

# **Leigh Blackburn**

## **A Man with Vision**

**Researcher: Marie Phelan**

## **Founding of the LDHS**

Leigh Blackburn's involvement with the history of the district began in March 1971 at a public meeting organised by the then Shire of Lillydale to plan for the centenary celebrations of the formation of the shire.

Leigh became interim and then inaugural President of the Lilydale & District Historical Society which was formed to help the Shire with the centenary celebrations planned for February 1972.

The Society became involved in two events: collecting material for a special display, and the publication of a centenary book: *Lilydale The Billanook Country 1837 – 1972* by Marion Aveling. Leigh became involved in both projects and worked on the book committee.

Later, he served on the book committees of the Shire's two other publications: *The Border Country Episodes and Recollections of Mooroolbark & Wonga Park* by G. F. James (1984) and *Montrose Settlement in the Foothills A History* by Jennifer McLennan (1987). Leigh's meticulous and methodical research skills were valued by both authors on those two latter publications.

## **Leigh's Vision for our Society**

But in 1972, Leigh had a special vision for the District, the establishment of a Museum in Lillydale with a local and international focus. The local focus being provided by photographs and memorabilia from the District while Lillydale's own Dame Nellie Melba would be national and international focus. Also in 1972 Leigh was helping with the Formation of the Mt Dandenong- Kalorama Research Group and the Yarra Glen Research Group.

In 1973 Leigh went on to speak at the inaugural meeting of the Yarra Glen Historical Research Group. It took until 1976 to convince the then Shire of Lillydale to let the society establish a museum in the old shire offices in Castella Street. The museum featured changing exhibitions of local interest but always had a permanent Melba display gallery. The volunteers operated the Museum until 1989 when the task became such that the shire was asked to take over the day to day management of the facility and more importantly, the extensive and valuable collection which boasts a large Melba collection.

This prompted the Shire to appoint Victoria's first curator to a municipal museum, a move subsequently adopted by several other councils.

# History finds a way into winner's workplace

By KAREN JONES

THE AUTHOR of many historical articles about Lilydale and its people has been presented the Telecom Advance Australia Merit Award.

Mr Leigh Blackburn has been president of the Lilydale and District Historical Society since it was formed in 1971.

He has been involved with the establishment of the Lilydale Museum and is particularly interested in gathering material for the museum's Dame Nellie Melba memorial collection.

History has also found its way into Mr Blackburn's workplace; as well as being Stokes Electrical division development administrator he has been appointed com-



**MR LEIGH Blackburn won the Telecom Advance Australia Merit Award for his dedication to history.**

pany historian, researching the history of medals produced by the

company.

Another area of interest for Mr Blackburn is

the search for the mahogany ship, believed to be washed up along the

Warrnambool coastline.

As a member of the Mahogany Ship Association he believes if the ship is found it could change the history of European involvement in Australia.

The books *Billanook Country* and *Border Country* were both written by Mr Blackburn with the assistance of the historical society and he is currently researching and writing the history of Montrose.

Mr Blackburn said he was proud of the results the historical society had achieved, particularly in developing the museum.

But of his achievements he said, "What I've done is only part and parcel of a team effort."

"I don't look on it as a personal effort."

*Article from the Lilydale Express after Leigh Blackburn received the Telecom Advance Australia Merit Award. The article is dated February 4, 1986.*

## His Achievements

In 1980 Leigh as President also oversaw the building extension of the Museum with the help of Apex which went on to Display the Wandin Story.

In May 1985 when Leigh was President of LDHS, the Museum received a Grant of \$2,500.00 from the Museum Grants Programme by the then Victorian Arts Minister, Mr Race Mathews. Organised by the Museums Association of Australia Victorian Branch.

In 1987 The Museum was awarded a 'Certificate of Merit' from 'Westpac Museum of the Year Awards' by The Museums Association of Australia Inc. Victorian Branch for Special Exhibition: 'Pioneer Families' when Leigh was President of LDHS.

