



# “WHAT’S OLD”

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## FROM THE EDITOR

As we wrote the last edition the Coronavirus was just beginning to affect us, now we know how big an impact it made across the world we are very grateful to live in this wonderful country. This time will go down in history and on that note it would be great to get some perspective on how locals were affected by it for future history.

I was honoured to receive from the National RSL an ANZAC of the year award, in recognition for my efforts in having our local soldiers recognised and other community work. Accepting this award was not possible without the whole team who worked on our war memorial and all the other projects that have been undertaken but more so I see it as recognition for all of those soldiers who were never recognised locally for their service, so I dedicate the award to them.

It was disappointing to have to cancel the Back to Wandong Luncheon, hopefully we can reschedule this event as it's a great day enjoyed by many. Also our first open day was cancelled but we will reschedule that as well. We are still full steam ahead planning for our History Week event in October and are extremely grateful for sponsorship from the Bendigo Bank, the major sponsors for an amazing artwork to be unveiled at the event along with ARTC and the event itself is being sponsored by the Victorian Government and Victorian Veterans and we thank all the sponsors for helping us to bring this event commemorating our local WW2 soldiers to you.

In this issue we have featured Alexander Clarke Mackay. He was the Comet Mill Manager for a time and led a remarkable life. Through the hard work of member Lynne we have spoken to Alexanders grandson Jon and shared photos and information. I hope you will enjoy the article.

Stay safe.

Editor: Karen Christensen

## RHYMES OF THE BUSH

### When the Sawmill Starts Again.

And so the old mill in the ranges into new hands shortly changes,  
With another “push” to work there, is all the latest talk.  
Well, I'd like to hear them cheering when open valve and gearing,  
And the steam flies down the tram-line where the pullers used to walk,  
But it's little use of wishing, though I might fancy in a vision.  
That I saw them all together, all the old time sawmill men;  
Tho they're scattered in disorder from the sea unto the border,  
And they can't be got together by the time she starts again.  
There was Jones our noted faller, he and Jack the timber hauler,  
They are shooting down the brumbies on a run up Queensland way,  
And Boyd the “Tussock” hardy, on the alluvial flats does fossick:  
While Wilson's splitting palings on the western spur today.  
Then after he departed with the first of those who started  
To go shearing down the Murray, as his station ticket showed.  
And Mitchell's son on the Comet, he has never yet gone from it,  
While Long's trapping rabbits up along the mountain road.  
Then there's Smith, he's line repairing, and Joe is sleeper squaring  
In the box and red-gum forests down the Goulburn way,  
I don't know where “Boston” cleared to, or where Davis disappeared to,  
But Tait is boundary riding somewhere on the Castlereagh.  
Aye, the old ranks they have sunder'd, and the songs and yarns that thunder'd  
And fairly shook the rafters of the mill huts that were then,  
Made the mill life bright and pleasant, and I wish that they were present-  
They'd shake things up I fancy, when they start the mill again.  
And the times we had together, hunting thro' ferns and heather  
Where the wombat made his burrow, and the dingo had his lair,  
And we found the wild cats hiding, where the mountain creek was gliding  
Thro the tangled scrub and bushes, and we used to chase them there.  
And when the twilight hour was flitting, in the log yard to be sitting  
When the voices of the forest sounded melancholy strange,  
And to see the bright stars twinkle, and to hear the distant tinkle,  
Of the bells on working bullocks, grazing up along the range.  
But those pleasant days have vanished, since the sawmill hands got banished,  
For the hard times struck the super, and he shut the old mill down.  
But we hung out wishing, hoping that sometime twould surely open.  
And we'd hear the whistle blowing and would keep up from the town.  
But it showed no sign of starting, and I saw them all departing  
One by one, to go and swag it, and they've not returned since then.  
But they've written to me often, just to let me know they're grafting,  
So tonight I'll write and tell them, that the old mill starts again.  
And I fancy as I listen, I hear the hot steam hissing  
Thro the valves and out the escape pipe, and go echoing down the creek,  
And when the valve is opened fully, then the belting wheels and pulley  
With the circular, starts revolving with a hard and rasping shriek:  
And the bullock whips loud cracking, as the hauling teams come tracking  
With the logs upon the bogies from the landing on the hill:  
When the fallers axe is ringing, and the crosscut saw is singing  
A song in opposition to the circular at the mill. -Eden

