Balwyn Historical Society

October 2025

Visitors very welcome

Thursday November 13th 2025 – 7.30 pm

at

THE BALWYN LIBRARY

Corner WHITEHORSE RD AND TALBOT AVE, BALWYN PARKING AVAILABLE

Entry from Whitehorse Rd Car Park side door

Guest speaker: Gary Adler "The Chocolate Box Story"

-a very sweet evening and our final official meeting for 2025

December Thursday 11th from 6.30 pm- 930pm
Dinner at Stranger Coffeehouse and Kitchen
Cnr Whitehorse Rd and Cherry Rd Balwyn

A cheery get together for members, family and friends. Further details to come

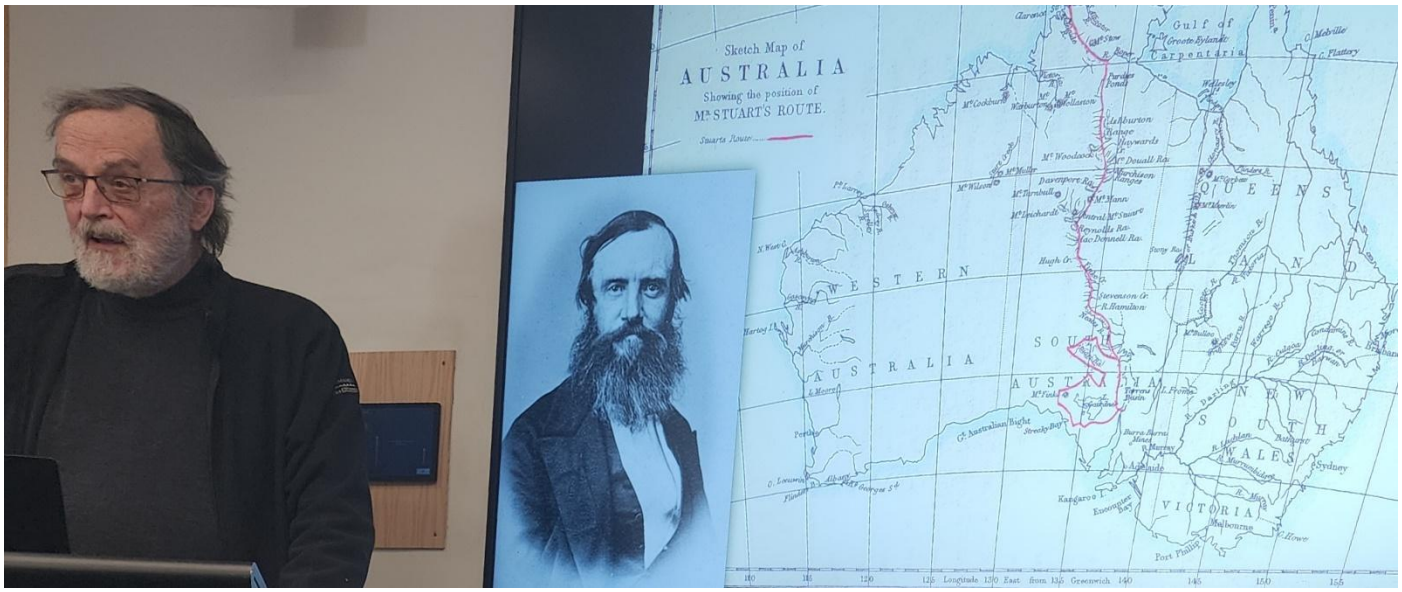
Dear Readers,
This newsletter will update you on two amazing men who were introduced to us by recent guest speakers. Hearing about these people filled one with admiration for their intellect and ability to overcome challenges and their resilience in a technically developing world. They deservedly are important beacons in history.
Greythorn Road, North Balwyn, was not always so named. Philip Mallis' article will explain why.

August Guest Speaker: Professor Leigh
Topic: The Hum in the Wires

Leigh has an engineering degree from Melbourne University, and a master's degree and Doctor of Philosophy from Princeton University. He has held appointments at ANU, the State Electricity of Victoria's (SECV's) Research Laboratory and RMIT University.
Leigh's career has included extensive engineering research and its application in industry, tertiary teaching and senior-level university administration. He is an engineer with a wide knowledge and understanding of technology, and a keen interest in its application and impact on society.

Summary
Charles Todd was born on 7 July 1826 and emigrated to Australia in 1855 to take up his appointment as Astronomer and Metrological Observer and Chief Telegraph Officer for South Australia. After successfully linking South Australia to Victoria and NSW through electric telegraph, in 1870 he was appointed to construct the 2,900 km Overland Telegraph Line from Port Augusta to Darwin.
His expertise in astronomy, meteorology and the accurate determination of time and contributions to the resolution of the dispute about the location of the Victorian-South Australian border should also be acknowledged.

