

“AT THE UNION” EXHIBITION

This PLOD Essay showcases the content of Rees Quilford's Light Box Lane exhibition 'At The Union', which explores the history of Wonthaggi's Union Theatre.

The exhibition, in the western laneway beside Wonthaggi's Union Theatre is on display until the 31st of October 2026.

Rees' project takes Joe and Lyn Chambers' local history booklet “IT'S ON AT THE UNION” as a provocation to showcase glimpses and moments typical of one of Wonthaggi's iconic community meeting places.

The resultant eight panel artworks offer mixed-media bricolages that layer these fragments together. It's less a conventional chronological history, more a collection of glimpses into the people, events and connections that have made the Union Theatre what it is.

The essay provides an overview of the content of three of the eight panels of the exhibition.



PANEL 1

BUILDING A HALL OF THEIR OWN | 1914-1924

In the raw beginnings of the establishment of Wonthaggi, miners met wherever they could. Political meetings were held on the Powlett River coalfields as early as 1909.

Men gathered in the open air, tents behind them, politics and unionism already woven into the life of the new mining town.

By 1914, Wonthaggi's Miners' Union was levying members a shilling a fortnight to build a hall of their own. But war, the Spanish Flu pandemic and the pressures of a growing town repeatedly delayed their plans.

The idea of a hall of their own endured. Committees formed. Minutes were taken. Money was raised. Plans debated. And, eventually, the miners themselves helped build it.

Finally in 1924, at a cost of £8,000 and taking 6 months to build, the new Miners' Union Hall stood in Graham Street. A permanent home for the collective life of Wonthaggi's working community.

A century later The Union Theatre, albeit rebuilt post fire, survives as a place of cultural connection for the town and district.



PANEL 3

IT'S ON AT THE UNION | 1920-30s

A night at the pictures. A boxing match. A hospital ball. Dancing. Live music. A children's fancy dress party. And, when there was business to be done, a mass stop-work meeting.

In the years after Wonthaggi's new Miners' Union Hall opened in 1924, there always seemed to be something on at the Union.

This panel from *At the Union* captures the remarkable variety of life that unfolded within the building during the 1920s and 1930s. Cinema advertisements promising “The Best Show In Town” sit alongside notices for dances and community fundraisers. Photographs evoke the bands, performers and crowds who filled the hall, while a boxing poster promises popular prices and a night of championship entertainment.

The Union could move effortlessly between pleasure and politics. At the centre of the panel, a notice calls workers to a ‘Combined Unions Mass Stop-Work Meeting’, demanding a forty-hour working week and the restoration of wages.

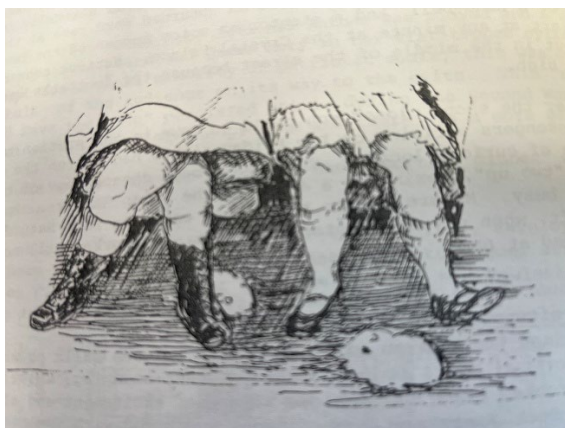
“ROLL UP – EVERYBODY!”, it proclaims.

And then there were the ordinary textures of a night out. Joe and Lyn Chambers’ book recalls the original theatre seating as eighteen-foot-long, high-backed wooden forms – their varnished surfaces gradually worn smooth by the friction of “serge skirts and twill trousers.”

It's a wonderful detail: thousands of people, gathering over years, quite literally leaving their mark on the building.

Together these fragments reveal the Union Theatre as much more than a theatre or union hall. It was Wonthaggi's meeting place. Somewhere to organise, argue, celebrate, dance, watch, listen and simply be together.

A place where politics, entertainment and everyday community life shared the same stage.



This sketch from page 16 “It’s On At The Union” by Joe and Lynn Chambers was drawn by Nell Quilford. The Chambers’ book recounts an evocative and hilarious everyday occurrence typical of the weekly rhythms of the Union Theatre:

Not all matinee fun stemmed from the screen however. There were the impromptu games, fights and romances at dull parts of the program. Jack Phillips remembers one particular Saturday:

“We were walking down to the Union when we fell in with Claude – from the Three Acre Blocks. Claude’s pockets bulged a bit and it turned out he had three of his guinea-pigs with him. Sure enough in the middle of the big picture at a quiet part the guinea-pigs got away, or Claude let them go, and there were girls squealing and kids racing round all over the place. The film stopped, the lights went on, and Claude and his guinea-pigs were put out.”

Together, these fragments capture something larger than a history of entertainment. They evoke the social life of Wonthaggi itself. A town built around coal and back-breaking labour but sustained by the places of connection where people could gather when the working day was done.

OTHER PANEL TOPICS IN THE EXHIBITION INCLUDE:

A New Home for the Union 1924

The Union Theatre – a Hub for the Strike 1934

The Strike of 1934

Women's Advocacy 1934 – 1967

Political Hotbed 1924 – 1960s

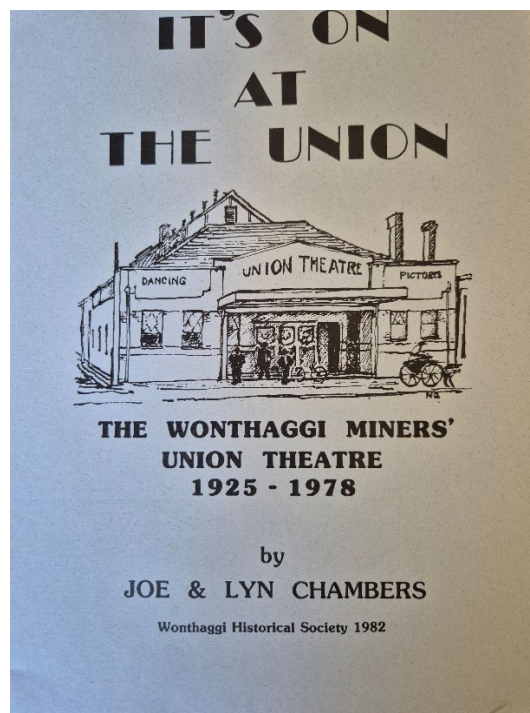
Rees is a fifth-generation settler of Welsh-Irish descent who was born to, and lives on, the unceded lands of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung. He is a father, a partner, a writer, and a maker whose work focuses on digital heritage and mixed media storytelling. His project-based PhD at RMIT University explored place-based storytelling practices using Bass Coast archives as its case study.

Acknowledgements:

Rees Quilford's 'At The Union' exhibition was commissioned by the Bass Coast Shire, to celebrate more than 100 years in the life and events of Wonthaggi's Union Theatre.

Special thanks to the dedicated volunteers at the Wonthaggi and District Historical Society as well as to the helpful staff at the State Library of Victoria and the University of Melbourne Archives who generously assisted facilitating research used in this exhibition.

Design filters and AI tools were utilised to enhance the readability and modify the layout of the archival fragments used in the exhibition. In some cases this has resulted in slight variations from the original source material.



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