Broadford and Reedy Creek Times December, 3rd 1897

## ALEXANDER CLARKE MACKAY

Alexander Clarke Mackay was the manager of the Comet Mill for some time. An astute man with great knowledge of the timber industry he was key in the success of operations at Mt Disappointment. The History Group through the efforts of member Lynne Dore have recently been in contact with Mackay's great grandson and have received photos from him that have helped us identify Mackay in some of the photos we hold. He also provided some background information on Mackay's life which we will share as this editions feature article.

Mackay was born in 1857 in Golspie, a fishing village on the North East coast of Scotland, his father Donald Alexander Mackay was the local doctor who unfortunately drowned in the local river. Alexanders mother was Mary Brisbane, sister to Sir Thomas MacDougall Brisbane, Governor of NSW (1821-25).

At the tender age of ten years old Alexander left home via sea, after several years of travel, he landed in Melbourne in 1880, by this time he was 23 years old. Where his travels took him in the intervening years are not known but it would appear the family connection to Australia may have brought him here.

His uncle William Brisbane secured him a job in Melbourne, but after a sea faring life the dreary desk job had little attraction. So began his career in the timber business. In 1887 he married the daughter of a Longwarry Sawmiller. Annie was only 16 at the time of their marriage, the union produced five children. After the death of Annie's father, Mackay took over the sawmill business. He was reportedly an energetic and capable man, and by the turn of the century he was managing the Comet Mill. Mackay wrote to the education department asking for a school to be provided at the Comet site, the impassable road and difficult trip to Wandong meant getting the children of the Comet workers to school was impossible, and having constructed a suitable building for the task, a teacher was provided.

After the disastrous fire that decimated the Comet Mill, Mackay moved on and became Managing Director of the Apollo Bay Timber Company. He became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, England in 1905 and made many contributions to the society during his time in Australia and overseas. In 1907 he moved his family to Coffs Harbour taking up the position of General Manager of the British Australian Timber Company. Compared to the Victorian operations the mills were primitive in their design and function, he played a key role in the development of the companies tramways and sawmills both in Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga.

Mackay was critical of the NSW government's forestry policy which he described as inefficient and wasteful. He was an accomplished writer and promoted his vision of sustainable forestry practice in newspapers articles and letters to government ministers.

The passage of the 1909 Forestry act gave Mackay the opportunity to put his ideas into practice , and after severing his connection with the British Australia Timber Co in 1910 he formed the Mackay Syndicate obtaining exclusive right No 3 over forest lands he had surveyed.



Alexander Mackay

His most ambitious scheme involved Exclusive Right No 1, he advised the Bonville syndicate which forest to apply for, the most efficient methods to work them, and where to site saw mills, logging tramways and outlet tramways. His plans centred on two sawmills deep in the forest with tramways taking timber via a private siding to the North Coast Railway. Timber was then transferred to the government railway and after an eight mile journey arrived at the Coffs Harbour Jetty and loaded on coastal steamers. He was appointed manager of the newly formed CHTC Co, in 1912 overseeing the construction of sawmills and timber tramways. Resigning from this position in 1916 he then took up a position with Norton Griffiths and Co as Supervising Engineer. In 1917 the company's contract was cancelled and Mackay's services suffered a similar fate.

By this time Mackay was recognized as an expert on Australian timbers and became a Director of Forests in NSW and Queensland. He did several surveys on behalf of the Australian British Timber Co, in Borneo, New Caledonia, Sumatra and New Guinea setting up several sawmills. He was asked to go to Manchuria and report on large forest concessions. Manchuria was dominated by China, until the Qing court, in 1896 granted Russia the right to build a railway from Dalian, a port at the head of the Yellow Sea, though Harbin to Vladivostok. By 1898 the city had become a Russian concession, with its own police force, as the Tsar continued to enforce his colonial plans for Manchuria, plans that were strengthened by the completion of the rail link in 1904.



