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# **KANGAROO GROUND CHRONICLE**

**Newsletter of the  
ANDREW ROSS MUSEUM INC**

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**JOHN AUSTIN**

*9/9/1931 - 21/3/2018*

**With sincere thanks to Dick Austin (John's son) for the information used in this article.**

John Austin was a long time and passionate member and supporter of the Andrew Ross Museum; a member of the board who eventually became its chairman. His contribution to growing 'The Chronicle,' (the newsletter of the museum) in quality and circulation was a credit to his editorial skills. He regularly manned the museum, answered many emails and written requests for information about the historical events of the Kangaroo Ground area, catalogued files and the many photos held in photograph albums. He supported Mick Woiwod with the publication of his many books. As Dick, his son, remarked "*The irony is that a newcomer of 1950s finished his time in Kangaroo Ground as an old-timer manning the local museum.*"

## ***JOHN AUSTIN and his FAMILY***

### **John's Parents**

John was born two years after the start of the Great Depression and grew up through WW2.

His father, Bert Austin, grew up poor in Kensington and Bert's father died at 26. Bert nearly died during the flu epidemic when he was 11. At 12 he left Kensington state school to support his single mother, which he did for the rest of her life.

John's mother, Irene Matthews, grew up in Essendon (her father was a policeman) and she worked at Ball and Welch, then Georges. She was 37 at the time of John's birth.

John's dad, Bert, worked as a law clerk for George Turner for 17 years then, after Turner's death, he worked for 40 years, as a private secretary for Ben Nathan. Ben Nathan owned the marvellous home Ripponlea and the Maples Stores. The Austin family initially lived at Ascot Vale but occupied Ripponlea while Ben Nathan was doing a European grand tour.

John Austin was the antithesis of his father, who was a heavy drinker, chain smoker, loud and assertive, with no formal education, which he didn't value. He was, however, a self-made man with numerous business contacts.

Bert (33) and Irene (25) married in 1919. The children of Bert and Irene Austin were: Bill (b. 1922), Lesley (b. 1927) John (b. 1931). His father called him 'boy', which John joked was because he believed he was unexpected and he couldn't recall his name.

John attended Caulfield Grammar, completing matriculation (1936-1948), where he met Graeme De Graaff. He went on to work at the Maples store in Prahran and, in 1951 at age 18, he went on his own European trip for eighteen months. Through his father's connections, he worked for seven months at Harrods, where he actually served Her Majesty the Queen. Eventually he met Graeme De Graaff's older sister Shirley De Graaff, who matriculated from MLC at 14, and whom John married in 1955. Shirley was initially a dress designer then studied nursing/midwifery.

### **John the Farmer**

Shirley and John followed John's ambition to become a farmer. Even though he had no farming experience they bought a pig and poultry farm in Kangaroo Ground. They ran a commercial chicken and pig farm, with over 20 sheds with concrete floors, automatic water and lighting, with a Dodge Fargo truck for transport.

They lived in a 50 year old house which was in a poor state, with tank water and a dam. They had a generator for power and a slow combustion stove for cooking and hot water. Eventually they closed down the pig and chicken operation and established a dairy farm, as their sole source of income, which was later supplemented by John giving private music lessons.

Shirley had a powerful personality and they quickly became established in Kangaroo Ground and the wider community. They became strong members of the Kangaroo Ground Presbyterian Church

as new young people. John became an elder, session clerk and church organist for decades, playing with a graceful, easy style.

John and brother Bill, so the story goes, after their father Bert's death in 1935, found a large sum of money in Bert's papers that Ben Nathan had given Bert to 'look after'. It was not a gift and not included in the will. Showing their personal level of integrity, John and Bill decided to return the money to the Nathan family who knew nothing about it. "The integrity of their action is of the Kangaroo Ground chook farmer returning money to the occupants of Ripponlea, that they didn't know they were owed." (*Dick Austin*)

### **John's Reinvention**

John reinvented himself from "*possibly the world's worst farmer who couldn't even wield a hammer*" by redoing his matriculation to get better marks before being accepted into Melbourne University where he completed a BA and DipEd. to become a teacher.

