PLOD ESSAY OCTOBER 2026

Wonthaggi & District Meals on Wheels Memories from Barbara Robertson

Mr. Michael Kirk saw a need for a Meals on Wheels service soon after his appointment as manager of the Wonthaggi & District Hospital. Elderly people were in hospital long term with health issues mainly owing to the inability to prepare their own adequate meals. His foresight and willingness to find a solution to freeing up hospital beds saw the beginning of this wonderful service in Wonthaggi.

The Mayor, Cr. G. Mortimer, called a public meeting on July 4th 1972, 54 people representing most sections of the community packed the Council Chambers. Miss J Hughes, assistant advisor community welfare section of the Health Department, outlined the scheme. A committee of 12 were selected including three Borough of Wonthaggi councillors and two representatives of the Elderly Citizens Club

The committee held their first meeting straight afterwards, electing Mr Bill Robertson as chairman. The committee was to be named Elderly Citizens Welfare Committee – better known as The Meals on Wheels Committee. The elected members were - Crs. J. Flemming, A. Brown & J. Gall, Mr J Spowart & Miss Lan Frankie (elderly citizens), Mrs K Beaumont (Worana CWA), Sister M Forsyth (district nurse), Mrs Y Isson, Mrs L Taberner, Mrs Tait (Combined Pensioners Assn.) and Mr J. Brown (hospital). With the guidance of Miss Hughes, a Constitution was approved and planning for an early start was made.

The committee's plans were submitted to the Borough for approval the following Monday, with these formalities completed, setting up the system was underway. The hospital kitchen would provide the meals for a cost of 40cents each, (a 10cent subsidy from the Commonwealth was also paid for each meal delivered) and special meals for diabetics would be available. The Borough was prepared to meet any annual loss up to $500, and stipulated that a doctor or doctors judge the eligibility for meals.

Money for carrying equipment was needed, Rotary & Apex Clubs gave $250 each, Mr Layton of Your Style Store gave the next donation. A driver for each 10 meals was needed, Yvonne Isson offered to take names etc but as she didn't have a telephone, volunteers weren't responding. That's where my involvement came in, Bill offered our phone to be the contact number.

With the arrival of the equipment and 36 volunteers signed up all was ready to go. Volunteers included service clubs, Red Cross, Church Groups, Golf Club Ladies, CWA, many individuals. For Moonya & Secondary school students volunteering was part of their education programs. Wonthaggi High School also took on a role as an emergency driver in early days.

The big day has arrived - August 21st 1972. At the beginning 20 meals were delivered each day, credit must go to Jack Brown and his kitchen staff. As well as feeding the hospital patients and staff, lunchtime meals for the Elderly Citizens Homes, now Meals on Wheels, was a mammoth job.

Under the constitution 'no person unable to pay for meals, provision is made for non-payment under special circumstances of needs' Also donations could be made for special services for the aged.

April 1974 saw meals being delivered to Inverloch residents. Inverloch Elderly Peoples Welfare Committee was a sub committee of our Wonthaggi Committee, they organized their own roster and delivery system with Tom Skerry overseeing the smooth running of the service. They had 10 meals at the beginning and at their 20 year celebration were delivering 45 per day. They used a two team system – team one collected the two bins of meals from the Wonthaggi Hospital, then met team two at the Road House with both teams delivering the meals. I remember only a couple of times there was a mix up and both teams waited at the Road House, or someone not turning up for the meals at the hospital.

In later times (1992) when South Gippsland Shire employed a Health and Community Care Development Officer (remember this was before amalgamation and Inverloch was part of South Gippsland Shire) there was a review of the Inverloch Meals on Wheels Service. Three pages of recommendations were made but as they would have needed many more volunteers, meals cooked in Inverloch, adding at least another $3 per meal, extra meetings between the players were held.

Over time, meal price increases were needed, food costs, containers etc. At times when there were major shortages of volunteers the committee decided it was time to add 5cents then 10cents per meal towards possibly having to purchase a vehicle to deliver the meals. Our meals were the cheapest in the state and no hardship for clients.

Some tough days, when volunteers didn't show up, we had to deliver three of the four routes, leaving clients waiting at the gate wondering what had happened to their lunch. The hospital kitchen staff often filled in too.