Mackay Row - Comet Mill

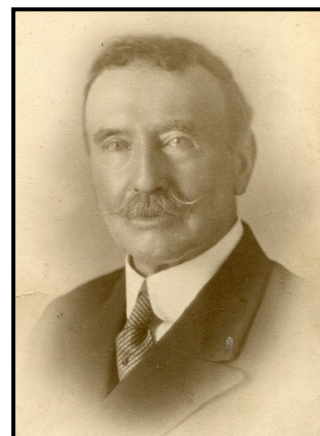
It was during this time in Manchuria that MacKay's life took an unexpected turn. He put together an expeditionary force of 70 men, most were armed soldiers as the area was frequented by bandits. Bandits extorted money from farmers who worked the timber concessions in the winter for the timber companies. The more money a farmer or timber worker made, the better for the bandits, as a result the bandits were in part friendly to Alexander and anyone seeking timber concessions.

He made several expeditions but on his last trip things did not go as planned. He had obtained a visa to enter the area but it was stamped with the message, "The holder of this visa should temporarily avoid travelling in districts disturbed by bandits".

His party was raided one night and marched in to the mountains, a ransom note demanded \$60,000 and warned "if not paid they will be shot". He was shot in the leg at some point during his 6 week incarceration and had his arm broken. He wrote asking to be saved but suggested the authorities not send troops as he feared they would be killed. The troops were sent in and the bandits carried out their promise, his three colleagues were shot and killed, in the darkness a bullet aimed at Alexander just grazed his head and he survived. He was later able to identify one of the bandits, two were later captured and beheaded.

Alexander's last job was as a copra plantation manager in New Guinea.

Alexander Clarke Mackay died in 1940 after a remarkable life of work and adventure.





**Unveiling the plaque on the Community Centre building.**

Thanks to Brian and Bobby Smith for sharing their photos.

## HISTORY MATTERS

In this column we will try to keep abreast of the things that affect our town and its historical links.

The Wandong History Group's charter is to protect and preserve the history of our area. As we are within the Mitchell Shire, we need to be informed of happenings within the shire that may affect us.

We are still attempting to get funding to have the old internment camp hut moved, unfortunately one of our applications has been rejected. We are still waiting on the outcome of another application, given this will be our fourth attempt I am not hopeful of winning a grant. I think this project is too far removed from those usually funded so we may have to look to other ways to fund the project.

It was sad not to have our usual ANZAC service this year and I comment those who did the dawn driveway service, something that was quite moving in its own right and something that we can perhaps expand on in future.

The Catholic church have given permission for us to apply again for a Living Heritage grant to restore St Michaels Church. The grant cut off date has been extended to allow those having trouble getting grant applications up because of "The Virus" by the time this issue is out our application will be in being assessed. So everything crossed for this one as it may be our last chance to apply for the grant.

## HISTORY MONTH EXHIBITION

**WANDONG and WW11  
23-25th October 2020**

Confirmation to come as the Covid-19  
situation develops

## BOOK SALES

There Was a Soldier that Wandered Far Away

Karen Christensen

(A history of Wandong at War) \$20

From Lightwood Flat to the Forest—Lynne Dore

(A history of our schools) \$20

## WANDONG IN PICTURES

Book (1-5) \$7 each or \$25 the set.

Wandong War Memorial

Wandong Seasoning Works

Wandong in Business,

Wandong Timber Mills and Tramlines

Wandong Buildings

**All books available at the Wandong Newsagent  
Or contact the History Group.**

## Donations

The Wandong History Group accepts donations of Wandong — Heathcote Junction — Clonbinane related historical artefacts. All items will be kept and displayed sharing our past and preserving it for the future generations.

## VALE — Jack Harper

It is with deep sadness that we note the passing of Jack Harper. Jack was famous for being born on the night the pub burnt down, May 23rd 1933. Jack and his wife Elsie were regulars at the Back to Wandong Luncheon and will sadly missed at future gatherings. Our thoughts are with Elsie and the extended family.

## 2019/2020 COMMITTEE

*President: Karen Christensen*

*Vice President: David Moran*

*Secretary: Di Vidal*

*Treasurer: Sandra Moran*

*Newsletter: Karen Christensen & Di Vidal*

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