

Launceston Historical Society Inc.

Newsletter No 200

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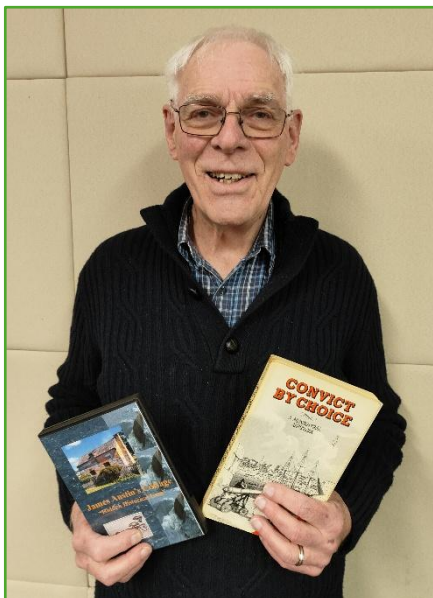
Bringing together people with an interest in history

Degradation & Dissipation

Alison Alexander presented an excellent lecture on the low state of public morals in Launceston during the 1820s at the meeting on Sunday, 20 July 2025. The British government sent Commissioner John Thomas Bigge to New South Wales to investigate transportation, administration, law, trade, revenue and church establishments. Bigge visited Van Diemen's Land and formally interviewed 80 people. Alison argues that he asked loaded questions to get the answers that he wanted. He strove to find out how much corruption, bribery, cheating, embezzling, and skullduggery went on. He was concerned about morals, bad language, prostitution, adultery, bigamy, concubinage and dissipation. Bigge painted a gloomy picture of VDL with widespread poverty, high wages, which he considered evil, an unpromising economy, and no churches. He was mainly interested in the upper classes; the others were just the workers. Because of Bigge's reports Governor Arthur was sent out to replace Sorell and establish a more rigorous convict system.



Speaker Alison Alexander (right) with her sister.



James Austin: of Beehives & Ferries

Richard Mack presented a fascinating lecture on Sunday, 17 August 2025. According to family legend James Austin and his cousin John Earle stole a straw beehive from Peter Higgens and left it on an uncle's doorstep, so they could secure a free passage to Sydney. After a trial and time in jail, the cousins boarded the 'Calcutta' under the command of David Collins and arrived at Port Phillip Bay in October 1803. After a few months the convicts, military and free settlers were shipped to the Derwent River. The cousins' terms expired in January 1809. Both were granted land, James at Glenorchy, and John at Old Beach. In 1818 they obtained a licence to run ferries across the Derwent River. Each of them built an inn. James named his 'Barley Mow', but Governor Macquarie renamed it 'Roseneath' when he stayed there in 1821. They both prospered and encouraged other family members to come out. After James' retirement in 1828 the ferry licence passed on to his nephews Solomon and Josiah Austin. James died in 1831. The landless, illiterate, convict made his way to comparative status and wealth with hard work. He is honoured with a suburb being named after him. 'Roseneath' was destroyed in the 1967 bushfires, but 'Austin's Cottage' still stands and is open on Sunday afternoons.



Lindsay Millar OAM, Speaker Steve Radford & Revel Munro, wearing his father Reginald's flying coat.

Reginald Munro, Aviator

On 21 September 2025 **Steve Radford** related the story of aviator Reginald Munro (1914-1980). He had a passion for motorcycle racing and flying. He first flew a Gypsy Moth in 1937 but was rejected by the RAAF because he had lost part of his right thumb and couldn't operate the joystick firing button on bombers. He paid his own way to the UK and became an instructor in the RAF. Returning to Launceston in 1946, he flew and instructed at the Aero Club until 1950. He undertook mercy flights to the islands and was instrumental in setting up the Royal Flying Doctors Service in 1960. Reginald established his own business, Munro Aviation.

October Meeting: John Dent & Darren Watton (delivered by Sam Diprose-Adams)

Fifth Mead, Smith, von Stieglitz Memorial Lecture with afternoon tea

Mountford Cottage, Perth, Archaeological Dig

Sunday 19 October 2025 – 2pm, Meeting Room, Queen Victoria Museum, Inveresk



The LHS archaeology group in conjunction with Southern Archaeology, undertook an archaeological dig at Mountford Cottage in Perth in the week of 28 October 2024. The site was generously made available by the landowner to enable the community dig to occur. Over the week we had 25 members participate, as well as 18 students from two schools and four archaeology students from La Trobe University.

The site was the remains of a farm cottage that historic research indicated was there from at least 1870 and went out of use around 1970. It was lived in by the Powell family over most of its life. Large stone foundations and a brick chimney were uncovered

which gave a great outline of the extent of the house. Publicity in *The Examiner* led to a visit from a Powell descendant who had visited the house when she was aged five. She was able to give us an idea of the use of the different rooms.

This talk will outline the history of the site, what the archaeology uncovered and how that changed our understanding of the site. Several important and interesting finds were uncovered.

John Dent is convenor of the LHS archaeology group and has recently retired as a registered land surveyor. John is a member of many historical organisations in Launceston. He has extensively researched Launceston's history, authored numerous book chapters and newspaper articles, and given talks on northern Tasmania's past.