Our bank balance was growing and the constitution allowed for donations to be made for the benefit of the aged in our community. We never received publicity for these donations and thought it best to keep it that way. Donations I remember were; Ambulance Service – a heart monitor, District Nursing – a syringe driver to aid cancer patients to receive pain relief in their own home, large print books for the Library, the hospital – an extra heart monitor so they could have one each in both the operating theatre and the emergency department and an external pace-maker – this was used for emergency transfer of patient needing a pacemaker. I remember Dr Pepper stopping me in the street one day to tell me how beneficial this was to get his patient safely to Melbourne for surgery.

Many changes took place over the years, more government documentation, computers for more record keeping for government subsidies etc. Thus, major changes were needed to keep the management of the service going as a volunteer committee. In 1994 the committee went “cap in hand” to the Borough for help in coordinating the volunteer roster. I was, very nervous as word was Cr. Jack Clancy wasn’t keen on our proposal. We must have made a good case as the Borough agreed to be responsible for rostering drivers and associated administration included our insurance cover in their policies.

Meals on Wheels was much more than a hot lunch. Many elderly people became locked into their homes and that visit each day was the only contact they had with the outside world. Volunteers would alert us to any problems, it was monitoring done in a quiet way. Friendships developed between many and extra visits were a joy to all.

There were extra subsidies over times from the government, one being Vitamin C – so juice or an orange was added along with soup in the winter. The soup was carried in one large container and ladled into the client’s own bowl. One cheeky client’s used to bring out a saucepan as he was the last on the route and expected what was left. It worked a few times till he was told we had more to deliver. Many ate the main at lunch and saved the soup and sweet for tea.

To celebrate 20 years we held a wonderful celebration afternoon tea catered by Sarah Ashe, Darryl Thomas did us proud (he also was a wonderful support as an emergency driver over many years). We had all the main early players in attendance – Michael Kirk, Jack Brown, Bill Robertson, Lyla Taberner & George Mortimer and as many volunteers who could attend. I read a poem written for me by Cecelli Sullivan .

GRACE BEFORE MEALS ON WHEELS

Sittin at the table

With me knife and fork and spoon

Wishin’ that the Meals on Wheels

Would get here soon.

Hopin’ when they do show up,

Whenever that may be. They won’t have pinched the best bits,

And left the rest for me

Although I’m past my 70’s

Me appetites okay

And I do enjoy the tucker

Which they bring to me each day.

Our service was one of the few that provided meals 52 weeks of the year, 5 days per week and later extra meals delivered on Friday to cover the weekend in special cases. I am proud of our family's involvement over the full 24 years of operation, my husband was the first president, he roped me in to be the unofficial roster co-ordinator for the first year then a member of the committee for 23 years, in turn I roped my sister Jenny & family in, too. Our kids loved to join in the volunteering and having some lonely folk join us at Christmas dinner.

For a number of years a thank you barbeque was held at the Guide Park, sausages & hamburgers bought from Haines & Banks butchers, salads made at home and beautiful sponge cakes made by Maureen Hedley. It was a great event and lovely to meet all together.

Both Tom Skerry & I were presented with a lovely plaque for services to Meals on Wheels at our final thankyou function, and I was given a community award by the hospital but really they were for all the volunteers who shared with us to make a most worthwhile contribution to the frail and elderly of our communities.

The need for Meals on Wheels service in our community had grown to where it became unmanageable to continue by a volunteer committee. From modest beginnings in 1972, 1995/96 saw 24,446 meals delivered – swelling the total for the 24 years to 363,895 delivered meals. Fruitful negations took place between our committee & the hospital, resulting in the reauspice of funding and management. Wonthaggi & District Hospital would continue this vital service, officially taking over on 1st September 1996.

The final duty to officially wind up this volunteer committee was passing over of a cheque for $24,132.32 to be used for the benefit of Meals on Wheels in this area. Everyone can be very proud of this achievement.



Some people who helped get Meals on Wheels on the road and keep it there for 20 years at a birthday celebration for volunteers, past and present, at the Wonthaggi Town Hall last Friday.
They are: Jenny Milkins, home help supervisor, Michael Kirk of Mont Albert, former hospital manager, Bill Robertson, first committee president, Jack Brown of Kilcunda, co-ordinator for 22 years, Lyla Taberner, first treasurer, George Mortimer, former Borough mayor, Barbara Robertson, treasurer and secretary of the 1992 committee.



Rae Haines & Dawn Turner. 1972