

TIMELINES

No. 19 April 2016



Video about History House Museum's Comedian in Residence Program
Source: City of Armadale

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MUSEUM HISTORIANS' NATIONAL NETWORK COMMITTEE

President	Michelle Stevenson Museum Victoria
Vice-President	Alison Wishart State Library of NSW
Secretary	Ian Terry TMAG
Treasurer	Eleanor Cave Australian War Memorial
Ordinary Members	Charlotte Smith Museum Victoria
	Christen Bell History House Museum
Newsletter Editor	Gay Hendriksen The Rowan Tree Heritage and Cultural Services

MEMBERSHIP

Museum Historians is a Museums Australia National Network.

The cost of membership is \$11 and is open to all current members of Museums Australia.

To join Museum Historians please contact the Museums Australia national office:

The Membership Manager
Museums Australia
PO Box 266
Civic Square ACT 2608
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Ph: 02 6230 0346 Fax: 02 6230 0360

Email: ma@museumsaustralia.org.au

FROM THE EDITOR

Our first issue of *Timelines* for 2016 includes three member profiles from members at very different stages of their careers. These members share their experiences working at both small and large museums across Australia.

Christian Bell also shares the results of some innovative public programs at the History House Museum in Armadale which brought musicians and comedians into the museum to help put a different spin on the collections.

Warm regards

Liz Bramley

Nina Buchan

Gay Hendriksen

CONTRIBUTING TO TIMELINES

There are two issues of *Timelines* a year, all contributions are welcome including articles, press releases, photos and short updates.

Issue Two published: November/December.
Contributions due 30th September

Contributions for the next issue of *Timelines* should be sent to the editor at:

timelinesjournal@gmail.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to the contributors to this edition of *Timelines*:

Leigh O'Brien, WA Museum – Geraldton

Snjez Cosic, Gold Museum

Louise Douglas, NMA

Christian Bell, History House Museum

MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA HISTORIANS NATIONAL NETWORK BURSARY PROGRAM

Museums Australia Historians National Network (MAHNN) will provide funds of up to \$500 per applicant for museum curators and/or historians to undertake professional development activities. This can include, but is not limited to: Conference/seminar registration fees, travel and accommodation costs to attend professional development activities, and/or research costs.

To be eligible for funding, you must be a member of the network and be working or studying in the museums/galleries/libraries/archives/heritage sector.

A total of \$2000 is available for all bursaries in a given calendar year, with a maximum of \$500 per applicant.

Applications will be assessed by the MAHNN Committee bi-annually. Applications can be submitted anytime but must be received by **28 February** and **31 August** in any given year.

A panel consisting of three members of the executive of the MAHNN will assess the applications.

Applications should be emailed to:

Ian Terry

Ian.Terry@tmag.tas.gov.au

Please send your current CV with the application.

MUSEUM HISTORIANS AGM

Details

The Museum Historians AGM will be held on Wednesday 25th of May from 12.40pm-1.30pm via teleconference. If you are based in Melbourne or Sydney feel free to participate in person at Melbourne Museum (contact Michelle Stevenson) or the State Library of NSW (contact Alison Wishart).

Phone Details

To participate in the AGM via telephone, 1800 896 323 (those outside NSW and the ACT) or 02 8088 0900 (ACT & NSW). Follow the prompts and when the time comes, type in the participant code: 3035010052.

Timelines Editor

We are in need of a new editor for Timelines as Gay Hendriksen has had to step down due to increasing work commitments. The position requires compiling and editing two editions of Timelines a year it is not particularly onerous. We are happy to accept nominations for co-editors.

Ordinary Members

The Museum Historians Committee is looking for additional 'ordinary members' particularly from South Australia, Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland. Nominations will be called for these positions at the Museum Historians AGM in May.

More Information

Any further questions should be directed to Michelle Stevenson, President, MA Historians NN. Phone (03) 8341 7381 or 0438580712, email: mstevenson@museum.vic.gov.au

MEMBER PROFILES

LEIGH O'BRIEN, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

How long have you worked in the GLAM sector?

About fifteen years

What jobs have you had in your career?

Collection management and curatorial roles with small and large museums, as well as heritage sites including the former Edith Cowan University Museum of Childhood, Western Australian Museum and Port Arthur Historic Site.

You've worked in both a large state based museum and a regional museum - what are some of the differences that you've noticed in these two work places?

Both roles have been with the Western Australian Museum – as a curator in the history department at the Collections and Research Centre based in Perth, and as Acting Regional Manager of the WA Museum – Geraldton: one of three WA Museum regional sites, about 400 km north of Perth. One of the most obvious differences for me was the anonymity of working behind-the-scenes with collections versus being truly part of a community working in a regional museum.