His teaching career began in 1968 at Templestowe High School as a music teacher, then continued from 1969, at Ivanhoe Grammar, as a teacher of English for the next 18 years before retiring at 54. He enjoyed teaching night classes at Macleod Tech. one night a week to supplement his income as his children completed their education.

### **Family Tragedy**

John's wife Shirley suffered a brain aneurism in 1971 and died some week later, leaving John as sole parent with 4 children, aged from 5 to 14. Her death shocked the Kangaroo Ground community and obviously has a profound impact on him.

### **John's Passions During his 32 years of Retirement**

John's love of opera continued from early times as documented in his diary when it appeared that he attended operas every night when he spent seven months travelling in Europe and when he worked in London. He enjoyed classical music (sometimes played at volume), in particular Mozart, and amassed a huge collection. Along with this he displayed a remarkable knowledge of classical music.

He continued an interest of his father's; building up the family tree. He delved into genealogy and wrote a number of histories. He received, and sent countless emails, from far distant relatives and hit gold to discover he was related to Jane Austen.

### **VCE Marking**

From the early 1970s to 2017 he marked VCE English papers. He was the longest serving VCE marker in Victoria. He was very good at it and maintained that his bell curve is 'bizarrely accurate'. He claimed that he sometimes only had to read the first couple of paragraphs to judge the standard of the writing. His sense of humour showed through in the bloopers mail-out that he sent at the end of each marking season.

### **Social Media and Sense of Humour**

He embraced technology, wrote a Wikipedia page, accessed Facebook, and had constant communication with hundreds of people through email. John displayed many levels of his sense of humour and he sent and received numerous email jokes, which brightened up many lives.

### **John's Immediate Family**

John has four children: Hilary Tearle, Dick Austin, Paul Austin and Eugenie Austin as well as six grand-children and two great-grandchildren



A Duo of Pianists

## **ANDREW ROSS MUSEUM CONNECTION WITH ELTHAM COLLEGE'S SWIPERS GULLY RESTAURANT**



The Kangaroo Ground Andrew Ross Museum continues their friendship with Swipers Gully Cafe Restaurant with an on-going display of objects from the museum.

This has included kitchen utensils, crockery and implements from the past. At present there is a display of bottles and museum publications in the display case which you can check out while waiting to be seated in the cafe.

## **ANDREW ROSS MUSEUM TURNS 25 IN 2018**

### ***INTERESTING HISTORICAL FACTS ABOUT KANGAROO GROUND PRIMARY SCHOOL, THE SCHOOL HOUSE, AND ANDREW ROSS MUSEUM***

In the corner of the present Kangaroo Ground Primary School playground stands a weatherboard building used for art lessons.

A member of the Eltham Historical Society, Joy Ness (now deceased) tells of its history.

#### ***The original school***

This old structure, which is attached to the teachers' weatherboard residence facing Main Rd, dates back to 1878. Before then, from 1851 - 1878, schooling for the 10 families in the district was provided in a slab building south of this one. The building was built on .2ha (half an acre) given by a local farmer, James Donaldson, and built by Samuel Furphy, father of the novelist Joseph.

The single room 9mx5.5m (30'x18') was at first lined, but the green slabs soon shrunk, and the wind and rain entered cracks except when they were stuffed with paper.

The building served as a Presbyterian school and church with fees for 18 pence a week for education. Young men also attended winter evening classes there.

Once a corner of the room was curtained off for the schoolmaster's living space and the pulpit was used for sleeping.

#### ***The first teacher***

The first teacher was Andrew Ross, who also took church services when the minister was unable to attend, which happened frequently as he had long distances to travel on bad roads.

In 1857 the school building was also used as a Court of Petty Sessions and served as a post office from 1854 until 1858.

During the gold rush, fossickers on their way to the Caledonian diggings at Queenstown (now St Andrews) prospected the district but did not remain long.

But the farming community grew until, by 1878, the population warranted the building of State School No. 2105.

## ***From Presbyterian School to State School***

The 1878 one-roomed, tongue and groove lined building, measuring 15mx5.5m (49'x18'), was to accommodate 60 children. The old school No. 352 was closed and the new one opened on October 1.