The Presentation
After being introduced, Leigh thanked us for the opportunity to speak to us and quipped, when he turned on the first PowerPoint slide, that he was "always amazed when the technology works".



Todd's Background in England

Charles Todd's working background was as an astronomer at The Royal Observatory in Greenwich England, where he improved timekeeping and methods of navigation by the stars, planets and the moon.

He then was appointed assistant astronomer at Cambridge where he became involved in the evolving electrical engineering technology and devised improvements to telegraphy systems being used by the railway companies.

Various telegraph systems were being developed but the simple method of turning direct current (dc) along a single wire and using the ground as a return path (earth return) was the simplest, cheapest and best able to span the longest distances. Using Morse code was also the preferred signalling method by turning the dc on and off for a short period for a dot and a little longer period for a dash.

By 1844 Morse code was able to be sent by a person at one end and recorded at the other end by indenting the paper according to the dot or dash. These indentations could then have the appropriate letter, number or symbol written under them and provide a written transcript of the original message sent.

Telegraphy in Australia

By 1854 the gold rush was in full swing and telegraph lines were spreading to nearby towns. A Melbourne to Ballarat telegraph line had already started. The South Australian colony wanted to build their own telegraph lines and appointed Charles Todd for the job.

Charles and Alice Todd move to Australia

Charles Todd moved to Australia in 1855 where he stayed until he death at the age of 84 in 1910. He was appointed South Australian Superintendent of Telegraphs

By 1858 he had completed the Adelaide to Melbourne line using a galvanised iron conductor.

By 1867 the Adelaide, Wentworth, Deniliquin, Sydney line was completed

The Overland Telegraph Line – Adelaide to Darwin

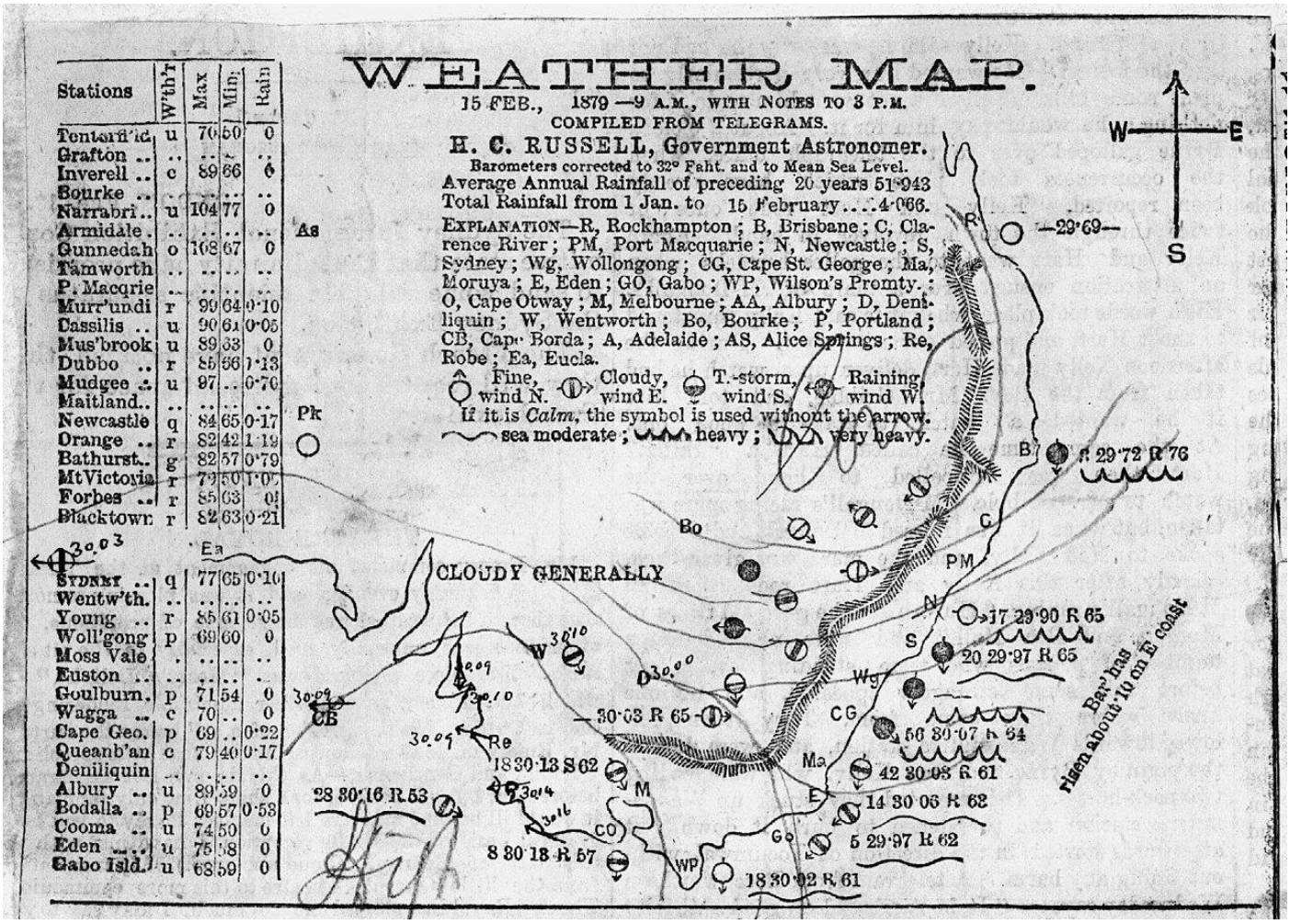
Between 1870 and 1872 the British Australian Telegraph Co was researching ways of running an undersea cable from Java to Australia and chose Darwin and the South Australian Government agreed to pay for the link from Darwin to Adelaide. This would be the gateway to the rest of the wired world and used by the other major cities in Australia via Adelaide.