CHIRNSIDE PARK  
OF  
The very early days  
Leigh Blackburn



LILYDALE & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE NAMING  
OF  
LILYDALE  
Leigh Blackburn



LILYDALE & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Reminiscences of  
Yering Station**



**Leigh Blackburn**

Lilydale & District Historical Society  
Local History Series 3

**The Swiss  
Connection**

**Leigh Blackburn**

Lilydale & District Historical Society  
Local History Series 4

*Four of Leigh's publications.*

1987 MUSEUM OF THE YEAR AWARDS

sponsored by

WESTPAC

*Certificate of Merit*

awarded to

L I L Y D A L E   A N D   D I S T R I C T  
H I S T O R I C A L   S O C I E T Y   M U S E U M

for

SPECIAL EXHIBITION: "PIONEER FAMILIES"

FOR PROVIDING OUTSTANDING GENEALOGICAL MATERIAL  
OF RELEVANCE TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY  
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF AN  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

Chairman of Judges:



The Museums Association of Australia Inc.  
Victorian Branch

**Westpac**  
THE BANK





*02568 Olympic swimmer Dawn Fraser presenting Leigh Blackburn with the Certificate of Merit awarded to the society in the 1987 Museum of the Year Awards in recognition of our special Pioneer Families exhibition.*



07117 Left to right: Cr Guil de Pury, East Riding Collection Annette Lord and Lilydale & District Historical Society President Leigh Blackburn ca 1987 after the Wandin East Riding display received a Certificate of Merit from the Museum of the Year Award.

## **Push for Museum Foundation**

From the mid 1980s, Leigh had also spent several years trying to achieve a special tax deductible foundation which could receive gifts of money and objects for the Museum. His vision was for the foundation to provide funds to re-develop the Museum.

In April 1988 Leigh being President was on the Interim Board of Directors of Lillydale Gallery and Museum Foundation Committee.

Despite several knock backs, Leigh persevered and after the Council took over the Museum's Management, convinced the Shire to establish a Trust. After two years of tough negotiations with the Taxation Department, the Lillydale Museum Trust was finally approved and established – the first municipal-based Trust to be set up for a Museum.



*LDHS members celebrating the move back to the museum after completion of stage one in July 1996. Back row left to right ... Daisy Chapman, Gwenda Mutimer, Evelyn Tull, Ruby Kwijas and Sue Thompson. Front: Sandy Ross Moya Macfadzean, Liz Downes and Leigh Blackburn.*



## **He encouraged others**

Leigh actively encouraged others to become involved in the Society doing activities they felt able to perform be it designing new displays; research; tour guides, etc.

In 1990 he retired as Society President after nearly 20 years at the helm. In the same year he was made a Life Member of the Society, an honour not often given.

Despite his declining health, Leigh continued to be active in the Society as its Immediate Past President and served as a member of the Museum of Lilydale Board of Management.

His love of history, methodical method of research and devotion to the Society has set a very high standard that members still strive to copy.

In 1998 Leigh Blackburn received the Royal Historical Society of Victoria's Award of Merit from RHSV Vice President Dr Alan Gregory in recognition of his contribution in front of family and Historical Society friends.



*Leigh Blackburn receiving his Award of Merit from RHSV vice-president Dr Alan Gregory in 1998.*



*Leigh Blackburn and LDHS members after he received the RHSV Award of Merit in 1998.*

*Back row: Beth Taws, Hazel Ross, Jim Sawyer, Wanda McPherson, Guill de Pury, Daisy Chapman, Ruby Kwijas, Sue Thompson, Val Sheehan, Maree Phelan.  
Front: Bertha Sebire, Leigh Blackburn and Sandy Ross.*



*Leigh Blackburn surrounded by his family at the Award of Merit presentation in 1998.*

## **Leigh Blackburn (1920-1999)**

Leigh Blackburn passed away aged 79 in October 1999.

He and his wife Marjorie had 4 children, 2 of which died young.

He was an Engineering Estimator at Stokes Electrical, and in 1986 became its company historian.

Leigh was also a member of the Mahogany Ship Association off the Warrnambool coastline.

## **Publications**

Leigh wrote several publications including:

*Dame Nellie Melba Dates.*

*The Naming of Lilydale.*

*Chirnside Park of the very early days.*

*Swiss Vinegrowers of the Yarra Valley*

*Yarra Valley Aborigines*

*Early Pioneers and Settlers*

He also provided research for several publications:

*Lilydale The Billanook Country 1837 – 1972* by Marion Aveling.

*The Border Country Episodes and Recollections of Mooroolbark and Wonga Park* by G.F. James 1984

*Montrose Settlement in the Foothills A History* by Jennifer McLennan(1987).

## **Acknowledgements**

LDHS files

Sue Thompson files

*Lilydale Express*

*Herald Sun* Melbourne

*Now and Then* Newsletter