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KANGAROO GROUND CHRONICLE

Newsletter of the
ANDREW ROSS MUSEUM INC

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CONTENTS

1. CHRISTMAS HILLS - A BRIEF HISTORY	1
THE FIRST PEOPLES – THE WURUNDJERI	1
CHRISTMAS HILLS STATION (1842-1865)	1
THE FIRST SETTLERS	2
1929-30 MELBOURNE MILESTONES	2
STILL STANDING AFTER ALL THIS TIME!	3
ROB ROY HILL CLIMB ATTRACTS CROWDS TO CHRISTMAS HILLS IN 1930s	3
A NEAR MISS IN KANGAROO GROUND	4
2. ONE OF OUR PATRONS TURNS 90 - WITH FLAIR!!	5
3. HEIDELBERG’S BUSY BEE SIGNATURE QUILT, 1895-96	5
4. WHO WE ARE AND HOW TO CONTACT US	6

CHRISTMAS HILLS - A BRIEF HISTORY

THE FIRST PEOPLES – THE WURUNDJERI

The Wurundjeri Aboriginal people once occupied the country around Christmas Hills. After spending their warmer months hunting and food-gathering across the Yarra River valley, these hills provided them excellent winter hunting and much needed shelter away from the gales, mists and floods along the Yarra. They reportedly enjoyed a close relationship with James Murray, lessee of the first sheep station in the district but little else is known about them.

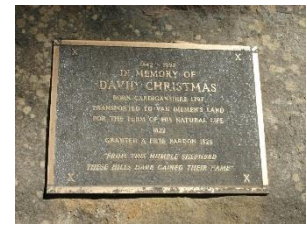
CHRISTMAS HILLS STATION (1842-1865)

Established by Joseph Stevenson, took in much country between One Tree Hill and the Yarra River. In urgent need of a shepherd, Stevenson rode into Melbourne in 1842 and hired David Christmas, a ticket-of-leave Welshman. Having given directions on how to reach his station in the stringybark forest, Stevenson left the shepherd to find his own way. Christmas became badly lost. However, after days of wandering, he heard the distant sound of bells attached to the necks of Stevenson’s

bullocks. Thankful for the man's deliverance, Stevenson named the run in his honour. In turn, the district became known as Christmas Hills.

DAVID CHRISTMAS

The district name derives from David Christmas, a Welsh shepherd (born 1797 in Cardiganshire), who had been transported to Van Diemen's Land for a relatively minor offence. In 1836, having received a pardon, he came to Port Phillip where, in 1842 he was hired as a shepherd by district pioneer, Joseph Stevenson. In 1992 a roadside plaque commemorating the shepherd who gave his name to the district was set in place over his presumed bush gravesite. The plaque was unveiled by two of Stevenson's grandsons, Bruce and Don Ness. This structure has now been moved up by the renovated Christmas Hills Hall in Ridge Road. Later, in 2009 a rock with a commemorative plaque, was installed on the left side of One Tree Hill Road, just before the bridge.



THE FIRST SETTLERS

Farming folk first settled Christmas Hills in 1865. They found it a harsh environment from which to carve out a living. First, they built rudimentary huts, then cleared and fenced (in post-and-rail) a few acres for crops, a horse and a cow. For most, it took a generation or two to remove sufficient forest, with farm productivity seldom rising above subsistence level and always the need for supplementary ways of boosting income. For many, this took the form of providing farm produce to diggers on the nearby Caledonian Goldfield and for a few short years, to others travelling a long Ridge and Muir Roads on route to distant goldfields at Woods Point and Jordan River. During the 1860s and 70s a steady stream of fortune-seeking diggers trekked from Melbourne to these fields, the established route (the Yarra Track) being via Eltham, Kangaroo Ground, Christmas Hills, Yarra Flats and Healesville. Consequently, there was a regular source of patronage available for hotels and grog-shanties established along the track. However, by the turn of the century, the improvement of other more favourable routes, notably through Lilydale, saw this lucrative passing trade tail off dramatically.

Guest houses then began to flourish as the district gained popularity as a holiday destination for Melbournians. However, with the eventual waning of the guest-house era the district settled in to the mid-1990s as a quiet hamlet supporting local activities including small mining operation, a slate quarry, scattered farmlets and numerous rural residences.

