

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HISTORY SOCIETIES

Maximising the value of local history

The Value of History

We acknowledge that history shapes our identities, engages us as citizens, creates inclusive communities, is part of our economic well-being, teaches us to think critically and creatively, inspires leaders and is the foundation of our future generations.

Yarra Ranges Council Plan 2021-2025

INTRODUCTION

Local history is our cultural heritage; an asset that is valuable in many ways. Maximising its value to the community requires a strong partnership between local government and history societies. Those local councils which effectively support their community history groups enjoy the benefits, as does the community as a whole.

Local history is an often underused major asset despite its potential to generate considerable economic and social benefits for local governments and the communities they serve. History societies have considerable resources that can be harnessed with relatively small investments by local governments to maximise those benefits. Therein lies the basis for productive partnerships.

Recent natural disasters such as bushfires and floods have demonstrated how much value many communities place on their local history in their ongoing recovery process. There is a strong and deep need to erect memorials, record experiences, restore valued buildings and to recover other aspects of community history.

THE VALUE OF HISTORY AND HERITAGE

A growing body of research has generated hard evidence that history and heritage have significant economic and social benefits for local governments and their communities. Local history groups contribute significantly to these benefits through their extensive knowledge and volunteer input.



This NSW village of cobargo promotes its historic landmarks as tourist attractions.

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Economic Benefit

- Tourism (including hospitality, tours etc.)
- Job creation - directly and indirectly
- Leveraging uniqueness to create special places that attract tourists and a range of economic activity including creative industries
- Creating aesthetically pleasing places that attract people to congregate
- Repurposing old buildings. This also leads to skills development and environmental benefits
- Increased demand for heritage property and consequent price premium

Social Benefit

- Enriching our lives
- Shaping our personal, social identity and sense of belonging to the community
- Supporting social cohesion and strengthening social networks
- Fostering a strong sense of belonging and attachment to place
- Shaping the perception and quality of place
- Increasing the levels of social support (resulting in better social connection and improved mental health) and developing active and skilled citizens through heritage volunteering
- Visiting and engaging with heritage enhances our mental health and wellbeing
- Improving our mental health through outdoor experiences offered by the historic environment
- Engaging with heritage can improve our physical health and support public health goals
- Experiencing heritage stimulates our minds and helps older members of society.

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WHAT HISTORY SOCIETIES OFFER

Australia has approximately 1,200 community history and heritage societies. These voluntary community organisations operate in every local government area across the nation. They are a remarkable resource which creates significant social and economic benefits for the community for relatively small contributions from governments. They provide significant value for money and a high return on investment.

These societies have deep knowledge of the cultural heritage of their communities. This has been gained by curating local history collections, research and communicating that history.

Those collections often include items placed in their care by local government – a valuable community service.

Knowledge of cultural heritage

Some local governments regularly overlook this local knowledge when it comes to heritage studies, the assessment of what is important to local communities and planning policy, engaging outside consultants and failing to encourage local input.

Yet combining this rich asset of local knowledge with local government's resources to preserve and promote the history and heritage of an area can result in a rewarding partnership.

Despite the valuable resource that local history groups are some local councils do not make best use of that local knowledge.



Sale Historical Society has created four museums including a general museum in the former council chambers and a restored original water tower to tell the story of the town's water supply including its leading role in utilising bore water.

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Care for collections

It is estimated that more than 90% of societies have a collection of cultural heritage material which contributes to research and local understanding and more than 60% of societies have a museum or some temporary form of historical exhibition.

Local history and heritage groups often provide services to support local government. For example, local governments often pass on records and memorabilia to be cared for by local history/heritage groups.

These groups also possess a deep knowledge of the area and this is a valuable resource for planning.

In return for taking custody of important historical items and contributing to the assessment of local heritage, Local Government often subsidises local history groups to support their operations.

This can include the use of original council or other government-owned facilities as museums, shared libraries or similar archival facilities and the funding of curator and/or administrator positions. However this support is not uniform across the country.

The local knowledge and understanding, hundreds of images and documents collected from numerous local pioneering families and many hours of cataloguing and organising these items, provides a rich resource to properly understand the local area.

Local history groups maintain collections containing millions of items that form a significant part of Australia's cultural heritage and Distributed National Collection.

The societies publish and publicise their local heritage in many forms. They add incalculable social value.



Storage compactus for historical archives.

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Voluntary work

Collectively, these groups harness the skills and energy of approximately 100,000 members and volunteers who contribute hundreds of thousands of hours of work, conservatively valued at \$144 million per annum.

Where adequately supported by local government, the valuable work done by local historical societies includes:

- Promoting local history and heritage through tours, publications and displays
- Providing information to assist local councils make planning decisions, especially where there are heritage issues
- Curating and conserving valuable collections of local cultural heritage material much of which is irreplaceable

- Operating museums and other displays
- Providing opportunities for volunteers, including many senior citizens
- Recording the experiences of the area's older citizens
- Providing research and direction for descendants of former residents
- Contributing to research and local understanding.