How did you get into this type of work?

I had an interest in history that I did not explore until later in life as a mature age student and while studying I undertook some volunteer work with a small local museum which led to a short project-based contract. Once I had some experience I was able to more confidently apply for other positions.

What did you study?

BA double major in Cultural Heritage Studies and History at Curtin University, and an MA in Cultural Heritage Studies which included an exchange semester and masterclass in Europe studying world heritage management.

How would you describe your current role?

I have recently moved from an Acting role as Regional Manager to a Senior Project Officer position at the WA Museum – Geraldton. I am working on content development for future exhibitions. The new role is project focussed and draws on my past three years' experience at the Geraldton site as well as my curatorial background.

What has been your most challenging project to date and why?

I can see that the latest project will be the most challenging. It is an opportunity to deliver world-class museum experiences of the significant stories of the Mid West region of Western Australia including Yamaji culture, shipwrecks, and the Square Kilometre Array science project, as well as providing a place the local community can see their own stories and feel a part of.

Recently you took some LSL and spent part of that time in the UK - you attended a free two day conference:

DCDC15: Exploring new digital destinations for heritage and academia (DCDC = Discovering Collections Discovering Communities)

What was the best thing about this conference?

Although it was under the auspices of Libraries and Archives, presentations and attendees were cross-sector and interdisciplinary and there were plenty of choices and relevant topics for me.

Member Profiles Cont..

What three things did you learn that you can apply to your work?

1) A better understanding of the range of digital technologies for delivery of visitor / museum experiences through some inspiring case studies presented at the conference. Such as, using Minecraft to engage children in collections, and mobile apps that draw on agency and playfulness to engage visitors in a heritage site.

2) Collections are being used in new and previously unimaginable ways based on access to metadata and big data.

3) Gamification is one of the buzz words for digital experiences of collections and collaborating with game designers can produce creative and immersive user experiences.

Would you recommend it to others in the GLAM sector and why?

I would definitely recommend this conference. Besides the fact that this conference was free i.e. there were no registration fees due to the level of sponsorship, it is a great way to get an overview of recent digital projects from across the UK GLAM sector, as well as the networking opportunities.

What were some of the other highlights of your UK trip?

Experiencing virtual reality projects at the British Museum (Bronze Age roundhouse) and Natural History Museum (David Attenborough's 'First Life'), and wonderful temporary exhibitions *The Fabric of India* at the V&A and *Celts: Art and Identity* at the British Museum. Liverpool was an unexpected highlight and it took several days to explore the numerous museums, galleries and heritage sites there.

SNIEZ COSIC, VICTORIA

What's your current role?

Curator, Sovereign Hill Museums Association

How did you start working in/with museums?

I was studying Honours in history at university and I was fortunate enough to work on an exhibition on the history of the Travellers Aid Society of Victoria, a non-profit organisation working with travellers in need. This ignited my interest in pursuing a career in museums and history so I did internships at the Koorie Heritage Trust and Melbourne Museum

What have been some of your career highlights?

Recently I completed my first exhibition for the Gold Museum, *On Your Bike! Cycling in Ballarat*. I also organised a school holiday program and the *Festival of Spokes* community to celebrate the exhibition's launch. It was a great experience working on a complete exhibition package including public programming which has become a passion of mine.

Other career highlights include working at Melbourne Museum on their *First Peoples* exhibition and contributing stories to Collections Online on the history of the Sunshine Harvester Works.

What is it about working in/with museums that inspires you?

I'm a huge history nerd so I love researching and displaying objects and communicating these stories to the public. Working in a museum gives you the opportunity to explore and reveal stories which would otherwise remain hidden. I love having the opportunity to work in different areas to engage the public, such as exhibitions, public programs and social media.

Member Profiles Cont..



Posing with a velocipede from the *On Your Bike* exhibition (Source: The Courier)

What is your favourite museum and why?

I really enjoy the Heide Museum of Art. They successfully manage that balance between art appreciation and history which so many art galleries struggle to do. Plus, it's in a gorgeous location!

I'm also inspired by the Migration Museum in Adelaide. They organise great public programs to engage the community with their exhibitions and which also tie in with local events.

How long have you been working in/with museums?

Almost 10 years.

What advice would you give to someone trying to get a job in a museum or trying to progress their museum career?

Volunteer and persevere! It can be hard getting a job in the museum sector but volunteering is so important in getting experience, building your networks and getting your foot in the door. If you love what you do and are proactive in seeking employment and/or volunteering opportunities, you will be rewarded eventually. Also, draw on your skills from the non-museum sector. I've worked as an historian and online writer and editor in non-profit and heritage organisations which have equipped me with skills relevant to the museum world.

