



Launceston Historical Society Inc.

Newsletter No 201

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PO BOX 1296 LAUNCESTON TAS 7250

Bringing together people with an interest in history

Archaeological Dig at Mountford Cottage, Perth

Our meeting held on 19 October 2025, celebrated the annual Mead, Smith, von Stieglitz Lecture, exploring the fascinating story of Mountford Cottage in Perth. Guest speakers **John Dent and Sam Diprose-Adams** (on behalf of Darren Watton) shared insights drawn from both historical research and the October 2024 community archaeology dig, organised by the Launceston Historical Society. Together, their work brought to life the people, places, and discoveries uncovered during the dig, revealing new insights into the history of Mountford Cottage and the Perth region.

John began the talk by tracing the history of the property, including the original landholders, James Thornloe and later George Palmer Ball, before it was sold to Alexander Clerke. It subsequently passed to the Mackinnon family, who have owned the property for four generations. John also shared the history of the Powell family, long-term residents of the home, whose lives were brought to light through his research.

Sam then guided the audience through the archaeological process, explaining how a dig unfolds and how artefacts help build a picture of the past. The excavation revealed the layout of the building and uncovered thousands of artefacts, including buttons, nails, marbles, bottles, coins, and military-related items such as a ring and a commemorative token.

A particularly moving moment from the dig came when a neighbour shared an incredible historic photograph of Roy Powell standing outside the cottage, connecting the research directly to the people who once lived there. The excavation also revealed a major surprise, the house was constructed in the 1840s, around thirty years earlier than previously thought.

The lecture was followed by afternoon tea, providing a wonderful opportunity for members and guests to discuss the talk, share reflections, and connect over history and community.

Sophie Appleby



Membership Renewals

Annual subscriptions for the Launceston Historical Society are **due on 31 December 2025**.

The [Membership Form](#) is on our website. Pay directly into the Society's CBA bank account BSB 067-003 A/C No. 2804 8638 (put your name in the reference field), by cheque or cash. Please email your details to launcestonhistory@gmail.com, or hand the form to Leonie Prevost at the next meeting, or post to:
Treasurer, Launceston Historical Society, PO Box 1296, LAUNCESTON TAS 7250

Debunking the myth of “Waubab Debar”

The final Launceston Historical Society meeting for the year was held on Sunday 16 November at the QV Museum at Inveresk. **Louise Zarmati and Bradley Wood** presented a thoroughly intriguing and meticulously researched investigation into the well-known headstone of ‘Waubab Debar’ near Bicheno.



There are three sources of information at the historic site: the gravestone placed there in 1855; a memorial installed by the Australian Merchant Navy in 2003; and a Bicheno History Trail information board erected in 2019. There are significant contradictions between these three sources creating a genuine history mystery.

The headstone states that Waubab Debar, a female Aborigine of Van Diemen’s Land, died in June 1832 aged 40 and was erected in 1855 by a few of her white friends. The Navy memorial tells us that she was born in 1792 and died in 1832 and was a heroine of the sea. The history panel says she died before 1816, was a strong swimmer and rescued two sealers, one of them her husband.

Louise and Brad investigated the secondary sources that may have been used to arrive at the different dates and further embellishments. These include James Kelly’s 1815-16 Log written in 1854, newspaper articles of 1893, and KR von Stieglitz’ book *Pioneers of the East Coast* published in 1955. These were deemed unreliable sources.

There are four primary sources that provide historical facts. Firstly, Henry Rice’s report of his exploratory expedition to the east coast states that on 30 December 1820 they left Moulting Lagoon and buried Archibald Campbell’s black woman at Stoney Beach Harbour. Secondly, Reverend Knopwood’s diary of 7 July 1814 notes that Archibald Campbell had a native woman living with him. Thirdly, on 20 August 1814 the VDL Gazette and General Advertiser reported that Campbell’s black woman went to Hobart to see the Lieutenant Governor. Finally, on 4 May 1818 Knopwood christened eight-year-old Maria (Marie) Campbell – a native girl of VDL – Archibald Campbell’s daughter.

Louise and Brad concluded that the Aboriginal woman buried at Stoney Beach Harbour, later named Waubab Bay, had a long relationship with Campbell and was buried in December 1820. She was a mother, a translator and go-between with local aborigines and the government. The lone gravestone, until now, was a mystery that people felt they had to fill with stories about sealers and heroic rescues at sea. They were nothing but speculation and entertaining fiction, not historical facts.

Marion Sargent

18th Primary History Prize 2025

Posters, projects, PowerPoints and films were submitted by 55 children from Evandale, Mowbray Heights, and Hagley Primary Schools, and a few individuals. Some wonderful entries were received with a variety of topics ranging from significant places, historic buildings, businesses, trams, schools, sport, people and even Hutch. Some of the children’s creations will be displayed at the Launceston Library from 12 December until the end of January.

Book vouchers from Petrarch’s Bookshop totalling \$684 are to be presented to 18 children at their school assemblies. Every child received a certificate of participation. The History Prize was judged by Carol Fuller, Prue McCausland, Brad Wood, and Sophie Appleby.

