

Launceston Historical Society Inc.

Newsletter No 202

February 2026

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PO BOX 1296 LAUNCESTON TAS 7250

Bringing together people with an interest in history

Annual General Meeting + Sophie Appleby

Sunday 15 February 2026 – 2pm at the Meeting Room, Queen Victoria Museum at Inveresk

Welcome to another year of history! A PowerPoint show of the past year's activities will be shown before the short AGM which starts at 2pm, followed by our guest speaker Sophie Appleby.

All eleven positions on the Executive: President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer and seven Committee Members will be declared vacant. Please let us know if you would like to join our committee!

Memberships are now due for renewal for 2026. Thank you to all those who have already paid. Lectures are free for members, visitors \$5. Bring cash for the chance to win a great prize in the raffle!

'Harlequin Bob' - The 'chequered and eventful' life of convict Robert Cowburn



Sophie's presentation will explore the "chequered and eventful" life of early convict and ancestor Robert "Harlequin Bob" Cowburn, a cotton spinner from Lancaster, England. In 1819, Robert was convicted of larceny and sentenced to seven years' transportation. His arrival in Van Diemen's Land set off a series of events that would see his escapades live on for generations in Tasmanian folklore. What began as a routine ancestor search has evolved into a six-year journey to unravel the myths, truths, and lies of Harlequin Bob's mysterious life. Was he a British soldier? A constable on the Black Line? A bushranger? A murderer? Or just a manipulative storyteller? Either way, in the words of his obituary, "were his life written, as he himself has frequently said, it would 'a tale unfold'."

Sophie Appleby is a Heritage Officer for the City of Launceston, as well as a writer and multidisciplinary artist. She is the Vice-President of the Launceston Historical Society and the President of the Book Council of Lutruwita/Tasmania. A sixth-generation Tasmanian, her interest in family history began over a decade ago when she embarked on a search for belonging and reconnection to her Scottish and Irish heritage. She hopes to share her passion for Tasmanian history and inspire a new generation of historical researchers through the creative arts, community projects, and social media.

The 38th John West Memorial Lecture

Brad Williams

Exhumations at the former Queenborough Cemetery at Hutchins School

Sunday 15 March 2026 – 2pm Meeting Room, Queen Victoria Museum, Inveresk



Brad Williams, as Archaeologist and Project Manager of the former Queenborough Cemetery exhumation project, oversaw the meticulous recovery and identification of 1,981 individuals who were interred between 1873 and the 1930s. The graves were discovered when the Hutchins School at Sandy Bay began a building project in 2024. The remains were re-interred at Cornelian Bay on 11 June 2025.

Read about the extraordinary history of the cemetery and the detailed information that was recorded during the exhumations in the report prepared by Praxis Environment:

Queenborough Cemetery. Allport Library, SLT, Album II, No. 14
[Former Queenborough Cemetery Report on exhumations.pdf](#)

Brad Williams is a heritage practitioner, historical archaeologist and paleoanthropologist. During the last twenty years Brad has worked as a Research Officer for Heritage Tasmania, Cultural Heritage Officer for Glenorchy City Council, Heritage Projects Manager for Southern Midlands Council and Heritage Manager for the Heritage Education and Skills Centre (Oatlands). He served four years as a member of the Tasmanian Heritage Council, and six years as Archaeological representative on Council's Works Application Assessment Committee, as well as chairing the Council's Archaeological Advisory Panel. He has served as a member of Arts Tasmania's Cultural Heritage Advisory Panel and is currently Chair of the Tasmanian Wool Centre (Museum) Board.

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 **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](#)

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>Urchin Convicts</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: Rebecca Beaumont & Andrew Tuma

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.

Other Events of Interest

George Town & District Historical Society: At Hillwood, 16 February 2026, 7.30pm, Julie Airey, *Hillwood History Room: local and family history resources*; Bass & Flinders Centre, 16 March 2026, 7.30pm, *A Talk on Model Boats*. Email: info@qtdhs.com.

Book Council of Lutruwita/Tasmania: Launceston Library, Level 2, at 1.15pm. 25 March 2026, author talk as part of Tasmania Reads Week. Members free; non-members \$5. Inquiries: bookcouncilt@gmail.com.

Royal Society of Tasmania (Northern Branch): Meeting Room, QV Museum, Inveresk on the fourth Sunday of each month at 1.30pm, \$7 for non-members. 22 February 2026, Her Excellency the Honourable Barbara Baker AC, *The role of the Governor*. Inquiries: Pippa Cotton, pippa.cotton@outlook.com.

Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Legacy Function Rooms, 159 Macquarie St, Hobart on the second Tuesday of each month at 7.30pm. 10 February 2026, AGM & Clare Wright, *Nāku Dhāruk The Bark Petitions* – in conversation with Greg Lehman; 10 March 2026, David Stuart, *A handful of Americans in Hobart Town: Richard Hazard, Samuel Rodman Chase and Elisha Hathaway*; 14 April 2026, Graeme Broxam, *Competition vs Cooperation: The Holyman Story*. Email: info@thra.org.au.

Historical Walking Tour, Carr Villa Memorial Park: Step back in time and discover the stories that have helped shape Launceston in this free walking tour led by Marion Sargent, president of the Launceston Historical Society. Meet inside the main gates on Sunday 22 February 2026 for a 2pm start. Registration is required. Phone 6323 3600 or email carrvilla@launceston.tas.gov.au to book.

Friends of the Library annual Book Sale: Saturday 14 March 2026, 9.00am – 1.00pm, St Ailbe's Hall, 46 Margaret Street, Launceston. Come and join us at Launceston's best book sale! A wide range of good quality, donated books – crime, thrillers, fantasy, science fiction, romance, children's, teenage, cooking, health, history, travel, crafts, gardening, sports, war, transport, collectables and Tasmaniana. Also, jigsaws, CDs & DVDs. All at rock bottom prices. Online payment available. Proceeds support library services in Launceston area.

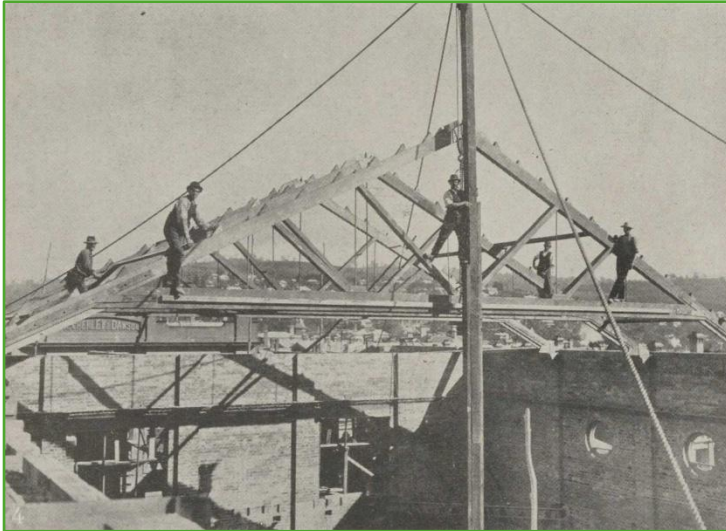
Unshackled, the true convict story: Australia's premier convict exhibition is now at Woolmers Estate, Longford for the remainder of 2026. Unshackled brings to life the stories and characters with interactive screen-based media, music and augmented reality that lead the visitor through the exhibition themes: repression, exploitation, rebellion and redemption. <https://www.woolmers.com.au/events/unshackled>

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](#)

Membership Renewals

Annual subscriptions for the Launceston Historical Society were **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

National Theatre



The iconic National Theatre has stood on the corner of Charles and Paterson streets since 1915. The National Hall Company sold it to the Launceston Council in 1954 with a bequest from AW Monds on the proviso it was used as a theatre until a larger community-owned venue was found. When the Council bought the Princess Theatre and converted it back to its original intention as a live theatre the National Theatre was sold. Since 1970 it has been occupied by Foot and Playsted, printers and bookbinders. The original circle tiers and stage are intact. The building, but not the business, is now on the market again.

Designed by architect Thomas Searell, and opened in September 1915, it was built without elaborate decorative effects. A comfortable seat and good view were considered more important to an enjoyable theatre experience.

Offices for the Australian Women's National League and Tasmanian Automobile Chamber of Commerce, and the National Café were in the basement. Ghost signs above the former windows can still be seen in Paterson Street.

The top photo from *The Weekly Courier*, 27 May 1915 page 22, shows workmen placing the roof on the new theatre.

The bottom photo from *The Weekly Courier*, 23 December 1915, page 23, was taken after a matinee as patrons spill out onto the streets. The National Hotel was on the opposite corner.



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Deadline

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

Kindly printed by the office of Senator Peter Whish-Wilson