President's Report 2025-2026

Prepared for

St Kilda Historical Society AGM 2026

21 September 2026

My first year as President, since farewelling the Society's outgoing president Helen Halliday OAM at the last AGM, has been an intensely busy one.

I believe we not only carried forward the significant initiatives of our past president, but also improved our performance in a number of emerging areas, including interaction with members and supporters via social media and our website.

Longtime member Rohan Storey has become involved in updating and improving the items on our website, while new committee member Yaél Smit is working on reorganising the site and making it more intuitive for users.

And of course, Krystyna Kynst has continued to put in her outstanding work on our regular newsletter, which without doubt is the best in the metropolitan area. We thank her and all of our members who have regularly provided interesting, well-researched content for the newsletter.

Our thanks also go to Christine Perkal, for again overseeing the Society's financial reports as she has done for the past few years.

Our committee has been busy on a number of other fronts as well, including approving and welcoming many new members over the year, and organising our ongoing program of history talks and walks.

The program for the rest of this calendar year is already in place, and we are working on plans for further events in 2027.

This report lists the Society's activities over the past year.

MEMBERSHIP:

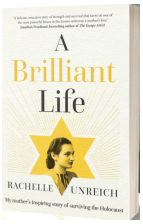
Total membership grew during the year from the 128 subscribed at the time of our 2025 AGM to the current number of 172 members.

EVENTS:

We offered 10 walks, talks and other activities during 2025-2026.

We began the financial year with a presentation by David Helms, entitled *Continental Living: the influence of European migration on flat building in St Kilda and Elwood*. David explored how Melbourne's housing shortage after World War I contributed to the growth of flat developments in St Kilda.

Other events included a talk by author Rachelle Unreich on her memoir, *A Brilliant Life,* the story of her mother's life after surviving the Holocaust, and we also made a visit to the Royal Melbourne Yacht Squadron for an afternoon exploring the history, significance and enduring appeal of St Kilda Pier.



David Brand took us on a walk along Fitzroy Street, exploring its architectural and cultural history and, Liz Kelly led us on a tour of the significant mansions around St Kilda's Botanical Gardens.

Some members took advantage of an offer from Earthcare St Kilda to join them on a penguin count one evening at the pier.

We reminisced with historian, Judith Buckridge, about the St Kilda of her childhood, and visited St Kilda's King of Swing, Denis Farrington's big band era with Paulie Stewart and Sally Moore.

And we also joined Emma Louise Pursey at 45 Downstairs in the city, for the opening of her play *Where is Joy*, about the controversial life of artist Joy Hester. The Society ran an event last financial year to help raise funds for the production, which turned out to be a delightful and engrossing one woman show.

The response from members and their guests to our events continues to be positive, and over time attendances have been growing. We have experimented with opening one event to the paying public, as a way of boosting the Society's finances; but small venues make that difficult to arrange.

We continue to hold most of our Monday night events at the St Kilda Army and Navy Club, where the professional and friendly support we receive has been unfailing.

As usual our events are too numerous to go into full details here, but all are recapped in our newsletters, published for members in April, August and December, and uploaded to the website for public access two months later.

NEWSLETTER:

Our first issue for 2025-2026 was published in August 2025, featuring Walls Brothers Photography, Robert Bell's Printing Press, and the intriguing story of adopted Aboriginal child, Lani Blair.

In December 2025, we looked at the 90-year history of the engineering firm of Galliers and Klaerr that had occupied much of the southern side of Inkerman Street between High Street and Chapel Street, and shared Peter Rogers' memories of his childhood with his grandparents in Elwood during the 1950s.

Our April 2026 issue uncovered the little known history of St Kilda's Chinese Fishermen who camped on West St Kilda's foreshore, and we reported on the great 1913 fire at Flatman's Timber Yard where a 50-foot-high wall of flame raged over two acres around Inkerman Street and was visible from the city of Melbourne.

Each issue included our regular Q&A section where Society's researcher, Liz Kelly, answered members/public's questions about St Kilda's past, and our regular events wrap featuring numerous snaps of our presenters and audience.

We sincerely thank our contributors, whose interest in local history and in the history of their families, makes such great newsletter reading. Thank you Liz Kelly, Ken Norling, Mary Bell, Peter Rogers for their stories, and thank you Isaac Hermann, Heather Arnold and Peter Johnson for their help researching the features of a 1900 St Kilda Foreshore painting.

