlemen in this very block of land". Now we have only the names of some of the streets (Orchid Street, Fuchsia Street) to remind us of those golden days...With the decrease in timbered areas and the increase in population, there came an alarming fall off in the number of our feathered friends. The absence of cover... [and]...the...enemy of bird life, the small boy... My garden is, in the language of estate agents, only a minute walk from a quite busy station, yet I think I could surprise you with the number of birds that visit us...'

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(ABOVE): Edith Coleman with her family in their Blackburn backyard, circa 1910; (BELOW): Edith Coleman, circa 1931. Her scientific research began in her own backyard and moved into the bush beyond.





# FRANCES ELLEN STEEL

## A mini-biography

**F**RANCES Ellen Steel (néé Sanders) was born at Bulla in 1872, daughter of William and Mary Sanders. Her father had built a workshop at the rear of his home in Blackburn Road, which was later the first home for the 1st Blackburn Scouts (formed in 1919).

In 1904, Frances married Archibald William Steel. Francis had earlier built a house “Alandale” on 11-acre paddock at the corner of Lake and Wellington roads, Blackburn. Archibald and Frances had three sons in all: Archibald William Jnr, Frederick James and Alan McKinnon, and in 1918 the family moved to Alandale from their smaller house in nearby Gordon Crescent. In 1922 they sold ten of the acres, and Alandale and McKinnon Streets were created, named after the house and the middle name of one of Frances’s sons.

Later in the 1920s, Mr Sanders Snr’s workshop was re-sited to Alandale; but at some point burnt down. The Scouts, who were its main users, bought a new hall and Mrs Steel donated a single block of land for them to place it on. Fortnightly dances were held there, with the Steel family providing the music. Mrs Steel played the piano and the harp and her three sons performed on other instruments (see picture).

Frances was an active member of the community who, in 1922, officially opened a private hospital in Gordon Crescent, on the corner of Clarke Street.

She died at Frankston in 1950.

**(ABOVE):** Steel’s Orchestra (L–R: Fred Steel; Arthur Thornton; Alan Steel; Cliff Luscombe; Mrs Frances Steel). Photo featured in Robin DaCosta’s book *Blackburn – A Picturesque History*.

**Do you enjoy your membership of WHS?  
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<https://whitehorsehistory.org.au/membership/>



**A**LTHOUGH the land area of the City of Whitehorse has remained the same, the name has not.

In 1864, when the area was first surveyed, it was known as The Parish of Nunawading in the County of Burke, and so it remained until May 1925 when the City Fathers decided, under pressure, to split the area into two. The area east of present day Middleborough Road became the new Shire of Blackburn and Mitcham, while the western section remained under the care of the of the burghers of Box Hill. Two years later Box Hill was proclaimed a city.

The two areas lived in reasonable harmony until the next change in 1945 when, due to the increased population, the Shire became the City of Nunawading.

In 1994, the State Government of Victoria decided to amalgamate the two cities, and since then it has been collectively known by its present name, the City of Whitehorse.

The two Historical Societies in this city also have had name changes. The Box Hill Historical Society commenced in 1964 and was followed a year later by the Nunawading and District Historical Society.

When the two areas were joined by the State Government in 1994 it was suggested that the two societies should come under the one banner, with each branch name in brackets. However, due to the collective wisdom of the two groups, the Box Hill Historical Society kept its original name and the Nunawading group elected to change its name to the Whitehorse Historical Society, to match the name of the city.

The area covered by the two complementary societies has Middleborough Road as a common boundary of interest. The Box Hill Historical Society, based in the Box Hill Town Hall is a rich source for research in their designated western area, while we, based at Schwerkolt Cottage, also have a rich source of local material, plus the museum complex, accredited with Museums Australia.

*A.Y.Fitzmaurice*

# Our city: what's in a name?

(BELOW): NP215 – Map of the Parish of Nunawading, County of Bourke, 1864.



## 2026 WORKING BEES

Please make a diary note and join us on the day. Working Bees commence at 9.30am and finish around 12 noon with morning tea.

**Saturday 18 July**

**Saturday 5 September**

**Saturday 7 November**

Please come and help even if you can only offer an hour of your time.

## STATISTICS

Photographs catalogued	-	4606
Artefacts catalogued	-	5936
Documents catalogued	-	8580
Museum visitors March–April	-	1032

## DIARY DATES

Meetings are held at the Schwerkolt Cottage and Museum Complex.

**Saturday, 6 June 1pm**

*Geoff Arnott "Writing History"*

## WHS Committee Contacts

### President

Vicki Jones-Evans  
0404 612 216

### Vice-President

Peter McPhee

### Secretary

Kathy Innes

### Treasurer

Eddie Tan

### Local History Room (03) 9873 4946

Rear Museum Building  
Schwerkolt Complex  
2 – 10 Deep Creek Road, Mitcham

## Newsletter Team

Chris Gray  
Rosalie Whalen

## WHS website

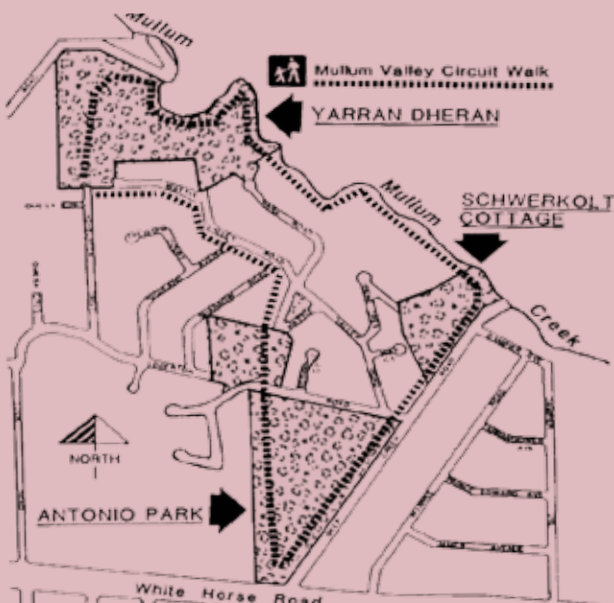
whitehorsehistory.org.au  
facebook.com/  
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## Email

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## The Whitehorse Historical Society Inc. Mission Statement & Acknowledgement of Country

*"The purpose of the Society is to foster historical interest and knowledge. To collect, document, research, preserve and exhibit items that show how people have lived and worked in the City of Whitehorse area."*

*"Whitehorse Historical Society acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. Wurundjeri connection to this land dates back more than 40,000 years, and evidence of this connection still exists today."*



*The Whitehorse Historical Society, Inc. acknowledges the support of the Whitehorse City Council.*

## REMEMBER

### Whitehorse Historical Society Local History Collection

Open 10am to 3pm Wednesdays.

Visitors welcome.

Ring 9873 4946 for an appointment at other times.



WHITEHORSE  
CITY COUNCIL



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