

THE MILLSTONE

KURRAJONG ~ COMLERoy HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Society is dedicated to researching, recording, preserving and promoting the history of the district. Covering the area north and west of the Hawkesbury River – North Richmond, Kurmond, Kurrajong, Berambing, Bilpin, Grose Vale, Grose Wold, Bowen Mountain, Colo, Wilberforce, Ebenezer, Glossodia, Tennyson, Freemans Reach.

Grasshopper Motor Mower *by Jenny Griffiths*

From "A History" by Ronald Tate (1994) provided by Fagin Park, Galston to Ron Ness

It may surprise some people to know that Kurrajong was the home of an early model of electric lawnmower. It was designed and manufactured by Ron Tate.

A local draftsman, Ron Tate, was the grandson of Henry Tate who was the Minister at St Stephen's Church of England from 1902 to 1914. When Henry retired he lived at "Arthona" on the corner of Grose Vale and Greggs Roads. Ron's father, Arthur, lived next door at "Glendoon" which had a citrus orchard. It was in a shed on this property that Ron began making the lawnmowers.

Electric mowers did exist, but friends ask Ron to design an improved mower that would cut the lawn without leaving stalks of grass. His first mower did the job and friends, who borrowed it, asked if they could purchase a similar model.

In 1948 Grasshopper Lawnmower works was established. The business was part time at first, owing to a lack of supply of ½ HP electric motors and other materials that were hard to obtain.

As well as local retailers such as Woodhill & Co., Paull Bros in Richmond and N. A. Minturn in Kurrajong the Grasshopper Rotary Electric Mower made sales to Nock and Kirby, David Jones and Anthony Horderns in Sydney. So popular was the mower, with enquiries as far away as Queensland, that, in 1949, it was decided to manufacture full time. They also changed to petrol engines at this time. With the number of units being sold, Ron found that he had outgrown the shed at Kurrajong.

In 1950 he formed the Grasshopper Lawnmower Co. Pty Ltd with himself as Managing Director and his father as the Secretary. They purchased the lease of the "Pea Vinery Factory" on Hawkesbury Valley Way, Richmond which had been used by Edgells during the war to separate peas from their pods. "Horseland" is now on this site.



Advertisement in The Sydney Morning Herald, 9th November, 1952

The company was very successful over the next six years despite competition from Victa Mowers. Engines were sourced from various manufacturers in England such as Crompton-Parkinson and Villiers. Thousands of mowers were sold and at its peak Grasshopper Lawnmowers had 30 to 40 casual and permanent employees each week.

With increasing competition from other manufacturers such as Victa Mowers, Grasshopper went out of business in 1959.



We will have a cutaway model of a Grasshopper mower on display at our Mid Winter Lunch.

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Membership renewal is now due!

President's Report

Hello everyone,

Our life member, Val Birch, passed away in May. She was 87. There is an obituary on page 6.

Membership renewal is now due. Please renew and [pay online](#) to minimise our administrative effort. Rates are again unchanged—\$20 single and \$30 family. If you joined since March you do not need to renew.

In May, our General Meeting was at the Kurrajong Radio Museum, and our guest speaker was Mal Bobrige. Mal gave an entertaining talk on his life and times in the Navy & RFS, illustrated with many pictures.

Our Upper Hunter Tour is going to be on the weekend of 25th & 26th July, so we can include a big open day at Tocal Homestead. Also included will be Singleton Historical Society and the Army Infantry Museum. As this is now relatively short notice, please contact me immediately if you would like booking details. To keep the cost down, it is only one night, unless you want to travel up on Friday to make a more leisurely day on Saturday.

The Mid Winter Lunch, is on Monday 27th July, speaker will be Ron Ray from the National Maritime Museum speaking on 'Bass and Flinders'. See page 3. It will be held at our favourite Bowling Club and we have a very tempting menu courtesy of Sarah. See page 8. There will be a lucky door prize, courtesy of the Maritime Museum.

We need your [booking for this event](#) NOW please.

We will have two items on display at the MWL: A cutaway model of a Grasshopper Mower (see article on page 1) and the only surviving chair from the Kurrajong Heights Hotel fire in 1975.

