

Military History



Cranbourne and its War History

By Claire Turner, Casey Cardinia Library Corporation

The carnage of the First World War shocked and disturbed the newly federated Australian nation. The feelings of sadness and loss permeated communities and Cranbourne was no exception.

The communities of the home front formed their own organisations for supporting families and soldiers through the War period. Cranbourne had a Patriotic Association, which involved many local people. They held weekly dances in the Shire Hall to raise money for parcels and supplies and, towards the end of the War, for welcome home events and monuments. Miss Nurse, whose family had run the Mornington Hotel, was the tireless secretary and Mr. Kirkham was the President of the Patriotic Association. In October 1919, they hosted an enormous celebration to welcome home the soldiers and women who had gone to War. The event endeavoured to 'give the boys a real good time'. The returned people included W. Bethune, Harold Brunt, Ed. Nurse, Chas Greaves, Ed and Les Savage, and Fred Peterson. There were also Sisters N and E Lehman who had served as nurses. A Cranbourne branch of the Red Cross was established and was extremely active during both the First and the Second World Wars.



There is a rich legacy in Cranbourne to remind us daily of the hardships and sacrifices that were made by ordinary people in a small country town. Whether they endured for the sake of what they felt was 'the mother country' or to defend their young nation, the importance of war and an all too clear understanding of what it meant, is embodied in the visual monuments, both living and stone and in the success of the Cranbourne RSL.

Cranbourne Men Who Served in the First World War

By Claire Turner, Casey Cardinia Library Corporation

The following information is about some of the men who died in the First World War who were from Cranbourne. The Australian War Memorial has a central database of names that includes details such as where they enlisted, when they died and their parents' names. Many families had a number of sons who had enlisted together. There are also the names of men who enlisted in Cranbourne, but were from Melbourne or even overseas. It is possible that they were working in the Cranbourne district on farms and were attracted to the enlistment camps along with the local men.

Peter Innes was killed at Gallipoli on the 6th of August 1915 during the eight month long campaign that saw around 7,500 ANZACs killed. He was 33 years old and was from Whifflet in Scotland, but had enlisted in Cranbourne. Similarly, Private William Allars was in the 39th Battalion of the Australian Infantry. He was only 21 when he died on the 2nd of May 1917 and although he was from St. Kilda, he had also enlisted in Cranbourne.

These men are of course remembered through the oak trees that form part of the Avenue of Honour at the entrance to Cranbourne near the racecourse. The trees were planted in 1919 and were a central focus for the community's 'Back To' that was held in 1927. The Cranbourne Primary School was a familiar place to all the men and this is likely to have been the main reason for locating the Avenue near the school building. Wreaths were laid by Cranbourne Primary School staff who had taught the boys who served. The school building stood for nearly 100 years where the Senior Citizens building stands today.

For further information, see www.awm.gov.au

Herbert Arthur Anderson

Herbert was a driver who was responsible for herding the horses and donkeys that were used at the front in the 13th Brigade of the Australian Field Artillery. He died on the 2nd of September 1917 at the age of 24 and is buried in Belgium. His parents were Reinhert and Rose and lived in Cranbourne.

Rupert Charles Bethune

Rupert was a Lance Corporal in the 59th Battalion and was killed in action on the 19th of July 1916. He is buried in France along with around 3, 000 other Australian soldiers who were killed in one night in the disastrous battle of Fromelles on the Western Front in France. He was 27 years old and his mother was Annie Margaret Meade of Tongola, Lyndhurst. Such heavy losses in only a few hours mark Fromelles as one of this War's most dreadful battles and the greatest loss of Australian troops. Gallipoli has reached legendary status as a tragic mistake where around 7,500 Australian troops were killed over an eight month campaign, but Fromelles is beginning to be recognized as a catastrophic military disaster for the Allied forces. It was feared that carnage of this magnitude might impair the fighting morale of other troops and damage the reputation of the British military leaders and so there was a cover up. Unlike the very public disaster of Gallipoli, Fromelles, a comparatively short disaster, was passed over and blended into military history with the overall brutality and futility of trench warfare on the Western Front.