Members Profile Cont..

LOUISE DOUGLAS, ACT

What's your current role?

Since retiring from the National Museum of Australia in 2011, I've continued my involvement in museums as a Research Associate at the Museum (with historian Dr Roslyn Russell, I'm writing a history of the Friends of the National Museum) and as member of the Board of ICOM Australia. I continue to be involved with the ACT Branch of Museums Australia and I'm lucky enough to be on the Board of the ACT government's Cultural Facilities Corporation, which manages the Canberra Museum and Gallery. I've also branched out and become involved with the RSPCA as President of the ACT society: I've discovered there is quite a cross-over between the values behind animal welfare and museums evidenced by the many staff in RSPCA societies who have museum backgrounds.

How did you start working in museums?

After finishing my university studies in 1978, I worked as a research historian on *Australians: an historical library*, the key contribution of Australia's historians to Australia's bicentenary. The Australian Research Council's grant, which funded my salary, came to an end in 1984 about the time the maverick Director of the Museum of Applied Arts and Science, Dr Lindsay Sharp, was recruiting staff to lead the exhibition development for the new Powerhouse Museum. Having no experience as a curator was almost an advantage as Dr Sharp was looking for people from a range of backgrounds to bring fresh perspectives to the Museum's collections and exhibitions.

My personal collection of green glass vases, cups/saucers and dishes, mostly collected from country op shops, indicated that I had at least some curatorial instinct!

What have been some of your career highlights?

The opening of the Powerhouse Museum (on 10 March 1988) with the Museum's inaugural set of social history exhibitions – including exhibitions on brewing and pubs, domestic technology and the history of Australian cinema – was my first great museum moment. It's been particularly gratifying to see many of the designers, curators and research staff who produced these exhibitions went on to have successful careers in the Australian museum industry. Being involved in the opening of the National Museum (on 11 March 2001) was another peak museum moment, particularly as getting the Museum approved and made was such long, hard-fought process. During the very early days of the Internet in 1996, I had oversight Australian Museums Online, a federal government funded project, which revealed the extent and breadth of Australia's museum collections. It gave many museums their first taste of how the Internet could extend the reach of their collections.

What is it about working in/with museums that inspires you?

When I went through university in the 1970s, a 'history from below' philosophy was embedded in academic teaching as a counter to the previously dominant views of history as the belonging to the powerful and the achievers. Through the collecting and interpreting of objects, I believe museums are critical to how communities - across the social, geographic and economic spectrum – are made visible in our history.

Member Profile Cont...

Exhibitions based on the material culture of everyday experiences not only appeal to museum visitors, but also conveyed that their story and experiences are valuable.

What is your favourite museum and why?

Regional museum developments have produced some of the most interesting museums in the last 20 years. Shear Outback in Hay is one of my favourites. It combines an outstanding architecturally designed building, professional exhibition interpretation with a great café and an active series of programs to tell the story of a crucially important industry. The daily shearing display is one of the few places you can see a sheep sheared, and talk to an experienced shearer about the history and techniques of shearing. Shear Outback is important to Hay's sense of identity and contributes to the economy of Hay and the region. It is also a great introduction to life in the outback, for both city slickers from Australia and overseas.

How long have you been working in/with museums?

I started working at the Powerhouse in 1984, and retired in 2011.

What advice would you give to someone trying to get a job in a museum or trying to progress their museum career?

Firstly, be as involved as you can in the museum profession, for example, get involved with your local Museums Australia branch or network. Not only does such involvement expand your horizons, your knowledge of how other museums work, but it brings you into contact with people who get to know you and may remember you should a job opportunity arise. Secondly, be the best corporate citizen you can be inside the organisation you work for: put yourself forward when volunteers are called for projects or activities, particularly the ones no one else wants to do. Thirdly, stay on top of the key issues and developments in the wider arts community – read professional journals, coverage of arts in the newspapers and online. The more literate and current you are, the more appealing you will be to a prospective employer.



Louise has stepped into animal welfare as well as continuing to be involved in museums and history, Phorographer Leisa Quinn, RSPCA ACT

Community & Public Programs

MUSIC AND LAUGHS IN THE MUSEUM

CHRISTEN BELL

MUSEUM CURATOR CITY OF ARMADALE

History House Museum is a community history museum run by the City of Armadale in the south eastern suburbs of Perth. Like many smaller museums that are off the beaten path, we are always on the lookout for new and innovative ways to encourage new audiences to visit the museum.

