

Objects, stories, identity: and the Gerringong Museum

Why did the pioneers of this museum decide to establish it? Why do people generally collect objects and create museums? What is it about objects particularly that enable them to convey the past to the present in ways that the written word alone very often cannot do?

Objects, along with historic places and documents, are the means by which we engage physically with the life of the past. Created by those who have gone before us, they are treasured as reminders of what that past was like, and connect us to the great events of history as well as the everyday life of people at every social level. And, in a museum such as this, the objects on display can create a powerful sense of the identity of the community from which they have sprung.

The sheer physicality of objects, the fact that we can imagine them being used, or worn, or admired by people like ourselves, delivers a sense of identification that just reading about them cannot do. What was it like to wear that wedding dress or those work boots, to sit in that barber's chair or at that school desk, to wield those tools, cut with those scissors, fire that weapon? What were the particular activities that people carried out when they were using these objects? What was the context in which they were created or used? These are questions for which we would like to have answers, but at times we do not have the information at hand to make this possible.

It is the task of the modern museum to bring to life the objects on display in all sorts of ways, and to convey the information that visitors need to make sense of what they are seeing. Some of what we call interpretive techniques can be seen here, in the shape of informative labels and in skilfully crafted scale models and murals. A visitor to this museum is already at an advantage - the beautiful mural picturing the local dairying landscape has already conveyed one aspect of Gerringong and its history to the visitor without using a single word. I believe that some of the art students who created this wonderful aid to our understanding of this place are here tonight. Their work looks as fresh and engaging today as it did back in the 1990s when it was painted. The visitors can admire the models made by Eric Wagstaff that demonstrate in the most charming way possible the processes of dairy farming and milk production and distribution; the various buildings in the town; and the former railway station at Omega. But not all museums are as fortunate as Gerringong in this regard.

Museum historian Kenneth Hudson tells the story of an eighteenth-century bookseller by the name of Hutton, who paid a visit to the British Museum. Hutton asked a museum guide to tell him something about the objects that the guide was whizzing his visitors past at speed. The guard replied, and the exchange went like this:

"What! Would you have me tell you everything in the Museum? How is it possible? Besides, are not the names written upon many of them?" Hutton said, 'I was much too humbled by this reply to utter another word. The company seemed influenced; they made haste, and were silent.' Hutton mused on his unsatisfactory experience at the British Museum: 'If I see wonders which I do not understand, they are no wonders to me. Should a piece of withered paper lie on the floor, I should, without regard, shuffle it from under my feet. But if I am told it is a letter written by Edward the Sixth, that information sets a value on the piece, it becomes a choice *morceau* of antiquity, and I seize it with rapture. The history must go together; if one is wanting, the other is of little value. It grieved me to think how much I lost for want of a little information.'¹

Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Prize-winning Turkish author who founded the Museum of Innocence in Istanbul, was a keynote speaker at the International Council of Museums (ICOM) conference in Milan in July this year. He delivered a Manifesto for Museums, in which he picks up Hutton's request for stories to give life to the objects people see in museums:

In museums we have History, but what we need is stories. In museums we have nations, but what we need is people. We had groups and factions in museums, but what we need is individuals. We had great and costly museums and will continue to have yet more ... Yet what we need are small and economical museums that address our humanity.²

So objects and stories together are what will bring a museum experience to life for visitors. They will take away with them a greater understanding of whatever the subject or place is about if those stories are told along with the objects, and if the voices of those who made the objects can be heard. Stories associated with objects are now regarded as essential before many museums will admit those objects to their collections - and this applies from the National Museum of Australia onwards.

What stories do the objects in Gerringong Museum tell, and what will visitors take away from here - mentally, of course! - as a result of their visits? How do these stories make the objects come alive for us and for our visitors? How do they express Gerringong's identity?

The first object story in this museum that I want to share with you concerns the shellwork Sydney Harbour Bridge in the Indigenous display. This is an attractive object, and we can admire it for its artistry alone, and for its association with a celebrated local Indigenous footballer.

The shellwork Sydney Harbour Bridge was one of two given to Mr P J Noble by Mrs Jessy Stewart, Aboriginal footballer Roy Stewart's mother, and it forms part of a larger display about Roy Stewart's life and footballing career. It was given to the museum by Mr Noble's family after his death in 2005. The label also tells us that it was made with shells collected from local beaches, and that local Indigenous people have made other works of this kind. So there is good information there about the life story - what in museums is known as the provenance - of this object.

