

PLOD ESSAY

Sixty-five Years later and Still Going Strong

The Wonthaggi Historical Society was formed in 1959, sixty-five years ago, nine years before the last miners emerged from the tunnel at Kirrak and the State Coal Mine was closed forever.

Amazingly, without coal, its central reason for being, Wonthaggi did not become a ghost town, nor did the workers and their families abandon their home. Rather they found new work, as industries like Cyclone arrived to keep the town vibrant. The trains continued to run and the railway station became a hive of activity, “the centre of Wonthaggi’s commercial and social life,” according to Jack Moyle, with goods coming in daily, bullocks and sheep going out heading for Dandenong or Newmarket, wheat coming in bulk for chook feed, 26-gallon barrels of beer for Taberners or the Workman’s, drums of molasses, large crates of rolled paper for the newspaper printing presses; passengers heading for Melbourne in the morning returning late in the evening.

But, finally, in 1977, the trains did stop, the Railway Station closed its doors and all that activity did seem to go silent. However, the Historical Society had been fighting a “rear guard action.” They hadn’t been a Society for over eighteen years just to let the unique culture of the coal mining town disappear. Over those years the members had managed to accumulate, as Noel Maud expressed it in 1989 in the *Sentinel Times*, a “formidable array of material graphically illustrating the ebbing and flowing of human energy in Wonthaggi’s rich and complex social fabric, its high and low points.”

The Historical Society had always been one of the strongest advocates for retaining the passenger-and-goods rail services in spite of the fact that it was no longer carrying coal. Members had taken part in a Melbourne rally in support of the line with many townspeople marching to Parliament House wheeling prams and waving placards and meeting quite a few old Wonthaggi faces along the way, but to no avail. The Liberal Party under Jeff Kennett with the help of local Liberal member, Alan Brown, got their way: the trains stopped coming, the crane stopping swinging goods on and off the railway cars, the tracks were taken up and the iconic station stood dark and empty.

According to Maud, the failure to keep the line open resulted in the Historical Society eventually getting a permanent headquarters. In 1978, after much animated discussion between vested interests, politicians, councillors and deeply committed members of the public, the most compelling argument in the end was that the only way to save the precious Railway Station from being ignored and destroyed the way No.5 Brace had been, was that it should be used as the regular meeting place for the Wonthaggi Historical Society. Much later, years later, again, as a result of one political stoush after another, it was finally decided by Council relying in part on recommendation from Heritage Victoria that the Railway Station was the best place to locate and develop an historical museum.

Preservation of history had been a part of the Historical Society from its beginning and by the time they were able to move permanently into the abandoned railway station and know that their precious collection would be safe, they had collected between 700 and 800 photos of the town and as a result received a grant from the Arts Ministry to have some of its finest photos enlarged and mounted. They had also collected a wealth of other material, which, in the days before they had a “home”, presented some formidable problems when members ended up with boxes of material stashed in spare corners of their homes. In fact, Arthur Quilford’s home in particular became crowded with Society material. And not just inside, either. For years people were directed to the Quilford home by the bullock dray parked on the nature strip outside his house. It had been donated to the Society by Bullocky Bill Shandley.

The railway station wasn't just any place to put all the collected material. As a part of Wonthaggi's history, it was an artifact in itself. With the Historical Society looking after it, it would be protected and brought back to its original grandeur as the centre of all Wonthaggi history. It would be the place to house an extensive collection: complete history of the local newspapers (*The Powlett Express*, *The Sentinel Times*, *The Criterion*), a continually growing archive including letters, photographs, maps, minute books from different societies, artifacts, photographs, essays and books, the Chamber recordings, plus a variety of displays, including champion cyclist, Vanda Unthank's bicycle, the bullock dray brought onto the platform from its resting place in front of Quilford's, the polio frame used by Bill, one of the McFarlane twins, both of whom were some of the last polio cases in Wonthaggi during the worst polio epidemic in the world here in Australia, the medical instruments used by the amazing Dr. Sleeman, who set up his practice in Tent town and served Wonthaggi his entire career, the huge back bone from the vertebrae of the whale whose jaw bones proudly stand in front of Taverners.... And the list goes on, never ending, constantly being added to.

