

# *GUIDE TO MANAGING HISTORICAL SOCIETIES*

## **Involving People**

### **Community engagement**

Historical societies collect, interpret and present the history of a community. They serve as the custodians of community history. The collecting policy may direct collecting towards particular elements of a community's history but essentially most societies exist to make the collections and research associated with them accessible to the community. Even those societies without collections aim to engage their community through programs.

An historical society's viability depends on its capacity to build community engagement. Effective community engagement impacts on all elements of an historical societies' role – from the obvious measurables such as increased attendance, to being able to demonstrate increased engagement to support grant applications, to building good community links to widen the pool to attract volunteers and members.

Community engagement means building links with other groups within your community. It requires developing shared programs, or tailoring programs that match the community interests. It requires talking to other groups to find out what their plans are and how the historical society might work in with these groups. It requires a commitment to opening up the society to the wider community. It requires building partnerships.

This section looks at some examples of programs, given the generic name of public programs, and the resources you might use, that both reach out to the community and bring wider community understanding of the history held within your collections.

### **Interpretation**

Interpretation is a common word within museums and it is used to mean how you present your topic to the public. The objects, themes, elements of the history you choose to present to the audience to create an exhibition, publication or event and what you say about them. For an historical society with a collection, an exhibition is one of the main ways to present the collection. The society interprets a topic through its selection of material, the information on the labels and importantly how it is displayed.

A template for preparing an interpretation plan is available from the Museums Australia (Victoria website - <http://www.mavic.asn.au/resources>).

The book by Sue Hodges (2006), *Hands on history: the essential guide to researching, recording and creating historical products* provides useful examples of how to undertake a variety of projects for interpreting history including interpreting historic places, writing history, using objects, oral history, displays and exhibitions, heritage trails / walks and brochures and websites.

## **Storytelling**

Storytelling is a method of interpretation. It is a way of presenting history as told in the first person. Storytelling is non analytical and must undergo the same scrutiny as any other evidence.

An example of storytelling is provided by Joy Suliman in the paper, ‘Significance and the online environment’ – <http://tinyurl.com/2bmmfew>.

## **Exhibitions**

There are excellent guides to assist societies to develop exhibitions. Topics covered include developing themes, project planning, writing exhibition labels and design. These highly recommended resources provide guidelines in developing exhibition policies, project plans and audience evaluation.

*Museum Methods* has sections available on line at – [www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector\\_info\\_item/11](http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector_info_item/11).

*Exhibitions: a practical guide for small museums and galleries* by Georgia Rouette was published by Museums Australia (Victoria) and is available from the Museums Australia website - [www.museumsaustralia.org.au/site/publications\\_bookstore.php](http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/site/publications_bookstore.php). *Exhibition Design for Galleries and Museums: an insider’s view* is a new publication from Museums Australia available September 2010.

*Recollections: Caring for collections across Australia* [www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector\\_info\\_item/3](http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector_info_item/3) includes information about displaying items throughout the sections but particularly in chapter 6 – ‘Handling, transportation, storage and display’ – which includes information on preparing stands for objects on display.

The section of this guide *Exhibitions on a shoestring* – [www.historyvictoria.org.au/pdf/people6.pdf](http://www.historyvictoria.org.au/pdf/people6.pdf) – provides additional guidelines for exhibitions.

Ideas for exhibitions might come from the collections and expert research knowledge, but a good idea is to look at special events, anniversaries, national events to see if an exhibition can be developed around these themes. Often funding such as planning for the Commonwealth Games or the Centenary of Women’s Suffrage or a Regional Art Deco Festival comes with grant opportunities.

## **Showcases**

Finding display furniture such as exhibition boards and showcases is one of the biggest problems for historical societies. Expense, storage, and often the sheer bulk of display furniture can create problems for volunteers and visitors.

There’s no simple solution but listed below are a few sources of display furniture in Melbourne:

- Click Systems - [www.clicksystems.com.au](http://www.clicksystems.com.au)
- Shop for Shops - [www.shopforshops.com](http://www.shopforshops.com)
- Ex- government Furniture at Abbotsford may have items
- Office Works can supply Perspex exhibition display stands

Museums, libraries and historical societies will often post display furniture they no longer need in forums including the *History Victoria Support Group mc<sup>2</sup>* forum.

### **Writing Labels**

In an exhibition the amount of text, the way the language is used and the way the label is presented are all part of the interpretation.

The fundamental principal in writing exhibition labels is that visitors move through exhibitions. Exhibition labels should not be “books on the wall” but should be written knowing that some visitors will walk by and some visitors will have a deeper interest.

Writing exhibition labels takes practise. The language should be clear and sentences short.

A common rule of thumb is to think of exhibition text as a newspaper article and arrange your information in a hierarchy. The main points, the overall messages should be in the first paragraph so that the visitor can get a quick idea and move on. For those more interested the information can be developed in subsequent paragraphs.