But we can go quite a lot deeper than that in unpacking the story of this object, particularly its background as an example of Indigenous craftwork. Shellwork of this kind, made by Indigenous women, has a history going back to the nineteenth century. There are documents from the 1880s that record Aboriginal women selling shell baskets at Circular Quay and Botany Bay, made from shells that they collected using their traditional knowledge of the beaches and the times of the year on which particular shells were likely to be deposited by the tides.

The Aboriginal reserve at La Perouse on the northern side of Botany Bay, established in 1895, was a focal point for what became an industry, whereby people were encouraged by missionaries to produce these popular craft items for sale. Indigenous men at La Perouse carved boomerangs with designs burned onto them with heated wire, and other souvenir items, and gave demonstrations of boomerang throwing, and the women made shellwork. The sale of souvenirs at La Perouse became one of the major sources of income for these Aboriginal people in the first half of the twentieth century. Nowadays, their descendant, Bidjigal man Laddie Timbery, carries on this practice at his gallery in the grounds of the Jervis Bay Maritime Museum at Huskisson.

Shellwork was popular in both Britain and Australia in the late nineteenth century, and the missionaries helped the La Perouse women to find outlets for their work. Bidjigal woman 'Queen Emma' Timbery, from La Perouse, was a noted shellworker, and her wares were displayed and sold at the Royal Easter Show, and even travelled to England in 1910 as part of an Australian crafts exhibition.³ As the twentieth century progressed, city department stores and gift shops stocked these items, and they found one of their biggest markets during the Second World War, when American servicemen came to Australia in large numbers and purchased them as souvenirs.⁴

The most common objects made with shellwork are jewellery boxes, boomerangs and baby shoes. And then there is the Sydney Harbour Bridge. A contingent of Aboriginal people from La Perouse came to the opening of the Bridge in 1932. They were impressed by this new structure, and went home and carved images of the Bridge on rocks that already held ancient engravings of fish and a 12-metre long shark. The men carved and decorated boomerangs with images of the bridge and the women began to make model Sydney Harbour Bridges decorated with shells, like the one you can see here in Gerringong Museum.

One of the most celebrated shell artists from La Perouse is Esme Timbery, the great-grand-daughter of 'Queen' Emma Timbery. Esme's work, and that of her daughter Marilyn Russell, has been collected by museums and galleries across Australia, including the National Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Museum, the Australian Museum and the Powerhouse Museum. Esme Timbery has described how she travels around the south coast to find the shells she wants to use:

Every beach has different shells and they've got different names, you know, for the shells. I like to put them all in different containers. Different shells, because I know what I want to use and when I want to use them and I know where to find them. Well, that's pennywinkles. These shells here, I got them at Cape Banks ... These buttons come from Hyams Beach. The stars come from Gerringong. These fingernails come from Hyams Beach.⁵

You will see these same shells on the Sydney Harbour Bridge model by Mrs Jessy Stewart in this museum. And is there a link between the Stewart family and La Perouse? I am grateful to Margaret Sharpe for supplying the information to make a connection. Jessy May Campbell was born in Gosford in 1912, and married Richard

Stewart. Their son Roy Stewart was born in 1939. The family came to Gerringong, where Richard was injured at Gerringong Sawmill in 1953. The family moved to La Perouse that same year and, I imagine, this is where Jessy Stewart learned to make shellwork items. Roy Stewart worked with the Railways and was transferred to Gerringong in 1963, and presumably his mother Jessy came here too. The Stewart family traded fish for sugar and flour as they walked past the Noble home on their way home from fishing at Warri Beach. And around 1980 they gave Mr Noble the two Harbour Bridge models. Jessy Stewart passed away in March 1996, and a year later her son Roy, the local Rugby League hero, also died.⁶

And there is one more thing I would like to say before I move on to talk about other objects and stories. Just about every example of a shellwork Sydney Harbour Bridge that I have seen, including those made by Esme Timbery and Marilyn Russell that have been collected by the big museums and galleries, is modelled in one solid piece. The example here in Gerringong Museum, made by Mrs Jessy Stewart, actually shows the Bridge as it is, with its free-standing arch and roadway. So this example shows a distinctive variation from the usual style, which makes it even more significant.

The story of dairying in Gerringong, which I mentioned before in relation to the mural that provides a backdrop to the many objects and models connected with this industry, is a key aspect of Gerringong's historical identity. I would hazard a guess that the majority of the audience will be very familiar with this story, and have strong connections to it. So I want to approach this display - and one object in it - from the point of view of an outsider, as if I were a casual visitor to the area who has popped into the museum to learn about Gerringong and its history. Looking at this display, I learn a great deal about dairying and its place in the history of Gerringong. I learn about the processes of dairying, enjoy looking at the models - the cows' heads peeping out between the timbers of the slab-hut are particularly delightful - peer at the historical photos and documents, and read the story of the Gerringong Co-operative Dairy Society, founded in 1888, 100 years after the colony of NSW was established.