This year marks the centenary of the Pansy line opening. We are planning a special 'Virtual Line Tour' on Sunday November 22nd (not 8th as previously mentioned). This will be held at Panthers North Richmond followed by a walk down to the bridge. We are expecting this will be a popular event so spread the word and don't delay in making a booking. [Bookings can be made online now](#).

Our AGM will be again at St Davids at Kurrajong Heights on Monday 28th September at 19:00 (7pm).

Our Christmas Party is Saturday 5th December at 17:00 (5pm). Mark it down!

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KURRAJONG – COMLEROY HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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DISCLAIMER: Views & opinions expressed in the newsletter originate from many sources and contributors.

Content does not necessarily represent or reflect the views or opinions of K-CHS, its committee and members.

Every effort is taken to ensure accuracy of articles.

If errors are found feedback is welcome.

secretary@kurrajonghistory.org.au

**Membership Renewal
is NOW DUE**
[Renew here](#)

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Dine In Gallery – Fully Licensed

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Evening Friday from 6pm

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Mid Winter Lunch Speaker *by Suzanne Ballard-Smith*

Our guest Speaker at the 27th July Mid-Winter Luncheon is Ron Ray from the Australian National Maritime Museum.

Ron has been a volunteer guide and member of the Museum for 20 years after retiring from a corporate career in human resources and training, including a number of years working as a part time teacher in TAFE.

His other volunteer activities include visitor services with the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust in the visitor centres on Cockatoo Island and North Head. Ron conducts tours of the North Fort tunnels and gun emplacements at North Head and the tunnels and fortifications at Georges Heights.

Ron spent 10 years in the Army working in signals and artillery. On Australia Day 2020, he was awarded an OAM (Medal of the Order of Australia) for services to the Australian community across a wide range of roles, preserving history and heritage. Also in 2020, Ron was awarded the title of Community Fellow of the University of Western Sydney for services to the communities of Western Sydney

Ron will be speaking on the life of BASS AND FLINDERS. So come along and find out about the backgrounds of these two famous maritime explorers, their fates and their voyages of exploration around the coasts of NSW, Tasmania and Terra Australis in small boats, Tom Thumb I and II.

 **From
THE ARCHIVES**

The steam tractor (traction engine) pulls the timber jinker loaded with logs near Hobby Bros Sawmill, Bells Line of Road, Kurrajong Heights, not far from the Bowling Club. c. 1920s Image 034901

ALONG THE COMLERoy ROAD – “FERN HILL” by Deborah Hallam

Convict, Thomas Leeson, arrived in the colony of New South Wales, on the “*Royal Admiral*” in 1792 with a 7-year sentence for theft of glass bottles. Thomas’ mother, Hannah, had been transported the previous year for an unconnected theft. By 1800 Thomas was farming 30 acres at Cornwallis, presumably with a Ticket of Leave. In 1804 Thomas married Ann Bradwell, convict per “*Experiment*”, with Hannah a witness. Ann and Thomas’ first child, Mary Ann, was born the following year.

Thomas and Ann suffered greatly from the 1806 flood losing 150 bushels of wheat, 100 of barley, 2 horses, 70 pigs, 2 houses and a barn. The family found refuge on a haystack and floated downstream to be rescued at Wilberforce. Following this experience the family appears to have settled at Wilberforce, farming.

In June 1823 Thomas was granted 40 acres, Lot 93, Parish of Kurrajong. For whatever reason, Thomas remained at Wilberforce and the land remained vacant. Thomas and Ann died in 1827 and are buried at Wilberforce, as is Thomas’ mother Hannah, who died 1823.

The unimproved property at Kurrajong passed to Mary Ann Leeson and her husband, James Winton, an ex-convict publican of Wilberforce. By the early 1830s the Kurrajong-Comleroy area was more settled and Ann Winton, in 1836, sold the property to her leasee, Edward Mitchell, an ex-convict from the “*John Barry*” who

had worked out his sentence at “*Nepean Park*” near Penrith.

Edward married his colonial born partner, Elizabeth Coverly, at Ebenezer in 1835. The couple were to have 12 children between 1833 and Edward’s death in 1859. As the Mitchell family and its many interconnections are far too complicated to cover here, I’ll simply record sons, Edward John and Robert. Edward and Elizabeth named the property “*Fern Hill*” and settled the family in a wooden house, most likely of slab with shingled roof of the type common in the era. Over the years adjoining properties were acquired.