And, of course, a big thank you to Brendan Moore for his diligent and creative newsletter layout.

RECONNECTING PLACE

Last year the Society worked with a team at Monash University to apply for a City of Port Phillip *Cultural Development Fund* grant to create an indigenous map for the St Kilda area. Work is now well underway on the project, known as Reconnecting Place, and members received an interim presentation on progress in June 2026.

The work is being carried out by Ali Soutar (*right*) and Dr Ana Lara Heyns (*centre*) , under the guidance of Professor N'arweet Carolyn Briggs, with Helen Halliday OAM (*left*) representing the Society.

It is due to be presented to the council later this year.

WEBSITE:

I initiated the work being done on improving the structure and content of the website last year. Since then, Rohan Storey and Yael Smit have taken the lead. Their knowledge and skills, and the time they have devoted to the task, will make the website easier to navigate and the information it contains more accurate and comprehensive.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

Another focus of my attention has been to reboot our presence on social media. A lot of work has gone into this, particularly on Facebook, and as

a result there has been substantial growth in our follower numbers, which have grown from about 1,600 at the beginning of last year, to more than 2,400 today.

Our Instagram audience is also growing, but only slowly, and we are putting plans in place to address this.

We have also attempted to regain access to our earlier Instagram accounts, but have not been successful so far.

PODCASTS:

Committee member Sally Moore, host of the Unplugged in St Kilda podcast, and musician and author Paulie Stewart, are developing a podcast about St Kilda's King of Swing, Denis Farrington, an impresario who managed and performed with more than 50 bands at weddings, birthdays and Bar Mitzvahs across Melbourne and Victoria.

Sally and Paulie plan to release their podcast later this year.

ENQUIRIES:

Since 2019, Liz Kelly has responded to almost 800 history-related email enquiries. Most years we average between 100 and 120 such emails, but they peaked in 2020 when the Society received 170 queries, mostly thanks to Covid lockdowns.

Liz recalls that these emails have led to some great discoveries, like the pioneer female aviator Florence Wurts who lived at 50 Chaucer Street; or 16-year-old Les Mecoles who invented his Penrite motor oil in 1926 in his Mum's kitchen at 36 Loch Street. Penrite Oil is an international motor sports leader throughout Australia, Europe, Asia and the US. And who knew there was a St Kilda Gift footrace in the 1930s?

Some requests tickle the funny bone - one enquiry revealed that in 1867 in Barkly Street, Henry Littlewood lived next door to Ellen Bigwood. A question with a difference asked for images of the early 1990s arguments between Premier Jeff Kennett and St Kilda Mayor Tim Costello. With sadness, Liz advised the enquirer, we had no fisticuff photos of the pair.

Seeking to flesh out St Kilda's industrial history, Liz was deep into a 3000-word essay on the Inkerman Street foundry of Galliers and Klaerr, when serendipitously we received an enquiry from a Rob Galliers in the UK, asking if we had information about his ancestor Henry Galliers. Only 3000 words! Thereafter Liz and Rob had lots of exchanges and he, and his cousin Sam, were wonderfully generous sharing stories about their ancestor. They donated many fabulous never-before-seen digital images of the old foundry and its workers, such an important legacy since the company engaged hundreds of St Kilda employees over its 90-year history.

When our members and website visitors ask us for information about their St Kilda house or ancestor, it is they who enrich the St Kilda story.

The Society hopes to encourage and empower more people to record their history, including contemporary stories.

COLLECTION

Work continued during the year to digitise the Society's historical records and upload them to Victorian Collections - the free archive and collections program that is managed by a partnership between the Australian Museum and Galleries Association - Victoria, and Museums Victoria. Images and information about 190 items, from military badges and medals to Mirka Mora's paint boxes, were added, bringing the total number of Society records on the system to 1,630.

Among the newly added items were 86 photographs of St Kilda in the 1980s, donated by David Rae, a former director of Backyard Press, which operated at that time out of Greville Street, Prahran. He discovered the photographs when Backyard Press moved to Collingwood in 1985. The photos appeared to have been left behind by the St Kilda Shout Collective, which used Backyard Press premises and equipment to produce a community newspaper 'SHOUT' from 1980-1991.

The information we have about the photographs has been gathered thanks to the help of former members of the Collective, who are now also Society members. Anyone with further details and insights about

these or any items in our collection is encouraged to contact us at info@stkildahistory.org.au.