Historical Society Members inside the Railway Station Museum in 1989, still waiting for confirmation that their place there was permanent



Wonthaggi Historical Society members at their railway station home, standing left to right, Arthur Quilford, Lyn Chambers, Joe Chambers, Mike Kirschner, Brian Clancy, Enid Hayes, Bill Hayes, George Simpson, Allan Bremner; seated Pauline Kirschner, Sylvia Chisholm, Jean Bremner, Gwen Opie, Alison Brooks, Irene Williams, Mary Mabin, Margaret Rixon and in front, the two youngest members, Matthew Clements and Simon Longstaff, both 12. The two boys have made several finds while fossicking around the old mine sites and Simon has researched a book on the 1924 McBride Tunnel fire which killed two men, one of whom was his great grandfather, John Johnson. Matthew has also taken on a project on the mine's history. Members unable to be there for the picture were secretary, John Bordignon, president Peter Brooks and Val and Alan Birt.

The 'Railway Station' was seventy-seven years old and still in need of repair when the Historical Society took it over permanently, but when its construction was completed in 1912, it was the pride of the town. *The Powlett Express* reported that, "The station occupies a conspicuous position in the new town of Wonthaggi, through the fact that there is a full view of the south elevation from McBride Avenue." Ironically, the report added that, "The main portion of the station is of brick showing that the Railway Commissioners, who control the State Mine, have great faith in its permanency..."

The total width of the building was 184ft., comprising a 76ft. brick building with a 66ft. wooden wing on one end and 42ft. of wooden buildings on the other. The brick portion included the main entrance porch with a width of 11ft. leading to the booking hall; each room being fitted with segmented windows, the upper portion finished in rough cast, with ornamental gables, this frontage had and still has "a very attractive appearance."

When the Historical Society took over the building, the interior of the brick portions included the main room, booking, telegraph and parcels office. The Station Master's office was a separate room where the office is now, and there were also the usual parcels racks, cupboards, writing desks and other conveniences. Two bookings windows were still in place, as were the waiting rooms for ladies and gentlemen on the west and east ends, respectively. The roof was

of red tiles, while the interior rooms were plastered walls with metal ceilings and heavy cornices. Hoffman bricks were used throughout. On the whole, very little fault could be found with the building. The contractor, the man who oversaw the construction of the station but who did not actually lay the bricks, was Mr Alf Frongerud, a Norwegian man, designer and contractor, master builder and perfectionist, who was also responsible for construction of the Post Office, the State Bank and other public buildings in Wonthaggi. It may have been his decision to have the station built in a “Queen Anne” style, the only one of its kind in Wonthaggi.

Now, after years of planning and negotiations, there have been many changes. In 2006, the Society applied for assistance for two projects for which they would contribute \$100,000. The first was building a new West Wing in which to properly house the archive, the construction of which was finally completed a few years ago. The second took longer to negotiate with Heritage Victoria to get permission to glass-in the railway station platform to create a large space which would accommodate such artifacts as the long-standing bullock dray. The point of using glass on the existing platform rather than adding a completely new space, was to maintain the design and feel of the original building. The negotiation with Heritage Victoria was long and detailed, but the result, which was finally finished after painstaking construction values were adhered to, was a triumph. Money for the work on both new areas of the station came from a Council grant and was attached to the plans for the new Rail Trail.



Wonthaggi Railway Station 1920

The railings are gone now, and the parking area has turned into rich, green Apex park, but the walk to the building is still in place. You can still look down all of McBride Avenue from the war memorial to the station and see the crane, which is in working order and still standing just as it was. The only thing in the way of a clear view to the Railway Station, is the nine-metre-tall poppet head at the street-end of the walkway. That is where the old mine whistle, which was thought to be silenced forever but was rescued by Historical Society members from being destroyed, or more correctly, from being neglected, was placed and calibrated to blast at Midday every day until the end of time...or until the air compressor gives way, which it has done more than once, and is right now being repaired by the Friends of the State Coal Mine, who get a yearly maintenance to make sure the whistle continues to blow. It will soon be back in its place and will continue to regulate our lives. We will never be allowed to forget Wonthaggi’s unique and proud history.

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