In 1838 Edward appeared before Windsor Court charged with stealing an ox, the property of the Crown. Prison records describe him as 5’½” tall, slender build, sallow complexion, brown hair, hazel eyes and a tattoo “Right arm a Crucifixion to Heart (drawing of an Anchor) EE.SS.” He was acquitted.

Edward Mitchell died on 9th January 1859 at Kurrajong.

In June 1860, Elizabeth Ann Overton was born to widow Elizabeth Mitchell, age 45, and a neighbour, James Overton. James had just turned 18 and was almost 10 years younger than his eldest step-child. James and Elizabeth married in 1875.

By this time there were at least two residences on the



Some of Robert and Alice Mitchell's children outside “*Fern Hill*”.

Left to right: Mary Elizabeth Mitchell (b1890), Millie May (b1886), Stanley (b1893), Alice Ada “*Lily*” (b1883). Seated: Elsie Mona (b1891), with Arthur Leslie (b1885) on bike on the right. Arthur owned it in later years. c. 1900 Image 083004

Continued from previous page

property as the older family members married and began their families.

In 1878 a typhoid outbreak affected the families in the area around *"Fern Hill"*. A newspaper report of an interview with Edward John Mitchell at the time he was recovering, gives us an excellent description of the effects as well some aspects of the property.

Initially Edward recounts the progress of the disease through the closely connected families remarking that it was the movement of relatives throughout the locality that caused so many deaths, among them Edward's younger stepfather, James Overton. Elizabeth Mitchell/Overton was to recover although she died the following year, aged 65.

The property is described as down a steep lane beyond the Methodist Chapel. Known at the time as Mitchell's Road it is now a private entrance to the former *"Fern Hill"* property. Edward describes the family home belonging to his mother which had been burnt down on doctor's orders. The house had been of timber and con-

sisted of four rooms plus kitchen. Further down in the hollow was a bark cottage, the home of Edward John. It was recommended that this cottage also be burnt, however it is unclear if that was the case.

After the death of his mother Edward's younger brother, Robert, a well-respected and experienced drover, returned to the property from the Maitland area where he had been based with his expanding family.

"Fern Hill" continued to be worked by Edward and Robert. Edward died on 9 August 1890 of heart disease, having been bed ridden for several months. For many years Robert posted a moving memorial to his brother on the anniversary of his death.

Robert Mitchell and his wife Alice Lindores died from pneumonia in Richmond Private hospital a week apart in August 1823. *"Fern Hill"* was advertised for sale in 1825 along with land on Crooked Lane. The buildings consisted of a slab house, a shed and outhouses. It was purchased by Arthur Leslie Mitchell.



Arthur Leslie Mitchell with his horse Tasman. c. 1907 Image 083017

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Vale Val Birch *by David Griffiths*

Val was born in 1938 and grew up in Croydon. She attended Burwood Girls High. Her working career included as a school secretary and at CBA but the majority of her working life was as a medical receptionist.

Val raised two daughters as a single mother, which was less common at the time.

She moved to the Hawkesbury about 38 years ago.

Val was a foundation member of K-CHS in 2001, and was very involved in family history research and became our Family History Co-ordinator. She also took on the role of librarian/archivist, roles which she retained until quite recently when health became an issue (Parkinsons disease).

Val was on several book committees, including *We Remember Them* and *St Stephens Registers* and her long term pet project, *Kurrajong Guesthouses*.

In 2022 Val was awarded Life Membership in recognition of her dedicated contributions. She was a most valued member and will be missed.



In Carcoar Courthouse the day it snowed on us in 2023.

Johnston Dairy, North Richmond *by Pat O'Toole*

John Johnston left Fernanagh, Ireland in 1865 for Australia. He settled on the South Coast, around Gerrin-gong, where he began his dairy. He and his wife, Sarah had six children. Many branches of the family continued to farm in that area.

Around 1906, John farmed leased land at Albion Park where HARS Aviation Museum is now located. Much of his land was resumed during WWII for the airport.

