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Local groups share in historical grants

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From high security to high rise

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I once described the place as made up of “dungeons of brutality and degradation”. An exaggeration? Not from my experience of visiting that place from 1976 through to 1992, four years before it finally closed in 1996. Right throughout that time it was infamous for “the reception biff”, handed out to every inmate received into the division from other parts of the prison system. Upon being frogmarched down the ramp to H-Division, each inmate was stripped naked for a security search. Surrounded by several prison guards armed with batons, he was beaten repeatedly until he fell to the ground. “You’re in H-Division now, the rules outside don’t apply here. Now you know who is in charge,” the representa-
tives of Her Majesty’s Prison Service would say.

If the inmate responded with verbal or physical defence he would be kicked repeatedly until he looked like a broken man. But what was going on inside? Often, we did not find out until he was released back onto the streets of Melbourne.

My predecessor as chaplain at Pentridge, John Brosnan, often said that the regime there “turned bike thieves into murderers”. That regime there “turned bike thieves into murderers”. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. That regime there turned bike thieves into murderers. 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‘A society which selectively removes those dark elements of its cultural heritage is often doomed to repeat them.’

Peter Norden
of Melbourne together in the early 1970s. He fell into drugs and armed robberies and was known as the "Gentleman Bandit" for his manners and toy pistol.

He was sentenced to 19 years' imprisonment, but after two years he escaped over the front wall of Pentridge in broad daylight. He was 10 years on the run, eight of which were spent in Bombay (now Mumbai), where it was alleged he worked as a street soldier for the Bombay mafia. He was recaptured in Germany in 1991, extradited to Australia and spent two years in solitary confinement in H-Division.

He was released in 1997 and wrote the international best-selling memoir Shantaram. I visited Greg regularly during 1991, always in his H-Division cell, since the authorities were determined he would never escape again.

In one of the very cells Shayher hoped to demolish, Roberts wrote the 900 pages of his novel on toilet paper, since he had no other writing material. The first two copies were found and destroyed, the third one made it to the light of day.

Ronald Ryan, the last man hanged in Australia, spent his last night alive in H-Division before his execution in 1967. It was where he planned his escape within a few days of the execution, but Ryan decided that he didn't want to put the lives of others at risk in order for him to obtain freedom from the gallows. He died a proud man, with real dignity.

I was privileged to facilitate the exhumation of his remains and their return to his three daughters in recent years. He is now finally at rest, his cremated remains next to his wife, Dorothy, in a cemetery in Portland.

I spent many hours in the laundry yard of H-Division with Mark "Chopper" Read, who worked there in the latter years of his final prison sentence. He took the opportunity of a regular chat to catch up on the gossip from around the prison.

In those years he became very philosophical about life, reading widely on a broad range of topics. For example, on one occasion he displayed his knowledge of the Jesuit Order, his admiration for its community building work with the indigenous people in South America and opposition to the slave trade back to France and Portugal. If only he had received a proper education in his early years, perhaps a scholarship to the Jesuit-run Xavier College, his life journey might have been very different. Proper mental health intervention certainly would have helped during his adolescent years, instead of the electro-convulsive therapy he received at that time.

Another character whom I got to know very well was Jimmy Loughnan, a member of Chopper Read's "overcoat gang" in H-Division in earlier years. He too had been a mental health patient as a teenager, at a time when there was little specialised treatment for adolescents.

One one occasion, Loughnan and Read escaped from H-Division, remaining on the roof for several hours as a public protest.

On another occasion, in order to prevent Chopper from carrying out a major siege in the division, Jimmy stabbed him several times, then proceeded to give him a cuddle and a kiss on the cheek before he was taken off to hospital.

Loughnan was a Richmond boy, in the days when Richmond was known as Struggletown, a working-class suburb and a tough neighbourhood. There is a Loughnan Street in Richmond named after his grandfather, who had been the mayor.

During my years as prison chaplain I lived at St Ignatius on Richmond Hill, so we had a natural affinity. In 1977, Loughnan successfully escaped from Pentridge at night but damaged his ankles as he fell from the wall, landing in the grounds of St Paul's Catholic Church next door. He told the priest, Father Sean O'Connell, that he had fallen over and asked for a lift to Richmond. O'Connell obliged and was later convicted for assisting an escapee, but the conviction was later quashed on appeal.

I conducted Loughnan's funeral after he died in the Jika Jika fire in 1987, along with four others, protesting about the conditions that then attorney-general Jim Kennan called "an electronic zoo", designed as it was
Clockwise from top left: the old Pentridge prison, William O'Meally, Mark “Chopper” Read’s back, the H Division gate, one of H Division’s most notorious inmates Chopper Read, Ronald Ryan (centre). Far left, Former Pentridge chaplin Peter Norden, outside the prison’s main entrance. Photos: Joe Armao, Jack Atley, Justin McManus
Local groups share in historical grants

BY JAMES TAYLOR

THE Torquay and District Historical Society and volunteers at Barwon Park are among the 63 Victorian community groups shining a light on Victoria’s history with support from the latest round of the state government’s Local History Grants Program.

The society will put its $6,408 share of the nearly $350,000 worth of grants towards its Virtual Collection project.

The National Trust of Australia (Vic) has been granted $9,430 to create an innovative multimedia project to bring the stories of Barwon Park’s wine cellars to life through sound and narrative recordings.

The grants are supporting a range of projects aimed at documenting Victoria’s history, including book publishing, recording oral histories, digitising collections, the creation of websites and apps, microfilming, training and education, heritage trails, exhibitions, catalogues and historical collection preservation.

Other supported projects include the creation of an e-book to record the history of community activism to save St Kilda’s iconic Espy Hotel; the reinstating of a collection of historic memorabilia from the Marysville Cricket Club which was lost during the 2009 bushfires; and an historical trail through Woodvale which will educate visitors about its fascinating past.

Announcing the grants last week, Minister for the Arts Heidi Victoria said the funding would support projects that worked to preserve and record the state’s history, while sharing it with the community and future generations.

“The Local History Grants Program provides access to stories that may have otherwise remained untold.

“The funded projects rely heavily on the extraordinary work of avid community historians, devoted to collecting and recording the stories of our past.

“These fascinating projects will provide us with an understanding of our past, our place and our people.”

The Local History Grants Program is managed by Public Record Office Victoria.
CALLING all trades people, builders, architects, community groups and owners to consider your recent projects and nominate for the 2014 Mount Alexander Heritage Awards.

The closing date for nominations has been extended to Friday 13 June. Each eligible nomination will receive a voucher from Tonks Hardware.

The Awards aim to celebrate those in our community who conserve and restore our heritage buildings, gardens, historic collections and other places.

The Award categories include heritage trade skills, sustainability, re-use of heritage places, new architectural work, restoration of heritage places and preservation of collections.

The awards are celebrated at a presentation evening at the Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum on Thursday 28 August 2014.

For more information or to obtain an application form, visit the Heritage section of Council’s website. If you need assistance with filling out the forms please contact Sera-Jane Peters, Heritage Officer at Council on 5471 1827 on Monday – Wednesday. Forms can be dropped at the Civic Centre in Lyttleton Street or emailed to s.peters@mountalexander.vic.gov.au.