British corps commander Sir Richard Haking was responsible for the campaign at Fromelles. Pompey Elliott was the Australian commander of the 15th Brigade that included the 58th, 59th and 60th Battalions. He was a veteran of Gallipoli, highly respected by his men and was horrified to be ordered to send them into the German stronghold. He later committed suicide, unable to cope with the guilt impressed by the impossible situation into which he

had been placed. The 60th Battalion was almost totally wiped out and the 59th, to which Rupert belonged, nearly suffered the same fate. Next morning, the front line was described as looking like a butcher shop.

Thomas Clair Whiteside from Officer was a fellow soldier with Rupert in the 59th Battalion. His letters from the war, sent home to his mother, father and sister, have been published by his daughter in the volume 'A Valley in France'. Tom was wounded in the head during Fromelles, a life altering experience that he could never forget. The 21 year old, like his companions, was fresh from training in Egypt when he was sent into this terrifying battle. He wrote about the experience from his hospital bed on the 28th of July, just over one week afterwards and when he was still on the danger list:

The first lines fare the best – for the terrible machine gun is deadly once he sees the game is properly on. It looked like putting up cardboard nine– pins in a hurricane - only it was human beings who were facing up to it.

Often wonder what happened to many a chap I passed lying helpless in the grass. For my part I was strong and had all my wits about me and it was only through acting on every inspiration that, with God's help, I got out of it.

James Daws

James lived with his parents Abraham and Mary in Codrington Street, Cranbourne and he enlisted in Cranbourne. A Private in the 23rd Battalion in the AIF, he died on the 3rd of May 1917 and is buried in France. He was 20 years old.

John Henry Glaisher

John was the son of John and Emily Glaisher. He was from Cranbourne but enlisted in Richmond. It is possible that he had moved to the city for work or study. He was in the 10th Field Coy Australian Engineers and died on the 28th of July 1917. He is buried in Belgium.

James Alexander Lecky and William Mervyn Lecky

James and William were the sons of James and Maggie Lecky in Officer. The Lecky family were among the earliest European settlers in the Cranbourne district. James Lecky senior built 'Cranbourne House' and was involved in the establishment of the first school and the Presbyterian church as well as serving on the Council for many years. James and William (known as Mervyn) probably enlisted together at Cranbourne and must have caused their parents anguish by both enlisting as they were the only sons. James, a renowned horseman, was a driver in the 8th Brigade Field Artillery and died in France on the 14th of November 1918, sadly just days after the armistice was signed. Mervyn was a gunner in the 4th Brigade Australian Field Artillery and was killed only two months before his brother on the 1st of September 1918. Their parents were so devastated by the loss of their sons that they sold the farm in Officer, unable to manage it on their own and moved away.

News of the Lecky family was recorded in the South Bourke and Mornington Journal on July 17th, 1919. It was written that:

Mr and Mrs. J. Lecky, of Cardinia Park, Officer, have been notified that their son, Gunner Mervyn, of 12th Battery, who was killed in action in September last, has been awarded the Military Medal for gallantry and devotion to duty.

Leslie William Lyons and Patrick Edward Lyons

Like James and William Lecky, Leslie and Patrick probably enlisted together, with the elder brother to look after the younger. Leslie was a Sergeant in the 24th Battalion of the Australian Infantry. He and his brother had enlisted in Cranbourne and were from Longwarry East. Their parents were Patrick and Louisa. Leslie was killed in action on the 5th of October 1918 on the Western Front and is buried in France. Patrick was a Private in the 59th Battalion and he died of wounds on the 27th of September 1917.

John Stark

Private John Stark was the son of William and Agnes Stark (nee Fraser) and lived on Hastings Road (now Craig Road) in Cranbourne. He was in the 5th Battalion of the Australian Infantry and was killed in action at the age of 21 on the 18th of August 1916.

Francis Douglas Cockerill

Francis was a Private in the 5th Australian Pioneers and was killed in action on the 13th of August 1916. He was the son of Charles and Mary Cockerill of Cranbourne. The family were originally from Tasmania. The Cockerill family home remains on Stawell Street in Cranbourne. They were a well - known Cranbourne family and great community participators.

