



SHEPPARTON
HERITAGE
CENTRE

A History of the Shepparton Heritage Centre

During Shepparton's colonial era, records of local events certainly existed, but they were rarely written with the benefit of historical perspective. Incidents such as the Siege of Tallygaroopna, and the later court cases involving Sherbourne Sheppard and Edward Khull, were reported largely as news of the day, with little attempt to place them within a broader historical context. Even basic facts were uncertain. For example, while a P. McGuire was known to have leased part of Sheppard's Run, it was not until recently that confirmation emerged that the "P" stood for Patrick. This discovery came through the work of historian Morris Bowey, formerly of Bunbartha and now resident in Canada, who unearthed contemporary writings by Sheppard himself explaining the lease arrangement.

The first attempt at a published history appeared in 1910, when J. Edward Robertson produced *Prosperous and Progressive Shepparton*. Inclusion in this volume was by payment, but many local business people and residents were eager to record their origins and achievements. While not a critical history, it reflected a growing awareness of the importance of documenting the town's story.

That interest was soon interrupted by the First World War. It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that enthusiasm for local history revived. "Comeback" celebrations were organised, inviting former residents to return to Shepparton. In a town still small in population, these events were akin to extended family reunions. The *Shepparton News* published special supplements featuring interviews and personal recollections—material that has since become invaluable to researchers.

In 1938, celebrations marking the centenary of European settlement brought renewed momentum. The Shepparton Borough established a Historical Committee to assist the then mayor, Cr. W. S. James, in writing a formal history of the town. Activities included imaginative re-enactments, among them HMAS *Sydney* defeating the German *Emden*—staged on the Goulburn River—and a spirited defence of Shepparton against the Kelly Gang. Once again, however, world events intervened. The outbreak of the Second World War called many young men and women away, not to study history, but to make it.

Much of the early preservation effort was supported by Shepparton's first Town Clerk, Raymond West, who commenced duties in 1921. West carefully assembled a Shepparton Historic Collection within his office. Upon his retirement, he convened a public meeting in 1962 that led to the formation of the Shepparton & Goulburn Valley Historical Society. He further supported the Society by publishing his own local history, *Those Were the Days*.

Council entrusted the new Society with the care of the Historic Collection. Its first president was Cr. G. Billingham, and the Mechanics Institute provided the Society with its first home, consistent with its charter to promote public education through a library and museum. Early activities included displays at the Shepparton Show, while member Ray Estrada visited local primary schools, using historic objects to bring the past to life for students.

In 1969, Council purchased what is now Shepparton's oldest standing building, and in 1972 granted the Historical Society tenancy. The building was in poor condition, and the attached cottages were so badly damaged by white ants that demolition became unavoidable. The survival of the hall itself owes

much to the determination of Cr. Bruce Wilson, who resisted strong opposition and ensured its preservation. Without his persistence, the building—and much of what followed—would have been lost.

From these foundations grew not just a hall, but a heritage complex. Many individuals contributed, and it is impossible to do full justice to them all. Among those who played key roles were Peter Ross-Edwards and Bruce Lloyd, who opened the Vincent Vibert Gallery and Myrtle Ford Gallery respectively, and who supported Australia Day and other community functions.

A central figure was Paul Gribben, who served as president for seventeen consecutive years. His tenure was marked by continuous improvements to displays and facilities. He oversaw the refurbishment of the old Post Office clock tower and its installation into the museum, and he advocated successfully for a tunnel beneath the Mooroopna access roadway to link adjoining parklands. In recognition of his contribution, Council named the surrounding grassed area the Paul Gribben Reserve.

Paul was supported by vice-president Bill Morvell, a Post Office employee and meticulous local historian, who appeared on GMV-6 to discuss Shepparton's past and even stood for federal election. The Morvell Cottage commemorates Bill and his wife Maureen. The Society's long-time treasurer, Myrtle Ford—a former principal of St George's Road Primary School and descendant of the Shepparton Flour Mill family—was also a prolific writer of local history. Though she wished the new museum extension to be called the Goulburnia Gallery, it was instead named in her honour.

Other dedicated members included Col Anderson, a life member whose historical interests were complemented by his collection of veteran and military vehicles. His quick action ensured the rescue of the First World War Honour Board from the former Shepparton Primary School, saved from disposal and restored through a DVA grant. Restoration projects also included the Post Office Tower Clock, painstakingly rebuilt by horologist Mike Tancredi after some 400 hours of voluntary work. One long-serving president, Peter Ford with the support his wife Bev, shared forty-one years of active involvement—helping with tours, catering, events, and encouragement along the way.