But what brings me up short and makes me spend time examining it (not to mention taking numerous photos to get the best possible shot) is a butter roller carved in

cedar which, for me, is one of the most beautiful utilitarian objects that I have ever seen. And this brings me to another aspect of objects - as well as telling stories, they can be items of great beauty. When we assess the significance of objects, we talk first of all about their historical significance. But the next criterion that is addressed is one called 'artistic or aesthetic significance' - this is the criterion that relates to works of fine art, or objects that display qualities of fine design and craftsmanship. They do not need to be artworks, and in fact many are not. Some can be mass produced, others can be unique creations. But what they have in common is their capacity to please the eye, as this butter roller does, with its fine carving complementing the warm tones of the cedar wood from which it was made. The butter roller certainly has a story, and one that is told in the display. 'These rollers were used in the Gerringong Factory to roll the top of the butter before covering with parchment paper and sealing the box', the label reads. A mirror has been placed under the rollers so that the word 'Australia' can be seen. And in another part of the dairying display is the end point of the story - a butter box found under the factory and reconstructed by Eric Wagstaff, with the design made by the roller, including the word 'Australia', embossed on the top. The butter roller is a beautiful and useful object, and one that tells a story of how Gerringong-made butter was exported with the name 'Australia', thus connecting this community to the nation.

Another story that connects products grown in Gerringong to the wider world can be seen in the cabinet that also holds sporting trophies and other ceremonial items. The objects in question - there are two of them - are bronze international exhibition medals won by William Bailey of 'Homeleigh', Gerringong, for corn grain (maize) at the Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition in 1887, and the Centennial International Exhibition in Melbourne in 1888, so their labels tell us.

International exhibitions were a familiar part of the cultural landscape of western countries in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century before the Second World War. From 1851, when the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, the brain-child of Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, was held in the Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park, international exhibitions - also known as 'world's fairs' - burgeoned around the globe. The first to be held in the Australian colonies was the Sydney International Exhibition held in the Garden Palace in the Sydney Botanic Gardens in 1879. It was followed a year later by Melbourne's first

international exhibition, held in the purpose-built Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton Gardens. The Royal Exhibition Building survives as one of the world's oldest exhibition pavilions representing the nineteenth-century international exhibition movement. Just about all the others, including London's Crystal Palace and Sydney's Garden Palace, burned down later on. The Royal Exhibition Building was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2004, becoming the first building in Australia to achieve World Heritage listing.⁷

William Bailey entered samples of his corn grown at 'Homeleigh' in the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition in 1887. It was held in Adelaide's new Exhibition Building on North Terrace, which had been built to celebrate 50 years since the colony of South Australia had been founded in 1836. It was also, by a happy coincidence, Queen Victoria's Jubilee year, the 50th anniversary of her coronation. There were more than 2,200 displays of objects and materials from 26 different countries. From the exhibition's opening to its conclusion on 7 January 1888, nearly 790,000 people visited the site.⁸ The awards ceremony was held on the evening of 30 November 1887. The bronze medal awarded to William Bailey carried the image of the Queen whose reign was celebrated in the exhibition. We do not know whether he was there to collect the medallion, or whether he ever saw his corn on display in Adelaide.

We do not know either whether he was able to attend the next international exhibition in which his corn was on display: the Centennial International Exhibition held in Melbourne in 1888 – in the Exhibition Building of course – to mark the centenary of British settlement in Australia. William Bailey's corn (described in the exhibition catalogue as 'maize') would have been exhibited in the grand New South Wales Court inside the Exhibition Building. The *Official Record* of the Exhibition described the splendour of the NSW Court:

A row of Venetian poles bearing the colonial standard and the coat-of-arms of New South Wales marked the limits of the area occupied by the colony; massive arches bearing the names of the principal towns, and elegant and costly canopies indicated the entrances to the several bays; rich trophies of minerals lined the front of the mining section, whilst a royal coat-of-arms and a splendid pavilion dedicated to Lord Carrington ornamented the centre ... the

main feature of the court was the remarkable show of raw materials, such as timber, cedar, different species of eucalyptus, and many other valuable woods, metals, and minerals ... marble, freestone, and other building stones, breadstuffs and [here's where William Bailey comes in] other grain, wool and skins ... Other features of interest were the representations of the Jenolan Caves done in cork work; the landing of Captain Cook, with life-size figures in wax and an exact reproduction of the surrounding scenery; and a model of Sydney Harbour and its environs.⁹

Was William Bailey there in Melbourne in person to collect his second bronze medallion, which was again embellished with the regal profile of Queen Victoria? Did he take the opportunity to marvel at the goods on display from around the Australian colonies and the world, and take pride in the fact that his corn grown in Gerringong had been considered worthy of a prize?

