

The Dromana Historical Society Permanent Exhibition Redevelopment

INTERVIEW BY KITTY OWENS WITH JEAN ROTHERHAM

Kitty Owens has been working with Dromana Historical Society in her role as Roving Curator, assisting the Society to re-do their permanent exhibition. Kitty spoke to Jean Rotherham, President of the Dromana Historical Society to find out how they have achieved an inspiring invigoration of their museum.



Below: Dromana Historical Society President, Jean Rotherham (left) with Secretary and Treasurer, Janet Egglestone.

Jean Rotherham's mother, Jessie Bright, had been a founding member of the Dromana Historical Society and Jean began to accompany her to Historical Society meetings and eventually began volunteering herself. Jean has subsequently been instrumental in the redevelopment of the Society's permanent exhibition.

As membership of the Dromana Historical Society was declining as members aged, the Committee wanted to attract new members with an interesting project. Jean recognised that their displays were not as appealing as others she had seen in museums of a similar size. The displays contained a lot of personal items that were not catalogued and had little accompanying information. The committee agreed to undertake some collection management and engaged Georgia Rouette, former Manager of Exhibition Services at MA (Vic), for some assistance with developing themes for a new display. *"Its not one person's Society, it belongs to the whole membership, not just the Committee, so we felt it was very important to let everyone have a chance to say what they thought should be included, and where possible we tried to incorporate those ideas."*

Some of the Society's members struggled with the suggested move

towards themed displays with fewer objects, but most felt that something needed to change although they weren't sure where to start. The new permanent exhibition will have more interpretation and stronger stories illustrated with key objects. *"We wanted visitors to leave the exhibition with more knowledge of the area, and just having lots of objects on display doesn't achieve that."*

The Committee set about implementing their plan and removed everything from the exhibition area so that they could work with a fresh view of the space. They anticipate that some donors will be unhappy if their items are not displayed but Jean will reassure them that items will be refreshed over time. *"The new exhibition allows us to do more by having smaller exhibitions and by showing objects to better advantage."*

As part of their plan, Jean has started a catalogue of the collection that has given her more authority over the objects, their provenance and significance. Currently there are over 5000 items catalogued. *"Our plan is to have all of the Shire's collection available for searching in the History section of their website by including all of the Historical Societies in the area."* Facebook has proven to be a good resource for finding information relevant to the collection and the area,

and useful to other local organisations. The local Mechanics Institute asked the Society for help verifying information about Institute buildings in the area. One of these had been burnt down in the 1970s during a controlled burn that got away. Photos uncovered by the Society through Facebook showed the fire brigade were present to manage the burn-off before the building caught alight and the Institute was able to use the photographs that they recovered. Working with other groups has improved the relevance of the Society to the region.

With the exhibition area cleared, the selection of finishes and display housing is underway. The committee has selected themes and objects and are writing interpretation texts. The Society will include a digital storytelling project in the new display that evolved from the *Postcards* exhibition involving eight other Societies in the area. For *Postcards* Jean recorded a story and used collection items and photographs from around Dromana. The digital format was appealing to younger audiences and the Society is interested to do more in that area. The *Postcards* exhibition required high resolution images and Jean obtained permissions from other collections including State Library Victoria and the Royal Historical Society Victoria (RHSV).

The exhibition includes photographs and stories about guest houses in the area, and as advised by Georgia, the Society is developing a reference in the format of a coffee table book that will provide additional photographs and information.

Jean hopes that the redevelopment of the exhibition *"will be enjoyed by the public, that the Society will be proud of it, that it will stand the test of time and attract more visitors."* The Society hopes to attract younger members and to encourage further donations and information to benefit the collection.

Kitty Owens spoke with Jean Rotherham in April 2015. The Exhibition, 'Dromana The Delightful', opens in May. The Dromana & District Historical Society is located in the Old Shire Offices, 359A Point Nepean Road, Dromana. It is open on the first and third Sundays of the month from 2-4pm; other times by prior arrangement. For more information visit: <http://avoca.vicnet.net.au/~dromana/>