

PLOD ESSAY

Saving the State Coal Mine Rescue Station

Based on 15-minute history talk by Wendy Crellin Jan 2025



Dennis Leversha's final project is a small booklet published at the end of 2024 by the Wonthaggi Historical Society. Its title is *History of the Rescue Station, State Coal Mine, Wonthaggi*. On its cover is a beautiful and accurate drawing of the Rescue Station as it looked in 1975, a bit worn with sagging doors and broken windows. That drawing was a testament to the fine lines of the old building, but also a possible acknowledgement that it, too would go the way of the great No. 5 Brace structure that was the centre of the State Coal Mine (SCM) project and is still visible to this day but barely standing.

Leversha's booklet, however, is testament to the survival and new life of that small and now beautifully renovated Rescue Station. In it, he lists different ways the community attempted to use the old building: in the 1970's the Wonthaggi Lions Club had plans to create an Historical Park of the area and use the Rescue Station as a visitors centre; in the 1980's the Fire Brigade trained in the smoke tunnel until they purchased their own smoke machine; and finally, most importantly, in the 1990's, Wendy Crellin, then Shire Councillor, worked with Parks Victoria to "make the Rescue Station serviceable for any interested user group." In fact, as a Shire Councillor and a member of the State Coal Mine Advisory Group, Wendy already had a hand in rescuing several heritage-listed buildings under her stewardship – Post Office, Court House, and the Goods Shed behind the Railway Station.

Wendy is a third generation Wonthaggiian. Following in her father's footsteps, her instinct has always been to serve the community. Her father, Allan "Tiger" Opie, had followed in *his* father's footsteps into the Wonthaggi Mine when he was 14 years old. He eventually became an important leader of the Union in Wonthaggi, "a person of interest to Asio" and, later with Wendy's Mum, Catherine, a community leader in Melbourne's northern suburbs eventually receiving an Order of Australia Medal for his work there. As a child, Wendy loved regularly taking the train with her family to Wonthaggi to visit her grandfather who lived on Dunn Street and who Wendy would find in the "poorly lit lounge in front of an open fire smoking his pipe." Possibly inevitably, Wendy found herself moving back to Wonthaggi as a registered nurse, having married the newly appointed doctor/surgeon and thus she became known as Wendy Crellin, Doctor's wife, rather than Wendy Opie, minor's granddaughter. She quickly became an activist in the community she had known and loved all her life.

In January of this year, 2025, Wendy was encouraged to give a **Fifteen-Minute Talk** at the Historical Society about her connection to the Rescue Station. What follows here is her story, but, of course, Dennis was part of that story:

"In 2009," she begins, "the SCM Central Area including the Rescue Station was registered on the Victorian Heritage Register. This was followed by a structural report and audit on the Rescue Station. In 2010 we signed a lease and we registered with the Australian Charities in order to gain tax-deductibility and then began fund raising by launching the "Buy-a-Brick" appeal, which generated thousands of dollars, and we are still selling bricks.

"We called ourselves *Rescue Station Arts* and were invited to present our project at Parks Victoria Inaugural International Congress, *Healthy Parks, Healthy People*. We were amongst 510 presenters from all over the world and were one of only two community organisations represented. Our standing with Parks Victoria Jumped up a notch.

"From then on, we sought funding wherever we could find it: Festivals Australia for a *Pit Pony Festival*; then a *Dance to the Rescue* festival which included three days of workshops, including master classes for teachers of dance; then a May Day luncheon celebrated with Members of the Miners Union, Old Miners, state and federal Labour politicians, Friends of SCM, Historical Society and community

members with Sam Gatto giving a brilliant history lesson to all sixty people present. Our much-loved pastry chef, Philippa Sibley, launched our heritage cookbook, which sold out on the night and which is still available for anyone who wants it – signed, of course.

“In 2011 we started *Make, Bake, Create Community Market*, and began weekly after school art Classes. On top of that Onyx Players put on a performance of *Little Red Riding Hood*. We organised *Antique Road Show*, a wine tasting workshop, and inaugural art exhibition, including sculpture and photography.

“In 2012 we had a *Plant the Seed* weekend of workshops for community to experience different art forms from photography, pottery, fine arts, woodwork, tie-dying, music, dance. Of course, Dennis and Bev Leversha were integral participants in all the arts effort.

“And then everything stopped! The main drain overflowed into our building, a torrent of dirty drain water inundated the entire building and created significant damage to the building and contents. After the clean-up the Rescue Station was finally deemed a public building, and the committee was required to gain a certificate of occupancy something that had been overlooked by the powers that be for years. This requirement took many years to solve as one problem after another was uncovered. Nevertheless, we continued with our monthly meetings and eventually we re-opened the big doors to a much-improved building and our task ahead was to resume our program and bring back the community to the Rescue.

“In 2018 we opened a Pottery Centre. We gratefully accepted second-hand kilns and wheels and managed to appoint a skilled tutor, who turned out to be the experienced and relaxed Alan Whitmore. Soon, enthusiastic students were enrolled to both weekly day and evening sessions, and there is still great demand for both sessions. Community potters attend these session and work alongside NDIS participants and their Carers, as well as with WSC Students and the BCA Artist Society potters. It is a popular, creative and happy studio, and there is always music to be heard.

“Dennis and Bev Leversha, both very well-known and loved ceramicists, were instrumental in establishing the Ceramics Studio. Within a year, an International Artist, Varuni, was in residence at the studio during the month of May and an exhibition was held of the works created during her visit. This was an important asset to our community and region.

“In 2019, we hosted a performance of Tibetan Music by Raga Shambalya. The performers had seen our building featured in the RACV journal and thought it would be a perfect venue. It was an outstanding cultural experience. The group left Wonthaggi to play at Carnegie Hall. What a privilege it was for us!

“In March 2020, all workshops and activities were suspended due to the Corona Virus pandemic!!!

“However, in November of that year, the ‘lockdown’ was lifted, and we were able to hold the *Joyous Christmas Tree Project* as a community celebration, a project/event that involved more than 40 community artists and 80 raw wooden trees for the artists to express their experiences of 2020 through creative design storytelling. Opening night was memorable and emotional for this was the first occasion for the community to come together in nine months. The Bass Coast Chorale had the tears spilling into our masks as they walked into the large room singing Christmas Carols.

“*Ballet Barre Exercises for Seniors* began (under the care of Wendy, herself a dancer whose training began when she was a teenager). It was offered under the Open Access program in July 2021 and the numbers grew rapidly, especially following on from an article in the *Age Newspaper* and later a feature on both channels 9 & 7 followed by a recent ABC *Back Roads* program covering Bass Coast that featured the Rescue Station Ballet Dancers!

“Another, surprising and very successful recent venture is the “Wonni Olive Press”. Local couple, Liane Arno and Matt Stone, imported a state-of-the-art olive press they had seen when they were in Italy and have offered to house it in the Rescue Station where the community can bring their ripe olives straight off the tree for pressing. The Committee had no idea how it would work, but this beautiful machine has spat out the pips and pressed the good oil, free of charge. This is just another successful venture where community comes together and generously shares another new art form.

“So, pull everything together, open doors, welcome all; our building belongs to the people,” says Wendy. “One final thing that will happen soon, is a naming of the arts area in the Rescue Station after Dennis Leversha, for without his generosity and talent, it may never have come about.”

**Information in this essay is from
Dennis Leversha, Liane Arno, & Wendy Crellin,
Drawing of Rescue Station by Dennis Leversha**

**C. R. Landon, ed.
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