Two programs that were very successful in attracting new audiences to the museum included a Musician in Residence in 2014 and a Comedian in Residence in 2015.

Both programs were made possible through the support of the City of Armadale (CoA) and the Connect Community Collections Grant program run by the Western Australian Government's Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA). The DCA grant was designed to encourage collecting organisations to engage with artists who would work with the community to reinterpret parts of the collection.

Music brings collection alive

The 2014 Musician in Residence program was inspired while researching a new temporary exhibition that explored the history of performance in the CoA. The exhibition looked at how community members used to play at local dances, the creation of amateur theatre and choral groups, through to the successful professional singers who have emerged from the district.

The research into the exhibition then posed the question: How do we bring the instruments in the collection alive, and how do we demonstrate their core function - to make lovely music?

During the *History of Performance* exhibition the City engaged David Hyams, a professional musician with extensive experience in working with community groups, to run two song writing workshops.

During these workshops a dedicated group of community members worked together to each produce a song inspired by an item or a story found in the museum. This culminated in a concert where each song was performed while two instruments from the collection were played by a professional musician. This was the first time in over 60 to 70 years that some of the instruments had been heard in public. The concert also included the history behind each instrument as well as the inspiration for each of the songs that were performed.

A musical instrument can be an interesting item to look at; it can tell an interesting story such as the violin owned by Mabel Parker which was played at a farewell concert in Roleystone for several young men who had enlisted during World War One. To hear the melodic strains of the violin when played by a musician helps the audience enter that world, much like when the engine of a vintage car is started or you can see and hear an old piece of machinery working.

Community & Public Programs Cont...

To help preserve the functional significance of the instruments, each was examined to ensure it could withstand the rigors of being played. Some were sent for service to a professional with a long career in instrument maintenance and repair, others needed no maintenance, while a handful proved unfit to play. Before the instruments were handled by the musicians strict instructions were provided on how they were to be handled, the importance of clean hands and for them not to be left unattended.

The final step in the process of keeping the functional significance of the museum's instrument collection alive was to professionally record them being played. This allows the museum to have a high quality recording of the instrument for both research and interpretive purposes.

The universal language of laughter

In 2015, the museum was seeking an alternative way to encourage people to engage with the collection and for a different voice to be used in its interpretation.

From this, the concept of a comedian running museum tours was formed and the *Comedian in Residence* program was launched.

It helped that nationally known actor and comedian Peter Rowsthorn (*Kath & Kim*, *Paper Planes*, *Thank God You're here*, *Can We Help* & *Who Do You Think you Are*) lived locally and had links to the region through his wife's family.

The DCA funding allowed History House to host the event which is often only available to larger state based museums.

So why comedy? Laughter is universal, it's a language, it's an emotion and it's communal. Using laughter in a museum is a way to bring your audiences together and to help them make an emotional connection to your museum and its collection.

Comedy provides the opportunity for the audience to physically interact not only with the collection but also the stories that are in your museum. Mix comedy with the uniqueness of a museum venue and the advantage of having a national known comedian was going to grab people's attention and bring non-traditional museum visitors to History House. We also believed that a comedian would provide a very different yet still informative and respectful voice in the museum; they would have the ability to play with and adapt the stories in the museum and present them in a way the target audience would enjoy.

The goal of the comedy museum tours was to look at the funnier side of the history of the CoA, to include some historical fact along with what we like to call 'local legend has it..'; along with a few personal stories from Peter, particularly those relating to his wife's family as well as allowing people on the tour to share some of their own stories.

For two months the curator and Peter Rowsthorn worked together compiling stories (factual and 'local legend') and Peter spent time looking around the museum seeking inspiration and putting his performance together.

Community & Public Programs Cont...

History House advertised four comedy museum tours with Peter Rowsthorn over three months. We limited each tour to 25 people to ensure the event had an intimate feel. We also organised for one of the tours to be professionally filmed as a record of the event and to create a promotional video (<http://library.armadale.wa.gov.au/history-house>). All the tours quickly sold out and they attracted a good mixture of people. Peter Rowsthorn was a fantastic tour guide, taking people on a funny and informative journey through the museum. He encouraged his audience to be a part of the performance and happily spent time speaking to them after the show.

Both of these programs were very successful as they allowed us to reach new audiences and encouraged them to engage with the collection and the history of the City of Armadale.

History House continues to source a range of different events and voices into the museum so as to attract new audiences. Music and comedy are popular art forms and mixing that with the uniqueness of a museum will attract people who probably don't see museums as an entertaining place. Events such as these allow the museum to prove that museums are entertaining places and learning can be fun.