The Society benefited greatly from the generosity of Carmel and Jack Furphy and their family, as well as from the work of Andrew Furphy, who helped secure funding for the sesquicentenary history *Water – The Vital Element*, written by Martin Summons. Graham Leitch and his father Dougal (“Mac”) Leitch were instrumental in construction works, including the Myrtle Ford Gallery and Morvell Cottage, contributing skilled labour and professional expertise that saved the Society considerable expense.

Support from service clubs, community members and the City Council underpinned many extensions and improvements over the years. Mayors including David Piper, Bill Hunter, Bruce McNeil, and Bruce Lloyd all showed active interest in the Society's work. Australia Day observances, ANZAC commemorations with the crew of HMAS *Shepparton*, school tours, exhibitions, and open days steadily strengthened the Centre's role in community life.

Underlying all of this was the quiet but constant support of volunteers and families.

By the early 2020s, the Shepparton Heritage Centre faced one of the most challenging periods in its long history. Three years ago, the organisation found itself in a precarious position. Financially, it was insolvent. The committee was under strain, and the museum itself bore visible signs of neglect. Water damage had taken its toll, the atmosphere within the building was musty, displays lacked cohesion and narrative flow, and little had changed for more than two decades. For an institution built on preserving the past, the future had become uncertain.

Yet, as has so often been the case throughout its history, the Heritage Centre's survival rested on the commitment of its people. A change in the executive committee marked the beginning of a determined journey of renewal. Through the tireless efforts of volunteers, gradual but meaningful improvements began to take shape. Displays were refreshed, maintenance issues addressed, and a sense of purpose slowly restored. Step by step, the organisation began to rebuild itself.

This progress was not achieved in isolation. It was made possible through the trust and support of the wider community, the Greater Shepparton City Council, grant providers, local benefactors, and philanthropic funding bodies. As a volunteer-driven organisation, the Heritage Centre remains deeply reliant on the passion, skills, and dedication of its volunteers. Without them, the Centre would simply not exist in its present form.

As renewal progressed, it became increasingly clear that physical improvements alone were not enough. The organisation's governance and operational structures no longer suited its needs or ambitions. A comprehensive overhaul was required to ensure long-term sustainability and relevance.

At the Annual General Meeting held in November last year, the Executive Committee resolved to establish a sub-committee to undertake a full organisational review. This Organisational Review Steering Committee brought together representatives from the Executive Committee and four invited community members, each contributing valuable expertise from a range of professional fields. Their task was both necessary and ambitious: to examine how the Heritage Centre functioned and to chart a stronger course for its future.

The review identified the need for a new organisational structure supported by a clear and practical strategic plan. From this work emerged a framework designed to strengthen governance while preserving the volunteer-led spirit that has always defined the Centre.

On 7 April 2025, the Executive Committee formally resolved to transition to a Board structure. The newly established Shepparton Heritage Centre Board comprises ten members, supported by an Executive Officer and administrative support. Existing Executive Committee members transferred directly to the Board, joined by four co-opted members selected for their specialised skills. This marked a significant milestone: a shift toward contemporary governance while remaining grounded in community involvement.

At the heart of this transformation is a renewed strategic vision. The guiding principle of the Shepparton Heritage Centre is now clearly articulated, Preserving the Past to Inform the Future. This vision is supported by a mission focused on collecting, archiving, curating, promoting, and displaying heritage items of regional significance; operating a high-quality boutique museum on the historic site at 154 Welsford Street, Shepparton; and delivering exhibitions, education, and research services that deepen understanding of the heritage and history of the Greater Shepparton region. Special emphasis is placed on group visitations, school programs, clubs, organisations, special events, and temporary exhibitions—ensuring the Centre remains a living, engaged part of the community.

To bring this mission to life, the Board established a series of sub-committee "pillars," each chaired by a Board member. Volunteers and members are encouraged to participate in one or more of these groups, ensuring a bottom-up approach that keeps volunteers at the core of decision-making and activity. These pillars are Marketing and Fundraising, Museum Operations, Building and Facilities, Financial Management and Compliance, Heritage Research and History Hub. This structure has enabled clearer focus, shared responsibility, and better use of the diverse skills within the organisation.

The journey has not been without its challenges. Reform takes time, and progress has required patience, resilience, and an enormous amount of hard work. Along the way, there have been many “spot fires” to extinguish, bridges to rebuild, and community connections to restore. There have also been moments of collaboration and celebration—signs that the Centre was once again finding its footing. As history has shown time and again, the Shepparton Heritage Centre endures not because it is immune to hardship, but because its people rise to meet it.

This latest chapter stands as a testament to renewal grounded in community, governance strengthened by reflection, and a shared commitment to ensuring that Shepparton’s heritage continues to inform, inspire, and connect future generations.

Shepparton Heritage Centre stands today as the product of community effort, persistence, friendship, and a shared belief that the stories of the past are worth preserving for future generations.

“Preserving the Past to Preserve the Future”

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