The original three-tiered floor was replaced by a flat floor and teacher's platform (which has since been removed). A half glass partition wall then divided the large room into two rooms in which the old-style form-type desks were replaced with dual desks. The small playground, surrounded by pine trees and a picket fence, was extended in 1931 with an additional .4 ha of land.

During World War Two the school faced closure because of a decrease to seven in enrolment but by 1946 it had increased again to 45.

In 1955 the school won a prize for the best kept garden and school ground in this inspectorate.

A district subdivision increased the enrolment in 1968 to 65 and a bus service was established.

After the hall, which had been used for lessons, was demolished late in 1968 the pupils met in the original fire brigade meeting room, which is now the tennis club, opposite the General Store, until the new school building with a storeroom and staffroom was built in 1974.

### ***The present primary school buildings***

The new additions of class rooms and hall were built in 2009-10 and added much needed additional space for a growing population of students. The bonus structure includes the covered outdoor, all weather playing area, with BBQ facilities for use at school functions.

### ***The teacher's residence and its transformation to a Museum***

The Andrew Ross Schoolhouse Museum, which is in its 25<sup>th</sup> year, came into being through the efforts of the Kangaroo Ground School Council and members of the Eltham District Historical Society, which celebrates 50 years, this year, 2018.

The four-roomed attached residence was built in 1879.

In the early 1920s a small room was built on the front veranda of the teacher's residence which was to serve as a State Savings Bank agency until about 1934. It remained in use as a residence, by numerous teachers and sewing teachers until the late 1980s.

Discussions with the Victorian Education Department commenced in 1986 regarding the fate of the Kangaroo Ground school teacher's residence once it was to be vacated in August of that year.

In 1992 the initiative of a former school principal, David Dodd, the Ness family and the Eltham Historical Society led to preservation of the residence and aspects of the district's past.

Bruce and Joy Ness, of the Eltham Historical Society, proposed it become the Society's Museum which received the support of that Society and the School Council.

The Museum was opened by Cr Robert Marshall 27 March 1993.

One room has continued to be used by the school as a music room.

## **DID YOU KNOW THAT KANGAROO GROUND HAD ITS FIRST POST OFFICE IN 1854?**

### **Extract from Victorian Government Gazette.**

“The public are hereby informed that a Post Office has been established at the Kangaroo Ground, beyond Eltham.

Mails close at Melbourne every Tuesday and Friday at 2.00pm, and at Kangaroo Ground every Wednesday and Saturday at 1.30pm.

*Dated GPO Melbourne 13 October 1854. (A. M. Crae) Post Master General.”*

## **ANDREW ROSS SCHOOLHOUSE MUSEUM ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

The AGM was held on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> May at Swipers Gully Café Research. Our Guest Speaker was Jim Connor, President of Eltham District Historical Society who spoke about the EDHS role in the formation of the Andrew Ross Schoolhouse Museum in Kangaroo Ground. It was extremely interesting to hear the process that took place 25 years ago, much of which is recorded in the previous article in this Chronicle.

### **Election of Office Bearers**

The members of the Board for 2018 – 2019 comprise:

<b>Patrons:</b>	Mick Woiwod and Diana Bassett-Smith
<b>Chairman:</b>	Warwick Leeson
<b>Deputy Chairman:</b>	David Sharpe
<b>Secretary:</b>	Carol Leeson
<b>Treasurer:</b>	Rob Shackleton
<b>Assistant Treasurer:</b>	Geoff Ritter
<b>Committee Members:</b>	Jane Cook
	Jack Stock
	Rob Thornton
	Catherine Thomson
	Vivienne Ritter
	Robyn Reed

<b>SUBSCRIPTIONS</b>	(Join or Renew)	
10 Year Subscriber:	Family \$200	Individual \$125
Yearly Subscriber:	Family \$25	Individual \$15

## **EVENT FOR ANDREW ROSS MUSEUM CELEBRATING 25 YEARS IN 2018**

To celebrate this milestone we will have a cemetery walk at Kangaroo Ground Cemetery on Sunday 23 September at 3 pm. Meeting at the cemetery gates.

**We gratefully acknowledge the support given to the Museum by Kangaroo Ground Primary School  
and the Shire of Nillumbik**