Our digitised collection records can now be seen and searched by simply clicking on a link to Victorian Collections from the Society's website.

In conjunction with digitising the items in our collection, we have continued with the deaccession of items that other organisations are better able to preserve and make available to the public, or which are more relevant to their collections. During the year we passed on 20 items to the City of Port Phillip, the Glen Eira Historical Society and the St Arnaud & District Historical Society.

While the impetus for this work in 2025-2026 was the impending reallocation of space available to the Society within the St Kilda Library, we hope to keep up the pace in 2026-2027.

COMMUNITY:

Liaison with historical groups

Fascination with local history continues to be a vibrant passion for many in our community, as evidenced by the plethora of historical groups, locally and across the country. In fact, the Royal Historical Society of Victoria hosted a day conference this August, entitled, 'Nuts and Bolts' to assist volunteers from across the state to discuss emerging trends, shared challenges and the future of such societies.

In our South Metro region, representatives from 14 such groups meet four times a year, hosted by one of them in turn, to discuss and report on their varied and common experiences, programs and projects and share tips. Suburban history groups from Moorabbin to Port Melbourne and Oakleigh to St Kilda, as well as others such as the Prahran Mechanics' Institute (PMI), Scouts Victoria and Friends of St Kilda Cemetery are represented and canvas planned talks, walks, exhibitions and organisational issues, including collection criteria, storage and cataloguing plans. Committee member Margaret Pagone represented the Society at these meetings.

Several examples of news and inter-group co-operation this year are: Brighton Society loaning costumes, including a 19th century wedding dress, to an exhibition at the Old Treasury building; Port Melbourne having displays of memorabilia at the Emerald Hill Heritage Centre; Scouts Victoria having a museum in Bentleigh East and often hosting group visits, as well as assisting many scout groups to preserve records and memorabilia; and challenges, due to lack of volunteers, leading to the imminent folding of the Moorabbin Society, which will be closing Box cottage at the end of this year and needing to rehouse their collection.

Many historical groups in our surrounding areas welcome visitors to most of their talks and exhibitions and advertise these on their websites, for those interested.

Communication with the City of Port Phillip:

Phillip Stewart continued in his role as the Society's representative on the City of Port Phillip Cultural Heritage Reference Committee, which meets to discuss various heritage matters.

Phillip has been Vice President over the past years and has worked with other members towards building the committee to its current success and strength. He would like to record the fact that the Society is, like all such organisations, constantly evolving and changing, but we are currently in a strong position to move confidently into the future.

LIBRARY RELOCATION:

At the last AGM we reported that the Society's arrangements at the St Kilda Library were being changed. We were to lose access to our meeting room, while gaining access to a shared Staff Meeting Room.

Our small office was to be retained.

These changes were to be made at the request of the library.

They have now changed their mind, and we retain the status quo, under a new licence. Undoubtedly this will change at some time in the future, and we will keep you informed.

We are continuing our discussions with library management on how the Society can expand its public presence at the library.

COMMITTEE:

Once again, the committee has worked tirelessly over the past 12 months to ensure the Society continues to function for the good of our members and the people of St Kilda, Balaclava, and Elwood.

We are continuing to monitor and have input into discussions about areas of interest in the community, including the Chapel Street military drill hall, and the Cosmopolitan redevelopment proposals.

I would like to thank ***Lindy Smith*** whose job as secretary, in addition to organising events and the digitisation of the collection, has kept her busy; ***Liz Kelly*** for all her work, particularly as treasurer and also researching and responding to requests for information, writing articles for the newsletter and presenting walks; ***Phillip Stewart*** as Vice President for all the historical knowledge he contributes; ***David Brand*** who brings considerable knowledge of the workings of council along with his expertise as an architect and historian; ***Margaret Pagone*** for her liaison with the other historical societies in the area and her hours of work in our small office sorting through our collection; ***Sally Moore*** for the work she has been doing on the entertainment history of St Kilda, particularly her project with Paulie Stewart on St Kilda's dance band director Denis Farrington; and ***Yael Smit,*** the newest member of the committee, who has been working on getting our website and social media into order.

We are bidding farewell from the committee to Liz Kelly, who has decided to step down so she can concentrate on the many other ways she contributes to the Society. Thank you, Liz, for everything you do.

And thank you to all our members, who continue to support the Society, for everything you contribute.

Alan Baskin

President