To take advantage of the rich asset of our cultural heritage should be an automatic consideration in planning and development decisions.

Local history and heritage groups also should be recognised in local arts and culture strategies and activities because local history is cultural heritage.



Historical Society events such as this ANZAC day celebration in Parramatta highlight important local people and events.

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HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAN WORK WITH HISTORY SOCIETIES

Local government is the principal area of government that is served by and is responsible for supporting community history and heritage societies.

The proven economic and social value of history and heritage to local communities, together with the important role played by local historical societies, provides a strong case for local government and those societies to work together.

There is much unrealised potential for partnerships between local government and historical societies.

That potential needs to be better acknowledged and the partnerships optimised. Local tourism, with its many spin offs, is often a major beneficiary.

Local government authorities recognise and support the work of these groups in many ways, although some with more appreciation of the benefits than others.

To operate in a way that assists local governments maximise the benefits of

local history and heritage, local history groups need:

- affordable premises with adequate space for their administrative operations, secure collection storage, museum displays, public meetings, etc. (These premises need to meet minimum standards for museums and galleries (see National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries.)
- funding for essential equipment such as scanners, computers, projectors, storage, signage, display mountings
- funding to cover operational costs such as utilities
- insurance coverage e.g. for volunteers, public liability, buildings and contents
- support for projects to:
 - enhance collections
 - conserve and digitise material
 - curate and present displays
 - publish research and information about their collections



The Cowra Shire Council provides accommodation for the Cowra Family History Group. The historic Cowra Prisoner of War Camp is a major tourist attraction supported by the Council. Photo from Cowra Family History website www.cfhg.com.au. Downloaded 18 February 2022.

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- o establish and maintain on-line access to collections
- o co-ordinate with other history groups in the local area e.g. through annual seminars.

Some additional initiatives that are particularly useful to support local history societies include:

- Employment of a Local History Officer or Local Heritage Officer to liaise with and assist community history and heritage organisations and provide access to Council heritage advice, collections advice and advocacy
- Ensuring societies are properly prepared for and assisted in disaster preparedness planning, including the provision of suitable emergency/secure collection storage spaces
- Inclusion of cultural heritage organisations in arts and culture strategies and activities
- Communication and promotion of the work of historical societies, such as through Council publications and websites.



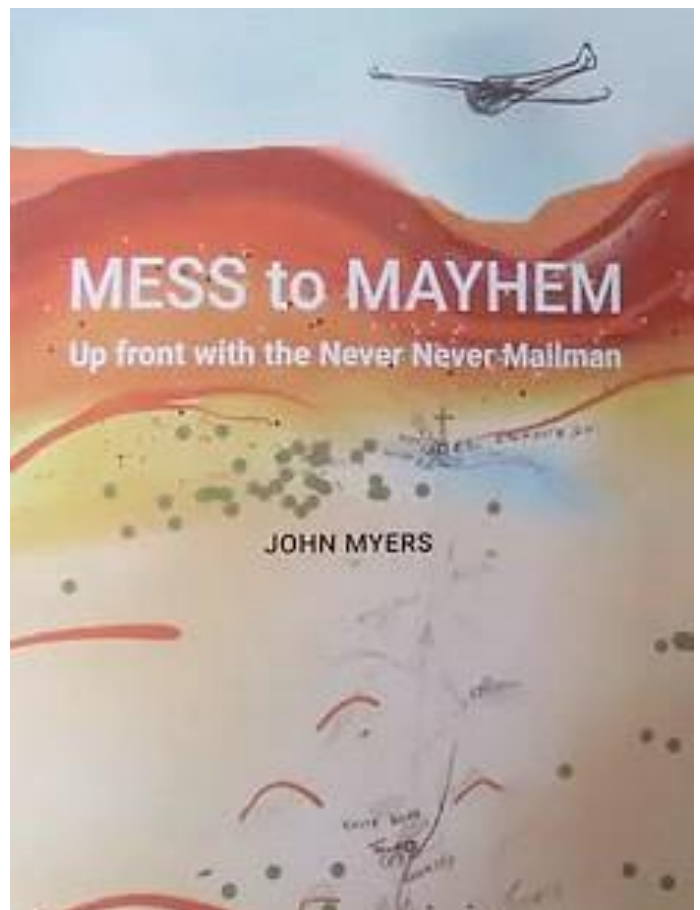
Yarra Ranges and other museums in the shire are supported by a heritage officer.

CONCLUSION

A mutually beneficial partnership between community history and heritage groups and Local Government will produce many benefits, both economic and social.

Relatively small outlays by local government can produce excellent value for money and return on investment.