LHS website: [History Prizes | Launceston Historical Society Inc.](#)

Federation of Australian Historical Societies: The FAHS Newsletter is full of stories from member societies around Australia that show a diverse and active history community. Read the Newsletter online: [Newsletter | Federation of Australian Historical Societies](#)



Hobart Excursion

The Launceston Historical Society excursion to the Hobart Convict Penitentiary on 27 October was a great success. The Penitentiary is well worth a visit. We were privileged to have Professor Hamish Maxwell-Stewart explain the Digital History Tasmania project which has created the exciting Convict Memorial displaying transcriptions of 75,000 convict stories and perhaps an AI image of what they might have looked like.

The excellent National Trust guides took us around the site to see the 1834 chapel of which two rooms were converted into courtrooms in 1857. We didn't have time to see the immersive

Unshackled film experience, but exploring the chapel, courtrooms, tunnels, condemned cells and execution yard were fascinating. See <https://www.nationaltrust.org.au/places/penitentiary/>

We had free time for lunch and a look around Salamanca before the McDermott's coach took the 21 happy travellers back to Launceston.

Archaeological Dig at 56 Frederick Street

The Launceston History Centre's archaeological dig at the old Frederick Street kindergarten from 24 to 28 November 2025 was a resounding success. Lots of LHC members, La Trobe university students and a school group volunteered to dig five trenches, revealing lots of artefacts. Work continued through sunshine, wind and rain under the supervision of Darren Watton of Southern Archaeology.

Among the unearthed items were marbles, pieces of ceramic, bottles, coins, a Jory and Campbell brick, bones and plastic toys including a dinosaur. They now need to be cleaned, catalogued and interpreted to help with understanding more of the history of the site and the people who lived, studied and played there.

Originally built in 1836 the main building has been an infant school, a state school, Ladies Collegiate Institute, a private primary school, the Launceston Free Kindergarten and the Lady Gowrie Early Learning Centre. Now owned by the City of Launceston council a 20-year lease has been granted to the Launceston History Centre – a collaboration between the Launceston Historical Society, Tasmanian Family History Society (Launceston Branch) and Friends of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute. Fun fact: Helen Reddy's aunt Kathleen Reddy was born here in July 1911, probably in the schoolhouse somewhere on the site.

See the article in *The Examiner*: "Launceston's own Jurassic Park moment", 7 December 2025, page 4.

Darren Watton and John Dent will be speaking about the dig and what was found at the Launceston Historical Society meeting on 15 November 2026 at the QV Museum at Inveresk at 2pm.



Sam, Darren, Sophie, John, Bee and Sue at the dig.



One of the five trenches at the Frederick Street dig.

LHS Activities 2026

Launceston Historical Society meetings are usually held at the meeting room, Queen Victoria Museum, Inveresk, on the third Sunday of the month at 2pm, unless otherwise notified. Admission is free for members, and \$5 for visitors. Bring some cash for a chance to win a prize in the raffle. The president and committee wish everyone a **Merry Christmas** and hope to see you all again on 15 February 2026.

The **audio recordings** of earlier talks are available on our website, so catch up the on ones you missed or listen to them again: [LHS Lecture Series Audio](#)

15 February	Sophie Appleby , <i>'Harlequin Bob' - The 'chequered and eventful' life of convict Robert Cowburn</i>
15 March	Brad Williams , Queenborough Cemetery (John West Memorial Lecture)
19 April	Rosalie Triolo , Anzac topic
17 May	Di Cassidy , <i>Launceston Girls Industrial School</i>
21 June	Julian Burgess , <i>St John's Church History</i>
19 July	Alistair Scott , <i>Convict Urchins</i>
16 August	Anne Green , Threats to Tasmania? TBC
20 September	Jen Thompson , <i>On the foraging trail of Thomas Jeffrey, cannibal bushranger</i>
18 October	TBA
October/November	Excursion TBA
15 November	Darren Watton & John Dent , <i>Archaeological Dig at 56 Frederick Street</i>

New Members

The President and Executive welcome to our Society the following new members: Helen Chappel-Hayios, Carol D'Amici, Leonie Geard, Andrew Parsons, Margaret & Eros Tessarolo

Membership Form

Membership forms are available on our website in both PDF and Word formats. Sunday meetings are free for LHS members. We encourage new members to pay by direct debit into our Commonwealth Bank of Australia account: BSB 067-003 A/C No. 2804 8638, by cheque in the mail, or by cash or EFTPOS at a monthly meeting.

Launceston Historical Society

President and Newsletter Editor	Marion Sargent	0438 432 848
Vice-President	Sophie Appleby	0413 771 248
Correspondence Secretary	Prue McCausland	6327 2540
Treasurer	Leonie Prevost	0418 575 910
Publicity Officer	Sophie Appleby	0413 771 248

Postal address: PO Box 1296 LAUNCESTON TAS 7250

Email: launcestonhistory@gmail.com Website: www.launcestonhistory.org.au

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/launcestonhistory>

Deadline

Items for the next *News/letter* should be sent to the editor by **1 Feb 2026** at marionsargent@outlook.com or PO Box 1296 LAUNCESTON TAS 7250.

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