

President's Report

Our last day of normality at the Mechanics' Institute was Thursday 19 March. From 20 March the NFHS closed its doors. The April Newsletter announced to members that everything, including the AGM, general meetings, library days, events, courses and all volunteer groups would be in recess until further notice. That further notice came on 1 June, but it was not until 4 June that we were able to re-open on a very restricted basis after permission was granted by the authorities to do so.

Although our rooms lay dormant during that period our Society did not. Members were reminded in that same Newsletter that our website and Facebook Group would remain active – and active it was! It was suggested that members might care to use the extra time at home to explore some of the links which were provided and to engage in some of the online discussions as well as pursuing their own family history research and writing – an opportunity many of us readily accepted.

During this time many members discovered the wealth of information available to us through digital membership of libraries such as our own Newcastle Region Library, the State Library, and the National Library of Australia. These, and other home research and reading opportunities, have continued to enhance our lives after we came out of lockdown.

The members of our Management Committee along with our Group Convenors and others continued to engage in Society based activities from home. Much was achieved during this time. The first volume of our next publication, *People of Newcastle and the Hunter Valley: Their Stories – Our Heritage* was completed and the second volume begun. The June Journal and the regular monthly Newsletters continued to be published. Research requests and secretarial correspondence continued to be dealt with as did membership applications and financial commitments. Library work, proof reading and research was ongoing. Some Snippers members continued to work on their current newspaper. New genealogy courses and future excursions were planned. Work continued on setting up the framework for the (now deferred) 2020 State Conference which will instead be hosted by us in 2022. Our bonnet makers completed all of the 1,600 bonnet tributes to the women who came to

the Hunter Region during the lockdown period – we even found novel ways of procuring calico and other essentials without the need to venture too far afield.

Our lockdown period was also a useful time for the Mechanics' Institute Land Manager (previously the Trust) to have some maintenance work completed such as the exterior painting of the wooden building we use as our meeting room. A grant application was also lodged during June with the view in mind of completing much needed interior painting.

Prior to the re-opening of our rooms on 4 June a Covid-19 Safety Plan was developed to ensure the safety of our members and our strict adherence to health requirements. These we follow rigorously as those who have resumed using our rooms will attest to. Our June Newsletter set out the strict new protocols in place.

The cancellation of many Society activities and outings this year has been a great disappointment to many members. The annual Sandgate Day and the 2020 Conference at Wests New Lambton were two such examples. The lengthy preparations involved in these activities will not be lost however, they will simply be transferred to a future date.

Despite the very obvious negative impact of the Corona Virus positive aspects, some highlighted above, have also emerged. We have had to think outside the square to find ways of moving forward within the confines of our new framework.

We have re-opened our doors at the Society albeit under very different circumstances, we have recommenced our monthly excursions which now attract a full complement of members keen to attend and enjoy the history and the social interaction. We are now holding virtual General Meetings via Zoom which allows us to connect with many members who have previously been unable to attend before because of distance, health or time factors, or an inability to drive at night. While we hope to re-establish our General Meetings at the Mechanics' Institute rooms as soon as possible we will also continue to offer virtual attendance to those who find it more convenient. We are learning to use modern technology to reach a much wider audience than ever before. We have also begun to offer some Special Interest Groups for Society members

– something which has been requested by a number of our members keen to pursue this avenue of communication and learning.

No-one need be left behind with the changing technology because there is always someone available and willing to help you set up your laptop or other device so you can easily join in with the rest of the group. You will find many people you know there and we were all quite reluctant to use the new technology in the beginning. We are all growing in confidence.

The remainder of 2020 provides much to look forward to – we have so many positive things in the planning stages for the NFHS. I hope you will feel comfortable in joining us as we continue to learn about our family and local history in the company of other Society members and friends.