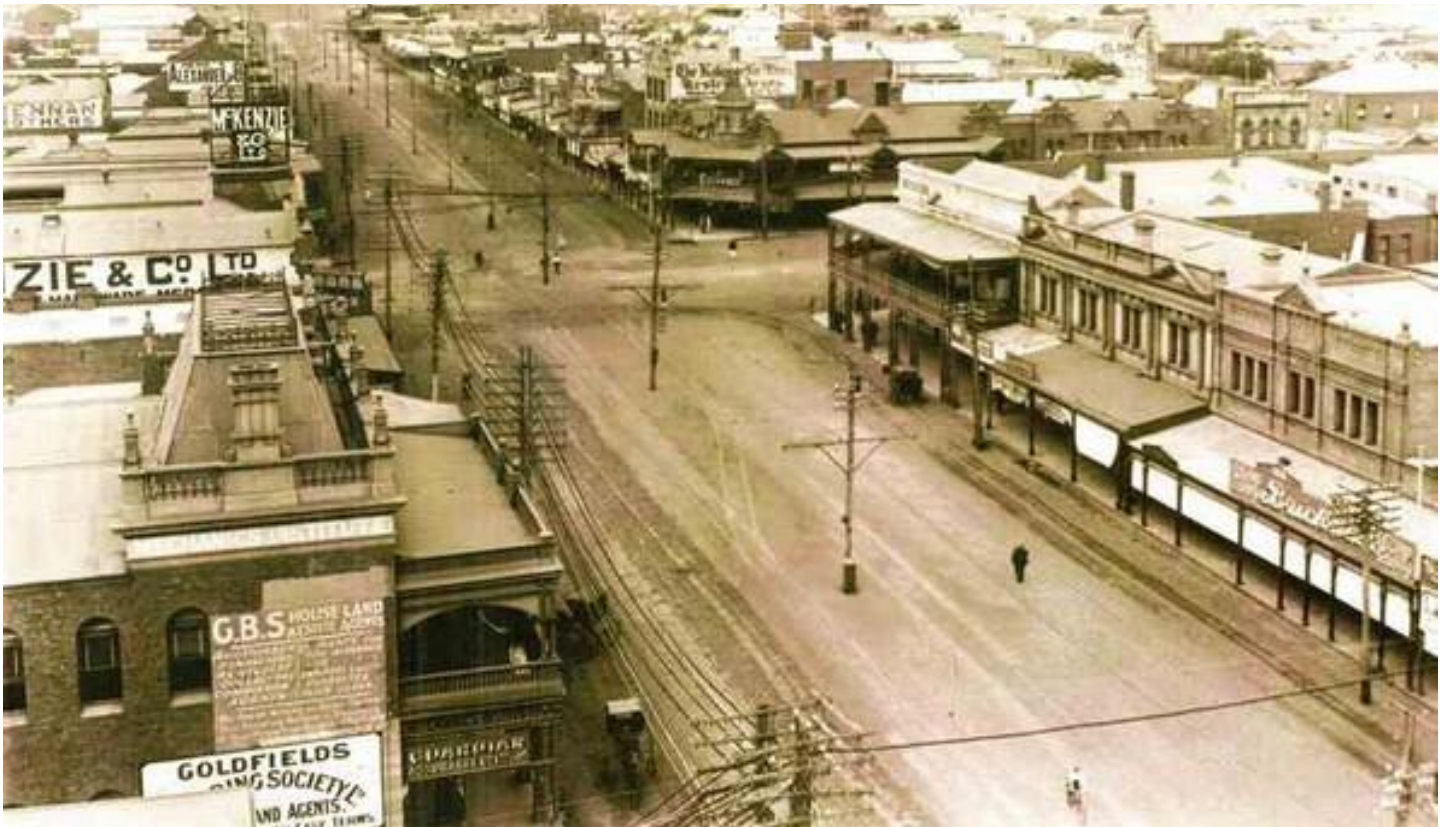
Such a partnership should be the norm rather than the exception, enabling all Australians to better appreciate their past and for all communities to be enriched both economically and socially.



Local Histories are valuable contribution from historical societies, often compiled by knowledgeable volunteers.

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Historical Societies across Australia identify, catalogue and archive hundreds of historic images such as this early Kalgoorlie street scene.

RESOURCES

Heritage Council of Victoria

<https://heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/research-projects/the-state-of-heritage-review-local-heritage/>

City of Adelaide

<https://invest.cityofadelaide.com.au/blog/the-economic-value-of-heritage-tourism/>

Perth

<https://heritageperth.com.au/your-heritage/why-is-heritage-important-to-communities/>

Historic England

(www.historicengland.org.au/research/current/social-and-economic-research/reports-and-briefings/)

Useful reports from this site include:

- Heritage and the Economy 2019
- Heritage and Society 2020

National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries.

V 1.5, September 2016. This is a collaboration of government organisations in the ACT, Tasmania, South Australia, Northern Territory, Victoria, Western Australia and the Collections Council of Australia Ltd.

This document can be found at: <https://www.amaga.org.au/national-standards-for-australian-museums-and-galleries>