His eldest son, Christopher, saw the opportunity to own his own land and in 1945 he bought 100 acres at North Richmond, next to the current location of Colo High School. Electricity hadn't arrived and, with hand milking, the herd remained small with 10 to 15 cows. The

cans of milk were picked up by Stan Gorham and taken to the dairy Co-op in Penrith.

Horses did all the heavy farm work and when Christopher became the third in the district to buy a Massey Ferguson Tractor the sceptics all said it would never work.

When Christopher passed away suddenly in 1954 his two sons, Bruce and Keith, gave up their jobs as fitter and machinist and came home to run the farm. With their trade skills they set about expanding and improving the business. The tractor enabled them to do contract ploughing. They planted an orange orchard which they grew and grafted themselves. These oranges were

Continued from previous page...

sold at a roadside stall. Peas and beans which were taken to the markets were an important cash crop.

The power arrived in 1960 so this enabled them to install milking machines and so expand the herd. This of course required much new infrastructure. As was always the way, Bruce and Keith built it all themselves – sheds, bails, stalls, fencing, gates etc. The large silo came as a kit so had to be assembled. Ross recalled that his job as a boy on the farm was to light the chip heater so there would be plenty of boiling water for cleaning.

Strangely, it seems that the property never had a special name.

The milking herd expanded to around 80 to 90 pure bred Frisians. The bull, which was only kept for a few years, was always called *Lord George*. The cows all had names and it was important that they were regularly handled to keep them safe to work. A chart, like a circular calendar, shows when each cow was served by the bull and then when the calf would be due 8 months later.



They recognised the importance of protein in the cow's diet and after milking they were given an extra feed in the stalls. This helped to give higher quality milk, for which they would receive as much as 45 cents a litre from the Nepean Co-op Dairy in Penrith.



Farmers owned the co-op and to do so they bought shares. However a few farmers came to dominate the ownership and so were able to sell the co-op to a big milk company which was no longer interested in the welfare of the farmers. This together with the abolition

of the Milk Board and deregulation in 1994 made it very hard for small dairy farms to remain profitable. Payment to farmers went down to 20 cents per litre. However the family continued milking until about 2000.

Many thanks to Ross Johnston for showing us the farm buildings built by his father and uncle and explaining some details of the operation of a typical small dairy, of which there were many back in those days.



Six stall milking shed.



Feeding stalls for supplemental feed.



Silo built from a kit.

Dates for Your DIARY

Mid Winter Lunch Monday 27th July, noon

Kurrajong Heights Bowling Club. Catering by Sarah.

Ron Ray from Australian Maritime Museum speaking on 'Bass & Flinders'. Lucky door prize!

Menu choices:

Entrée:

A Prawn Cocktail Salad

B Soup of the day with Focaccia Bread

Main:

C Crumbed Veal Parmigiana

D Beef & Guinness Stew with Creamy Mash

Dessert:

E Deep Fried Bananas with Butterscotch Sauce

F Individual Pavlova with Marinated Strawberries & Passion-fruit and fresh cream

Please specify your choices in the **Notes** when booking, using the letters shown. eg 2xA, C & D, 2xF

Members \$42 Guests \$45 GF available on request

[Booking essential.](#)

Upper Hunter Tour

Our self drive tour to the Upper Hunter is on the weekend of **25th & 26th July**.

Itinerary includes Singleton Historical Society Museum and Army Infantry Museum on the Saturday and Tocal Homestead Grand Open Day on the Sunday. The Tocal Day includes costumed soldiers firing muskets, various machinery exhibits, blacksmith and tours of the house.

If you are interested, please contact David Griffiths immediately. We might be able to arrange car pooling for you.

AGM St Davids Kurrajong Heights

Monday 28th September 19:00 (7pm)



Kurrajong-Comleroy Historical Society Inc **PANSY CENTENARY**



[Scan for more info and
to book.](#)

Sunday 22nd November 2026 13:00 (1pm)

Panthers Club, Beaumont Ave North Richmond

Includes a presentation of approximately one hour followed by a walk to the river bridge.

Have lunch beforehand in the club bistro if you wish.

Adults \$15, K-CHS Members \$10.

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