In the 1970s, the Victorian Government compulsorily acquired many farms in the district in order to construct Sugarloaf Reservoir.

Today, farmers, like the Wurundjeri, have largely disappeared. However, the stringybark-box forests are in many places returning. The district is now entering another phase of change, as Melbourne Water sells off 'surplus' land to an enthusiastic new class of land holders seeking rural-residential or hobby-farm lifestyles.

Information in this article comes from Mick Woiwod's book 'Once Around the Sugarloaf' and from an article compiled by 'Yarra Glen & District historical Society'

1929-30 MELBOURNE MILESTONES

- Melbourne's population reached 1 million.
- The first air passenger service between Melbourne and Sydney occurred.
- In October the Wall Street Stock Market crashed.
- 30% of Melbourne's population was unemployed.
- Otherwise unemployed men began building the Shrine of Remembrance and Yarra Boulevard
- Victorian Government introduced legislation to protect wild-flowers
- An open season was declared on possums which resulted in 800,000 skins taken

STILL STANDING AFTER ALL THIS TIME!



Butcher Bill lived in this MUD cottage, still standing at the corner of Nicholas Lane and Henley Road. He built it after the Great War, in 1918.

Ned Haughton used to call in with a bottle of whiskey and a yarn. Bill did a bit of fencing, and Clarky was known to pan for gold nearby. Diana Bassett-Smith, as a child, recalls Clarky asking for a bucketful of feed for his chickens, but 'he took the whole sack'.

ROB ROY HILL CLIMB ATTRACTS CROWDS TO CHRISTMAS HILLS IN 1930s

Rob Roy started its life initially as a Shetland pony stud owned by Bill Clinton, a former Mayor of Heidelberg. Over time the property progressed to being known as Clinton's Pleasure Grounds, where companies would transport their employees for a day of picnicking and other recreational delights. Available were a swimming hole, tennis courts, tea-rooms and an area for cricket, football and other sporting activities.

In 1923 the Victorian Light Car Club was formed to actively promote motor sports. During the mid-thirties Bill Clinton had discussions with the Light Car Club of Australia and invited them to organize hill climbs at the property. The first event was held in February 1937 and was won by Peter Whitehead from the United Kingdom in an ERA (English Racing Automobiles).

BUSH FIRE INTERRUPTS CHRISTMAS HILLS RACING

In January 1962 the Light Car Club of Victoria were forced to abandon the Christmas Hill venue when bush fires burned out the access bridge to the track area and the repair costs to restore the course were too expensive.

From 1979 to 1987 the MG Car Club ran a hill climb at Templestowe, however a decision by the owner of the land to subdivide soon put a halt to that venue. With the closure of the Templestowe Hill Climb a new venue had to be found, which resulted with the subsequent resurrection of the Rob Roy facility.

RACING RETURNS TO CHRISTMAS HILLS

A steering committee negotiated with the Board of Works and the Eltham Shire Council to take over the lease of the Hill Climb venue, formerly known as Rob Roy. In 1992 the MG Car Club was successful in obtaining a ten-year lease on the property.

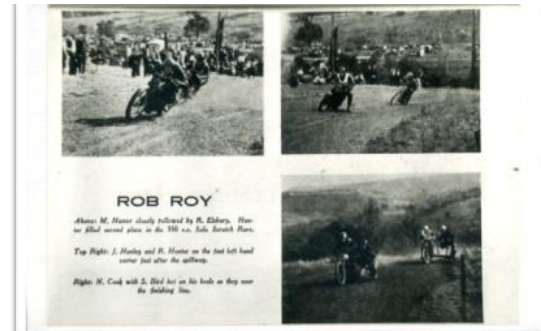
A great deal of voluntary work was carried out by club members over the next 12 months to restore the original track and associated facilities. The access road was improved and guardrails were installed on the causeway. In order to finance some of the enormous costs the "Friends of Rob Roy" was established and 500 memberships were offered at \$150, with members gaining free spectator entry for 10 years.

Over the period of Rob Roy's existence many different vehicles have competed, including motor cycles, (some with sidecars) and midget speedway cars.

In November 2009 the giant PBR brake shoe that was a feature of the Templestowe Hill Climb was rescued and erected at the start line at Rob Roy.

