

PLOD ESSAY

Tall Tales and the Mighty Leek

by W&DHS Volunteer, Carol Cox

Volunteers for the Wonthaggi & District Historical Society spend much of their time at the Museum – the old railway station – archiving the vast collection the Society has acquired over the more than 50 years it has been in existence. When, a few years ago, they were “beetling away” cataloguing newspapers – mostly *Sentinel Times* and *Powlett Express* editions from the past century – they came across interesting news items from the Town’s early days. One such is mention of Wonthaggi’s Leek Club, which started in 1927 and ran until World War II.

Initially, upon discovering the existence of the club, the volunteers erroneously presumed it to be a social welfare club for miners of Welsh origin and named after that country’s national emblem, the noble leek. They were disabused of this wrongful assumption by a feature in the *Powlett Express* as late as October 1991 headed, “Wonthaggi Grew Strong on Leeks!” That article was largely based on the reminiscences of Tom Besford, a Geordie and former Wonthaggi Leek Club member who had arrived in this town in 1928. Much of the following information is drawn from the 1991 feature article.

Wonthaggi’s Leek Club was a Geordie institution devoted initially to the growing of huge leeks, a custom that had its beginning in the north-east mining towns of England, where most members of the Wonthaggi Leek Club had originated. The Wonthaggi miners were



the only group in Australia to form a Leek Club.

Members paid a fee of £1 per year and additional money was raised at functions such as concerts that were held at the same time as the Leek Club Shows – the 1934 Good Friday night concert was notable for including the first performance of the song, “There’s a Part of My

Heart in Wonthaggi” written in 1934 by Jack O’Hagan for the 25th anniversary of the town. Funds raised at these events were used mostly for prizes at the annual shows held initially in the Union Hall and in later years in the Town Hall during Easter Week. The Leek Club show also included flowers and vegetables. At the end of the shows, all produce was sold, including unimaginably large leeks, and the proceeds were donated to the hospital.

Members each put up three of their leeks to be judged at the annual show. The leeks were not ordinary leeks you see in shops but a special breed. There were three classes of entry – pot leeks, furnished leeks and branch leeks. They varied in length of the stem and barrel. The pot leek, for instance, being the premier breed, had

to fit into a large pot with its leaves cut off. All leeks were judged for size mainly, the ones with the most cubic capacity normally being the winner. Other criteria were that the leek had to be no more than six inches [152.8 mm] long from root to the base of the leaves and it had to be smooth, without an onion bulge at the bottom.

Each member had his own method of feeding his leeks, which was never divulged to other members. Growers would all polish their leeks with a special



substance to make them shine on the show benches.

Tom Beresford recounted the tale of a miner who had an accident in the mine and was put in hospital. His workmate went to see him and offered to look after his leeks for him. He said he would feed them if he was told what to give them. This was secret information, so the sick man said, "Carbide," to get rid of his workmate. Now carbide, when mixed with water, gives off a highly flammable gas. The good Samaritan went to the store and bought a pound of carbide. He went to his mate's house after dark to make sure no one else found out about the magic plant food. He was wearing his miner's hat with a carbide lamp on it so he could see what he was doing. He lit his lamp and tipped the pound of carbide he had bought into a drum to make the right mixture for the leeks. When he bent over the drum to dip out some of the magic brew, there was an enormous explosion and he finished up in hospital in the bed next to his mate, with his face covered in bandages. When his mate asked him what had happened, all he could say was, "You and your bloody carbide!"

Every member who entered their leek in the annual show got a prize – it was a very democratic group with no losers. A report of the Leek Club Show in the *Powlett Express* of the April 1937 outlines the prizes all purchased from shops in the town. The winner of the "Best 3-pot Leek" prize received a case of cutlery, the J. Short trophy

[Mr Short being the Manager of the Wonthaggi Co-op], and the C. Taberner cup [Mr Taberner being the owner of the famous Taberner Hotel known locally as the 'Whalebone']. The second-place getter received an inlaid clock crystal jug and the C.V. Davies trophy [Mr Davies being owner of the News Agency on McBride Avenue opened in 1910]. The third-place getter received a pair of blankets and sheets and the Kiernan trophy [Mr Kiernan being the owner of Kiernan & Co. "The 'Furniture House Beautiful' store on 'Kiernan's Corner, McBride Ave & Graham St.]. The list goes on with place getters down to sixteenth place receiving saucepans, carvers, kettles, casseroles and Cincotta fruit trophies. There were also prizes for other categories: Best Leek in Show, Best Furnished Leek, 3 Best Leeks Any Size, etc. It seems that no one could be a loser.



THE TROPHIES circa 1934: S. Eccleston (Treasurer) J. Newton (Secretary) W. Spurr

Wonthaggi's Leek Club folded in the years of World War II, by which time it had even embraced some female members, who were fierce competitors.