Avenue of Honour

By Claire Turner, Casey Cardinia Library Corporation



In a further response to the shocking loss of life, many communities around Australia decided to erect living memorials to those who served and those who had made the ultimate sacrifice. Avenues of Honour were planted nationally at the end of the War and in the early 1920s. The species of tree varied and the symbolism of the chosen species was significant. Evergreens were planted to represent everlasting life and regeneration, and natives were planted in assurance of the national identity that was proudly displayed by Australian soldiers.

The Cranbourne Avenue of Honour is of Portugal Oak trees and is located on the South Gippsland Highway between Sladen Street and Cameron Street. The trees originally had nameplates, but now the names can only be found on the Honour Board that still remains with the Cranbourne Primary School. The Avenue was officially opened on 9th August 1919 by the Shire President, Cr. D. McGregor. It was planted by the Cranbourne Patriotic Association, whose president was Mr. Kirkham and secretary was Miss C. M. Nurse. The tree planting was supervised by a Mr. Fisher. The original Avenue represented 59 men and Sisters E and N Lehman. More trees were added after the Second World War.

Cranbourne Returned & Services League (RSL)

By Claire Turner, Casey-Cardinia Library Corporation

The first World War was fought on a world stage and was the catalyst for the formation of Returned Servicemens Leagues. RSL branches were established in towns and suburbs to provide support for the thousands of returned soldiers. These were of course before the days of counselling, and the men relied on each other for understanding about their experiences, because at times their families at home often could not.

The earliest form of the Cranbourne RSL began at the end of the First World War. Early meetings were held at the Devon Meadows Hall under kerosene lamps. This early group was called the Tooradin – Cranbourne Sub Branch and had about twenty members who were ‘diggers’ from the 1914-18 War.

The networking and support that the RSL provided for Cranbourne’s returned soldiers increased when the community was struck by another World War that took away many of the First World War veteran’s sons and daughters. The Second World War was devastating for these veterans because they had believed that they suffered in the name of a war that was to end all wars and did not expect to witness another only twenty years later.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, meetings were being held in the Church of England Hall, but numbers were expanding with the return of World War Two soldiers. They were politely asked, in 1957, to find another location for their meetings and securing a home of their own became a desperate priority. They held their meetings at the Turf Club while they investigated a block of land in Russell Street. This was purchased in 1957, but after visiting the new Dandenong RSL building, it was decided that this land would be too small to accommodate their dream ‘Dandenong’ model building. In 1958, Sir George Wales offered them a deal at no interest, to purchase the land that today remains occupied by the RSL. The members themselves built the original rooms, drawing on their skills and the generosity of local material suppliers such as Smith and Jolley. The grand opening for the first stage of completed work was held in 1961. Their membership and diversification of facilities enabled them to successfully apply to become a Sub-Branch. This occasion was officiated by Brigadier Sir William Hall in 1977. Developments have continued and Cranbourne remains a thriving branch.

Memorabilia from each of the wars can be found on display at the Cranbourne RSL.

War Memorial

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The Cranbourne War Memorial, which today is located in Greg Clydesdale Square, was originally erected on top of the hill in High Street, at the start of the Avenue of Honour. It was damaged by a milk truck in 1949 and needed to be restored, and was subsequently moved outside the Old Shire Offices. There was an official ceremony to celebrate its restoration and new location in 1952. The grand stone tablet monument was again relocated in the 1990s to Greg Clydesdale Square.



Enlistment registers show that many of the First World War soldiers were not born in Australia or were first generation Australians. They identified strongly with the 'Mother Country' and fought to support her, but they were also aware that they were the 'kangaroos' and belonged to a proud young nation. Many historians have remarked that the First World War was the arena through which Australians first developed a sense of

national identity, independent from Britain. Our earliest myths and legends were born there, the notion of the spirit of the ANZAC, mateship and what it meant to be an 'Aussie'. These were only preceded by admiration for British explorers and the struggle of the European pioneer. It was this First World War that provided the unexpected opportunity for the young Australian nation to display its qualities to the rest of the world.