These two medallions tell me one important thing: that in these vast exhibitions of the goods of the world, Gerringong was represented, and a Gerringong native took home prizes from both. So when I look at these medals, I don't just see two discs of bronze, I also see the wondrous spectacles of the nineteenth century that were the international exhibitions - and know that among the thousands of exhibits in Adelaide and Melbourne in 1887 and 1888, Gerringong was there by way of William Bailey and his corn.

One of the great stories told in this museum is that of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith and the first commercial flight in the *Southern Cross* across the Tasman Sea to New Plymouth, New Zealand, that took off from Seven Mile Beach, Gerroa, in the early hours of 11 January 1933. The comprehensive display you can see here has copious amounts of information on the event, and a DVD has been produced featuring personal reminiscences by local residents who were there on Seven Mile Beach on the previous day to watch the preparations, and the aircraft taking off the following morning at 2.50 am. A crowd of over 1000 people cheered 'Smithy' and his crew on the *Southern Cross* as the aircraft taxied across the sand, lifting off into the sky from a runway illuminated by car headlights and drums of burning oil. Smithy leaned from the cockpit as the plane taxied and called out 'Cheerio, everyone'. It is a great story about a great Australian.

This event links Gerringong with one of the notable aviation stories in Australia and the world, and with one of the most significant aviation pioneers. There is plenty of contextual material provided in the display in the museum, including historical photographs, a model of the *Southern Cross*, and a display of model aircraft associated with other aviation pioneers such as Nancy Bird Walton, who also visited Gerringong on other occasions.

There are also more personal items that link 'Smithy' to the local community and to that momentous occasion in January 1933 for Gerroa and Gerringong. Smithy and his crew enjoyed some peaches sent to them on the beach by Mr and Mrs Hindmarsh of Alen Bank, Gerringong. When the *Southern Cross* reached New Zealand, Smithy did not forget this kind gesture. He asked his Tour Manager to write to the Hindmarshes to 'express his keen appreciation and thanks for the beautiful peaches you sent him on the beach. He and the others enjoyed them thoroughly.' The letter to Mr and Mrs Hindmarsh, on display in the museum, shows a human side to the great aviator, a courteous and thoughtful aspect of a man who was fêted on all sides, but yet did not forget, in the hurly-burly of his journeys, to acknowledge the family who had sent peaches to him and his crew on Seven Mile Beach. It is often the small and seemingly insignificant items that can suddenly open up to us a whole new perspective on a historical character.

The Barber Shop Chair and Equipment display opens a different perspective on the past in Gerringong. It speaks to a particular activity and community segment - male grooming and the men who used the service provided by Ernest Oswald Henry in a barber's shop in Victoria Street, and then in Belinda Street. Ern, as his clients called him, doubled as a butter-maker at the Gerringong Dairy Co-operative Society for 57 years, and as a barber. The display features the old barber's chair that Ern's clients used when they came in for a shave or a hair trim - clearly to the satisfaction of one client, who drew the two delightful little cartoons that are such a distinctive feature of the display. A cartoon of a little dog is captioned 'Well, I'm sure of a good trim here'; while a cartoon rooster says, 'Now Ern, I know you can fix me up'. The label, which tells us that Ern passed away on 30 January 1966, does not reveal the name of the cartoonist. If anyone here knows who drew these pictures, I would be very pleased to find out. The barber's chair, the equipment and steriliser and the cartoons were donated by Ern's family to the museum in 2006. Together they form a most effective

ensemble. While many museums have similar displays of barber's chairs, razors, brushes, combs and the like, I have never seen anything to match the charm and the personal touch conveyed by these two little cartoons. They are gems.

One of the treasures of this museum is not an object as such, but it is a source of many stories. It is a diary written in eleven exercise books, kept for many decades by Jane Binks, who started writing it in 1897 and ended it in 1947. She passed away three years later, in 1950, and is buried in Gerringong Cemetery. Jane Binks, who never married, lived at Cambewarra, then Broughton Village, and then moved into Gerringong with her niece Heather, whom she had raised when her sister, Heather's mother, had died in childbirth. Jane Binks's diary is a wonderful source of information and insights into life in the Berry-Broughton-Gerringong area over the last years of the nineteenth century and for nearly half of the twentieth century.