Never underestimate the level of interest visitors may show in your collections or the breadth of knowledge they bring to the exhibition. If you have more extensive research which you think visitors would be interested in, develop folders of information and have chairs in the exhibition area so that visitors can sit down to read.

### **Publications**

An important role of historical societies is the researching, writing and publishing of local history.

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies has produced an outstanding guide on publishing – Helen Doyle and Katya Johanson *Publishing history a guide for historical societies* Federation of Australian Historical Societies Inc 2006.

The book can be purchased from the FAHS or downloaded from the FAHS website - [www.history.org.au/Publications.html](http://www.history.org.au/Publications.html). The book is packed with advice on producing both printed and electronic publications. It covers topics including the structure and elements of a history book, use of illustrations, editing and design, planning and finance.

Other resources to help with publications include history writing workshops run by the Victorian Writers Centre – <http://vwc.org.au/writing> and the Professional Historians Association – [www.phavic.org.au](http://www.phavic.org.au). The regular *Making Public History* seminars at the State Library of Victoria are run for those interested in exploring issues and approaches to making public histories – Further information at <http://arts.monash.edu.au/public-history-institute/seminar-series/>.

Funding for publications whilst in the manuscript phase, that is funding to produce the book, can be sought by regional groups from the *Holsworth Trust* with grants up to \$1,500 provided.

The *Local History Grants* managed by the Public Record Office similarly support publishing activities.

The Community History Awards, managed by *Information Victoria* recognizes achievements in local history publishing.

Further information is also available from the RHSV.

The RHSV runs a reading service for manuscripts to be read and peer reviewed prior to publication.

Authors are encouraged to submit articles for the RHSV's *Victorian Historical Journal* for which articles are also peer reviewed.

Ann Curthoys & Ann McGrath *How to write history that people want to read* 2009 is a recent publication on writing history.

### **Working with Schools**

Often teachers find working with historical societies difficult. Collections can be inaccessible during school hours and because of the volunteer workforce historical societies can be slow to respond to busy history teachers' needs.

A successful link between school and historical society can be developed when the historical society develops curriculum focused programs.

Information about VELS: Victorian Education Learning Standards from prep to Year 10 can be located at <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/>.

VCE History has a unit called *Applied History in the Community*. Details of this unit can be found in [www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/studies/history/history-sd.pdf](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/studies/history/history-sd.pdf) (page 12). The History Council of Victoria developed packs to assist historical societies to work with schools to resource this unit. [www.historycouncilvic.org.au](http://www.historycouncilvic.org.au).

Regional Arts Victoria has developed excellent tips on preparing for school visits in *Creative volunteering: work with collections* (page 37) section 5 Tips and Activities – writing educational materials – <http://tinyurl.com/282j2z3>.

The Oral History Association of Australia has developed a DVD, *Capturing the Past* – an oral history workshop for use in high schools. The order form is available at [www.ohaa.net/au/publications.php](http://www.ohaa.net/au/publications.php).

Consult with teachers and build links with schools. Let schools know well in advance of your plans.

### **Heritage Trails/ Guided Walks/ Walking Brochures**

Developing heritage trails and guided walks are a form of community engagement. In developing the content for these tours the historical society is interpreting local history and making it accessible to the local community. It is also a form of promoting the society within the community

An excellent resource in developing a heritage trail *Guidelines for Heritage Trails* can be found at [www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/info\\_heritage\\_trails.pdf](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/info_heritage_trails.pdf) .

Developing a guided walk requires much the same planning as a heritage trail, taking into account distance, time, site lines etc but a critical planning constraint is noise, size of group and most importantly the person who leads the group. Often it is not so much what is said but the way the information is presented that can define the success of the walk.

The History Victoria Support Group can assist in developing brochures.

Skills development and advice in developing trails and walks can be found by contacting the Professional Tour Guides Association at [www.tourguides.com.au](http://www.tourguides.com.au).

### **Cultural Tourism**

Cultural Tourism in Australia is the balance between the promotion of culture in an area and the economic benefits that visitors can bring. Historical societies as the custodians and interpreters of local history and identity can play a critical role in the success of cultural tourism within a region.

The Federation of Historical Societies has produced a fantastic guide available online for historical societies to benefit from opportunities presented by cultural tourism. Dianne Snowden has written *Heritage Tourism in Australia. A guide for historical societies* FAHS (2008) – [www.history.org.au/Heritage%20tourism.html](http://www.history.org.au/Heritage%20tourism.html). The guide is practical, full of ideas on how to present a ‘cultural tourism product’ with links to other source material as well as advice such as working with local councils and tourism authorities.

The *Heritage Tourism* website – [www.heritagetourism.com.au](http://www.heritagetourism.com.au) – contains articles about cultural heritage.