The Second World War

By Claire Turner, Casey Cardinia Library Corporation

ranbourne was again thrown into the turmoil of war by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The seriousness of the fighting was not fully felt by Australians until the Japanese had advanced into Indo China. The fighting in the Pacific mobilised the Australian people who were faced with the very real threat of invasion by the Japanese.

The efforts of the locals in Cranbourne were intensified – everyone was involved in the war effort. The school children held weekly concerts to raise money, they made items to send to the soldiers and wrote letters of friendship to children in London. They also sewed together rugs and saved their scrap paper, all in the name of the war. The coastline of Western Port was defended by 24-hour watches. There was a tower in Tooradin and a roster for all the locals to share the job of watching for aeroplanes. Dances were held on farming properties to raise funds for the Red Cross, where the women would bake delicious suppers. Women of all ages worked together, knitting socks, scarves and preparing food parcels for their soldiers. There was an Army training camp in the Recreational Reserve and the old Market buildings next to the Old

Shire Offices were also used by the Army for administration and accommodation. The War was certainly more immediate for the Cranbourne community this time.

Local resident, Mr. Peter Cowe, grew up in Cranbourne, where his parents ran 'Cowe's Milkbar' in High Street. He enlisted in 1941 and convinced his father to sign the papers with the false age of 19 years – Peter was only 17. He spent the War serving in the Infantry in the Middle East and then in the Pacific. He returned in 1945, after being discharged. Peter reflects on the experience of fighting in a brutal war when still only a teenager:

I was pretty young but I suppose I could say I aged a bit quick over the three years that all this took. And you missed out on quite a bit of life, I suppose, when you look back at it, to what the young people have today...

A majority of the Australian soldiers, like Cranbourne's Peter Cowe, served in the Pacific in the Second World War in the capacity of directly defending their country, whereas the First War had been fought mainly on the Western Front in Europe, to assist the British interests.

Tooradin, on Western Port Bay, was the site of an Aircraft Spotting Station. It was located on a hill, behind the Tooradin Hotel. Locals of all ages had shifts at the Station. Mrs Joyce Duggan was 15 at the time and her shift was Saturday mornings - 9 until 12. She recalls the skills that were learnt during this time:

It was quite good...you sort of felt you were doing something. I remember Mrs Ewit used to come down and teach us how to roll bandages and how to wrap people up and I'd go, and I was their patient...and we knitted socks and scarves, I think we packed food parcels.

Cranbourne resident Mr. Doug Smith remembers the local reaction regarding the threat of invasion through Western Port:

I don't think most of the local people really expected it to happen, although it was in the back of our minds as a possibility. I think we probably felt that Western Port, with its shoals and channels and so forth would be perhaps a little difficult for them to come close.

Cranbourne also had its own local militia called the Home Guard. They met and trained regularly. Petrol rationing was another constant reminder to the locals that there was a war on. People were issued around 4 to 6 gallons of petrol a month. The community really joined together to help the war effort, each making sacrifices in their own way, whether through limited transport due to petrol rationing, contributing to the many fundraisers that were held, or making wares to send to the front. Anice Stammers (nee Facey) was the daughter of the local butcher. She was a little girl at this time and she remembers that:



The hall was used for balls, picture shows and other things and during the War while the army camp was in town it was used for regular dances and card evenings to entertain the soldiers and raise funds for the Red Cross. We would go, as a family, there were always other children to play chasey and hidey with.

Army Camp

By Claire Turner, Casey Cardinia Library Corporation

During the Second World War, a Military Camp was started at the Cranbourne Recreation Reserve. American servicemen were stationed at the buildings next to the original Shire Offices, where the Market used to be held. The Army presence created some changes for the locals. Pam Ridgway's father, Colin Ridgway used to go up after the milking and help Joe Taylor bake extra bread and pies for the Army. Pam remembers with humour that after three months work, her father's final payment was a bag of flour, 'which didn't go over very well at home.'

There was also a voluntary Defence Corps in Cranbourne for the locals. Their training took place in the scrub and sandpits surrounding Cranbourne, part of which is now the Royal Botanic Gardens, Cranbourne.



Volunteer Defence Corps