For further details and dates check the MG Car Club website at <http://mgcc.com.au/robroy/>

Thanks to Jim Allen for the material for this article.



1. A History of Rob Roy Hill Climb, 1937 – 1961, (The Hill, The Drivers, the Cars) by Leon Sims
2. Commemorating 50 Years of the MG Car Club Victoria, (From Larikins to old Snoozers) - researched and written by Leon Sims and edited by Bob Somerville
3. Diamond Valley Leader article dated 21 October 2015, page 5

A NEAR MISS IN KANGAROO GROUND

(an unrecorded story until told to John Austin by Geoff Deed, one of the picnickers)

In early 1950s many teenagers of the Methodist Church in Port Melbourne, two busloads of them, one weekend, were picnicking at Kangaroo Ground. The buses parked outside Stevenson's Hall, a large hall that stood beside the main road near the top of the hill. It was mid- afternoon. Young people were excitedly running around in this unfamiliar environment – buses parked beside the road, grassy banks and hawthorn hedges lining the steep hill-side road.

Suddenly a returning speed car came roaring over the hill. Whoever was at the wheel of the Austin Healey saw in a flash that he was faced with many more split-second decisions than he had made at the Hill Climb. Somehow, he managed to dodge all obstacles, here mounting a bank, there swerving between buses, here scraping a hedge and there avoiding a group of scurrying picnickers.

“It was a miracle that no one was killed” commented Geoff Deed of Scoresby, one of the picnickers who hadn't returned to Kangaroo Ground until the middle 2000s.

ONE OF OUR PATRONS TURNS 90 - WITH FLAIR!!

The museum would like to give its warm congratulations and best wishes to life patron of ARM, Diana Bassett-Smith who recently celebrated her 90th birthday.

The occasion was recognised with a party for a large number of family and friends where Diana addressed the gathering from horseback. Diana Bassett-Smith turned 90 and rode a horse into a gathering of waiting well-wishers and regaled us with a tale of how she and Peter met and of her pride in her family, who were present on the celebratory afternoon event.

As a married woman, constrained from professional employment, due to the social morays of the time, Diana put her energies into volunteering, hence the glowing regard in which she is held in the Kangaroo Ground and wider community.

Through sheer hard work she ran a sustainable farm and was a driver behind the start of the Eltham and Kangaroo Ground Pony clubs, together with her husband Peter she played a pivotal role in the running of the Kangaroo Ground Rural Fire Brigade and for many years a member of the Eltham Rural Group where Diana's philanthropic character became evident. She was one of the founding members of the Andrew Ross Museum (hence her appointment as a Patron).

Her birthday speech was pure Diana; full of optimism, humour, anecdotes, with a positive eye to the future.



HEIDELBERG'S BUSY BEE SIGNATURE QUILT, 1895-96

In 1895 a group of Heidelberg women organised a Busy Bee society to raise funds for their church. One of these was a quilt with 213 embroidered cotton squares. Individuals, families and businesses were invited to pay four shillings per square and if every square was 'sold' then they would have raised about 40 pound (\$1,300 in today's money) for the Scots Church.

The quilt was 'won' by the Donaldson family, taken by them to New Zealand, donated to the Scots Church in 1990, then donated to the Heidelberg Historical Society.

On the quilt there are many names of families who lived in or may have been associated with Kangaroo Ground. Hugh Cameron, Henry Scarce, Phebe Scarce, E. Bell, Isa Donaldson, M. Donaldson nee Mary Bennell, John Bell, Mary Crichton.

For those who have Mick Woiwod's book "*KANGAROO GROUND a highland taken*" there you will find details on page 300.

The quilt will be on display at the Old Heidelberg Courthouse Sundays from 2-5 pm, from 19 May to 24 November 2019



WHO WE ARE AND HOW TO CONTACT US

Museum Board Members	
Patrons:	Mick Woiwod woiwodgongfler@bigpond.com.au Diana Bassett-Smith
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Secretary/Public Officer:	Carol Leeson 0422-307-630 wcleeson@primus.com.au
Treasurer:	Rob Shackleton
	Geoff Ritter
Supporter Officer:	Robert Thornton

The Museum is open:
every Thursday 9.30 am – 12 noon
Sunday
Open 2 pm – 4 pm by appointment

Supported by Nillumbik Shire Council