

PLOD ESSAY:

Our First Public Library

It took more than 50 years of debate and struggle to establish Wonthaggi's first public library.

In 1915 a library was the subject of lively discussion at a meeting of the borough council, which had received a "chaser" from the local A.N.A. (Australian Natives Association) regarding a library. *The Powlett Express* of 19 April 1915 reported: "*Cr. Nelson said a library was necessary for the young people particularly. They had no place to spend their evenings except at the picture shows and gambling dens of Wonthaggi... On the motion of Crs. Wishart and Bird it was decided to inform the A.N.A. that action would be taken to establish a library when council had a municipal building.*" After more discussions, some of it heated, the mayor promised the matter would be resolved within 12 weeks.

Six years later, that promise still hung in the air, but not much had changed. Still people longed for a library. A charming example of the community's ongoing desire for one was in the Letters column of the *Powlett Express*, 24 June 1921. It was from a lady who signed herself as "*Tired Mother*" of Glen Forbes South. It reads:

"Sir – will you allow me space in your valuable paper to suggest to the council that there should be some place of recreation in your most progressive town. I will state my case, out of one of many: I work hard on a farm, and have to go to Wonthaggi occasionally – a drive of 12 miles – and after doing my shopping have had to stand waiting in the street as long as three hours, waiting for horses to be shod, or other repairs to be done. Now, if there were a public library or other such place where one could take a book or some knitting, it would be a rest, instead of collapsing in the street from exhaustion. Yours, etc."

Although complaints on the lack of a public library and reading room were common, for years actual support from a majority of local residents seemed to be sadly lacking. In September 1927 the *Powlett Express* reported that a well-publicised meeting to address the issue attracted less than 20 people.

Two local organisations – Returned Soldiers and A.N.A. (Australian Natives Association) – had supported the establishment of a library, but due to the perceived lack of strong community backing, they concluded the people did not want a public library. The council had also discussed the establishment of a library on many occasions but felt the public should do the work. The main drawbacks were the lack of a suitable site and finance. In an attempt to get over the financial hurdle, two referenda were held on the question of an extra rate of threepence, however both lost on the grounds that rates were already at their limit. There was therefore no prospect of raising the funds necessary to establish a library directly from ratepayers.

It must be remembered that these were the years after World War I and led into the great depression of the 1930s when financial resources, both personal and government, were directed to more basic needs.

However, those who understood the importance of a library to the community kept up the push. In the 1960s, Wonthaggi Borough Councillor and popular schoolteacher Joe Chambers asked the question: "Why is there not a public library in Wonthaggi?"

Wonthaggi answered: "We can't afford one", "Our licensed clubs have libraries", "There are libraries in the schools", "No one reads now; they all watch television".

In an effort to sway opinion Cr. Chambers pointed out: "A library is much more than a collection of thrillers, westerns, romances and travelogues. ... (it) is also a reading room, a meeting place, a discussion centre – a very important focal point in the life of a town. Everybody benefits from a library. Education is a never-ending process. The most important part of the child's education at primary school is the acquisition of the reading habit. ... The habit is fostered by access to a wide range of books and other materials." (*The Express*, December 1967)

After that, in 1968, a Wonthaggi Library committee was formed. Dedicated individuals including Joe and Lyn Chambers, Bill and Barbara Robertson, Arthur and Nell Quilford, Barbara Hallett, Margaret Berry, Bill Thomas, Peter and Alison Brooks worked in official and unofficial capacities towards the establishment of a library.

Over the next two years various proposals were considered and discarded: a site beside the Town Hall for a cost of at least \$20,000, which, for an extra \$40,000 could be combined with a baby health centre and offices for the borough engineer and health officer; conversion of vacant premises that were already available to serve the purpose; an extension to the administrative section of the Town Hall. None of these proposals gained unanimous approval.

At the time the Borough of Wonthaggi and the Shire of Bass were separate entities. As Wonthaggi was the largest town in the area, people came from a wide area into Wonthaggi for shopping and other services. The Borough Council was reluctant to spend major ratepayers funds on a public facility for the benefit of people from outside the borough who did not pay rates in Wonthaggi. When the library was finally opened non-borough residents were charged to use the library *except* if a family member worked in the town.

Concerns regarding the high cost of providing a library were eventually overcome when an innovative and inexpensive option appeared on the horizon. In June 1970 the Borough of Wonthaggi considered a new proposal: to convert the town's comfort station to incorporate the new library. The brick building at the intersection of Watt Street and McBride Avenue (in Wishart Reserve) might not have been custom built, but you couldn't have found a better situation. The Wonthaggi Library Committee voted unanimously to support the plan and the Borough of Wonthaggi approved the immediate spending of \$750 to convert the building. Mayor Cr. C. Osborne assured elderly people that they could use the comfortable library as a resting place when out walking, that arrangements would be made in the Town Hall for alternative facilities to allow mothers to feed their babies, and that the comfort station toilets would not be closed as the building was big enough to accommodate both them and the library. (Consequently the ambience of the library suffered in hot weather !)

In October, 1970, Cr. Osborne officially opened Wonthaggi's first municipal library. As the borough's first librarian Georgie McRae was allowed to enter the men-only *Gentlemen's Club*, to sort the books in their reading room for the new library. The council

also presumed Georgie would handle the cleaning of the new library as part of her duties but she soon set them straight on that score and the Town Hall cleaners were engaged to clean the library premises as well. The West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation supplied more books to stock the new library from its collection of 20,000 to 25,000 books available to share among the five municipalities in the region. Each week a library car travelled around delivering books to libraries in the area – Warragul, Korumburra, Poowong, Longwarry and Wonthaggi. Members of the Library Committee had raised funds to fit out the library. They also made shelves and curtains and everything required to make the library suitable to open for business.

At the official opening in October 1970 Cr. Joe Chambers acknowledged that the establishment of the library had been a long hard road that had reached a happy conclusion. It would have been better housed in larger quarters, he added, but that was to come later

Since that time the library has moved more than once: from the converted comfort station where it began in 1970 to the foyer of the new Wonthaggi Arts Centre in 1982 in an effort to gain more usable space; then in 1992 from the theatre to the recently vacated old heritage listed post office building on the corner of Watt Street and McBride Avenue, which very soon also became too crowded; and finally, in January 2014, to the luxurious rooms on Murray Street where it can grow to its heart's content and still have room for more books, CDs, DVDs, computers, eBooks, talking books and whatever else comes our way in the future, including people who just want a rest.

This article was originally written as a series of stories by Carol Cox for the Bass Coast Post. Carol is a Volunteer, who is doing essential work on our Cataloguing of the Archive Project at the Museum on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Not only is she important to the Historical Society, but she has also volunteered to submit stories to the Bass Coast Post whenever she comes across some interesting articles in our newspaper collection as part of her work at the museum. These stories help keep our museum current in the minds of Wonthaggians. Thank you, Carol

- edited by C. Landon