The diary entries are laconic - only a few lines at a time, and written on most days (Jane sometimes misses a few days, then catches up). Jane Binks records the weather - of course, in a farming area, this was and is critical - and who has come to visit or to stay overnight, or for a longer period. She records births and deaths, and social events in the community. She reports on the Sunday sermons in the church of which she was a faithful member, and who will be coming on rotation to take up the preaching responsibilities. The annual shows at Kiama and Berry, and the Royal Easter Show, at which her father, Thomas Binks, routinely won prizes for his cheese, are mentioned every year.

And - what piqued my interest as I began to read her diary - Jane Binks reflects briefly on external events and situations, making connections to the world outside the local area, and the implications of what happens there for her life and the life of the community. Local and state politics form part of the diary entries, as do other momentous events in the life of the nation and of the British Empire of which she was a proud member - the Federation referendum in June 1898 and Federation itself, on 1 January 1901, for example. Before that there is the outbreak of the South African War, the recruitment of local men as soldiers for the NSW Contingent, patriotic bazaars, the news of the relief of Mafeking.

It is fascinating to read, in particular, Jane Binks's diary entries on the outbreak and then the course of the First World War. At the outset this is a distant occurrence,

troubling, to be sure, but it has not yet impacted on her life and the life of the community. Then men begin to enlist, and their send-offs are recorded, as is the Waratah recruiting march. The many events held to raise funds for the war effort, for the Red Cross and the various comforts funds are all mentioned in the diary, including the attendance levels.

At times Jane mentions major battles such as the naval Battle of Jutland and the siege of Verdun. The first Anzac Day in 1916 is also noted in the diary. As the war continues, its human cost begins to register - some local men are killed or wounded, and memorial services are held for them, all faithfully recorded in Jane's diary. In 1917 a general strike occurs, and male members of her family and friends travel to Sydney to volunteer to maintain essential services. Finally, in 1918, Jane records the great joy at the declaration of peace, and the continued work of the community to support those who had been wounded, and the families of those who had died. Then she records the outbreak of the Spanish influenza pandemic that followed hard on the heels of the war's end, and caused the deaths of over 11,000 Australians and between 20 and 40 million people worldwide. It made an impact in this area too.

Those of us who work in Australian history are very familiar with the diaries of soldiers who served in the First World War. There have been many books and exhibitions based on these powerful personal testimonies, and the centenary of the First World War has brought a fresh crop of publications on many aspects of Australia's experience of that time. One of these aspects is the Home Front during the War. I believe that the portion of Jane Binks's diary dealing with this period is a wonderful resource for understanding how the community in which she lived weathered these critical years in the nation's history. A woman's account, such as Jane Binks's diary, can enlarge our understanding of how the women of Australia, the vast majority of whom, with the exception of nurses, were nowhere near the battlefronts, experienced what has come to be regarded as a defining moment in the history of our nation.

There are many other stories that can be told in this museum, and I am sure that each of you will have your personal favourites, or subjects on which you are far more knowledgeable than I can be. I hope that the objects and documents that I have chosen to talk about tonight, and the stories they tell, will have given you some

insights into how this museum expresses Gerringong's identity. I wish you a very happy 25th anniversary, and look forward to many more years of collecting both objects and stories that speak about Gerringong, its history, and its identity.

- 1 Quoted in Peter Vergo, 'The Reticent Object', in Peter Vergo (ed.), *The New Museology*, Reaktion Books, London, 1989, pp. 47-48.
- 2 Orhan Pamuk, 'Manifesto for Museums', delivered to ICOM Conference, Milan, July 2016, first published by the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, reprinted in *The Art Newspaper*, 6 July 2016, <http://theartnewspaper.com/comment/comment/orhan-pamuk-s-manifesto-for-museums/>, accessed 14 August 2016.
- 3 'Esme Timbery's Shellwork', *Collection Stories*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2012, p. 138.
- 4 'Shellwork Sydney Harbour Bridge', Collections Highlights, National Museum of Australia, <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/highlights/shellwork-sydney-harbour-bridge>, accessed 13 August 2016.
- 5 'She Sells Seashells', ABC Message Stick, 16 February 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s2495615.htm>, accessed 13 August 2016
- 6 Email from Margaret Sharpe, 15 August 2016.
- 7 Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne, <https://museumvictoria.com.au/reb/history/>, accessed 7 September 2016.
- 8 Jubilee Exhibition Building: Staircase, <http://adelaidecityexplorer.com.au/items/show/59>, accessed 7 September 2016.
- 9 *The Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne, Official Record*, 1888, pp. 238-9.