Darren Watton is the principal archaeologist with Southern Archaeology. He has extensive archaeological experience in Tasmania and interstate. Darren has supervised four community digs for the LHS and volunteers some of his time to enable LHS to offer the opportunity for its members to participate in a hands-on dig.

Sam Diprose-Adams is the secretary of the Perth Tasmania Historical Society and runs a website on the history of Perth. He has been working as an archaeological technician and took part in the dig as a trench supervisor. He is currently a PhD candidate at UTAS in public policy and law reform.

November Meeting: Louise Zarmati & Bradley Wood

Debunking the myth of “Waubia Debar”

Sunday 16 November 2025 – 2pm, Meeting Room, Queen Victoria Museum, Inveresk



Wikipedia tells us that “Waubia Debar” (1792–1832) was a “female Aboriginal Tasmanian” who is buried in the east coast Tasmanian town of Bicheno. She was a strong swimmer who rescued two sealers, one of them her husband, when their ship was wrecked about 1 km from shore during a storm. Wauba Debar died in a boat off the coast whilst travelling towards the Furneaux Group and her body was brought ashore and buried. In this presentation we will interrogate primary and secondary sources to show the story of “Waubia Debar” is a modern myth created in the 19th and 20th centuries and very little of the above information is correct.

Louise Zarmati has had a varied career as a teacher, archaeologist and museum educator. She has a PhD in History from Deakin University and a Master of Philosophy degree in archaeology and heritage

management from the University of Cambridge. Louise is a Senior Lecturer in Humanities and Social Sciences Education at the University of Tasmania.

Bradley Wood is a writer, historical researcher and member of the Launceston Historical Society Committee. He is a partner with Louise Zarmati in an education consultancy business that develops learning materials for libraries, museums, heritage sites and schools. His article, “The Mysterious Journey of Captain Charles Bayley’s Cane” was a finalist in the Forty South *Van Diemen Anthology* 2021.

Bookings still accepted for the Spring Excursion to Hobart!

This year’s excursion will be to the **Convict Penitentiary and TMAG** in Hobart on **Monday 27 October**.

The bus will leave the Bowls Club car park, **Kings Meadows at 8am**. We will have morning tea at Ross (own expense) and arrive at the Hobart Penitentiary for our 11am tour. The site is closed on Mondays so we will have it all to ourselves! There will be time after the guided tour to look up your convicts at the Convict Memorial Hamish Maxwell-Stewart has told us about. There are steep and narrow stairs to tunnels and uneven sandstone floors plus plenty of steps throughout the site. It is also cool, so bring a jacket.

Lunch (own expense) will be at the Museum Courtyard Cafe with free time to explore the Museum. At 3pm we’ll leave for Launceston with a comfort stop at Campbell Town.

The price is \$95, or \$65 for National Trust members. Please pay the required amount into the LHS CBA account BSB 067-003 A/C No. 2804 8638 and email Leonie Prevost at leonie.prevost@bigpond.com or Marion Sargent at marionsargent@outlook.com to secure your seat on the bus.

LHS Activities 2025

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](#)

Primary History Prize 2025

The LHS Primary History Prize entries are due by 17 October 2025. Encourage children from northern Tasmania in grades 3 to 6 to become a history detective. Their mission is to choose a Tasmanian mystery from the past, gather clues and uncover the story behind it. Some suggestions are a person, an object, a place, a building, or family history. Vouchers from Petrarch's Bookshop will be awarded to the best entries. Guidelines and entry forms are on the LHS website: [History Prizes | Launceston Historical Society Inc.](#)

New Members

The President and Executive welcome to our Society the following new members: Sandra Callander, Pamela Gill & Boothe Havisham, Trevor & Dorothy Leonard, June Rays, Liza Snow.

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: The Grove, George Town, 7.30pm on 20 October 2025, AGM: *The Land Bridge - A world beneath the sea*. 9 November 2025, Biennial Conference - "More Convict Stories of northern VDL / Tasmania". 1 December 2025, Christmas function. Email: info@gtlhs.com.

Book Council of Lutruwita/Tasmania: Launceston Library, 2nd floor. Friday, 31 October 2025, 10.30am, Gregory North, *Life and Rhymes of Banjo Paterson: 125th Anniversary tour*; Wednesday, 19 November 2025, 1.15pm, Claire Van Ryn, *Where the Birds Call Her Name*. Members free; non-members \$5. Inquiries: bookcouncilt@gmail.com.

Royal Society of Tasmania (Northern Branch): Meeting Room, QV Museum, Inveresk at 1.30pm, \$7 for non-members. 5 October 2025, Andrew McNeill, *Geological Survey of Tasmania's History and Role in Understanding the Geology of Tasmania*; 23 November 2025, Burcu Keane, *An Unsettling Medium: A Curatorial Reflection on the Materiality and Meaning of 'Hair' Across Culture(s)*. Inquiries: Pippa Cotton, pippa.cotton@outlook.com.

Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Legacy Function Rooms, 159 Macquarie St, Hobart at 7.30-9pm. 11 November 2025, Jody Steele, *Public history and interpretation*; 9 December 2025, John Dent, *Launceston: the first twenty years – a difficult birth*. Email: thra@thra.org.au.

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Deadline

Items for the next *News/letter* should be sent to the editor by **1 Dec 2025** at marionsargent@outlook.com or PO Box 1296 LAUNCESTON TAS 7250.

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