Charles Todd chose the 1862 John McDougall Stuart expedition route with some modifications such as moving westward to avoid Lake Eyre and to find a better gap through the MacDonnell Ranges. Many other challenges were encountered along the way including the heat, rain, mud, mountains and the aboriginals,

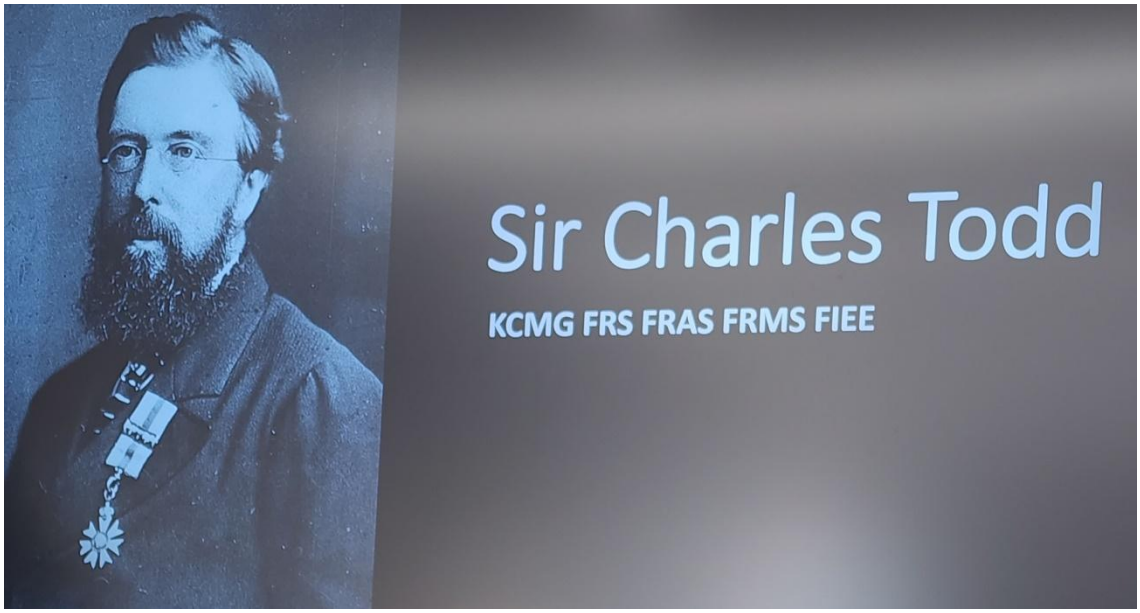
The local aborigines were not cared for during the construction and among other things many of their waterholes and sacred sites were damaged or destroyed by the incursion and the bullocks.

The main facilities and materials for the telegraph line were telegraphic stations at Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, 11 repeater stations 36,000 wooden or steel poles, and 32,000 km of galvanised iron wires.
Charles Todd used Port Augusta and Darwin as major warehouses and moved materials with shod bullocks and drays that could carry loads up to 35 tons.
The Adelaide to Darwin telegraph line was completed 22 August 1872 and first used for messages between Adelaide and England on 21 October 1872.

Charles Todd after the Overland Telegraph Line
In 1877 Charles Todd established the Adelaide to Eucla section of the Adelaide to Perth telegraph line. Because a different version of Morse code was used in Adelaide to Perth, in the room at Eucla, operators from both states would pass to each other messages so they could send them on in their appropriate version of Morse code.
Charles Todd, with access to the telegraphic and repeater stations, was able to get regular reports on weather conditions and use of this data to construct weather maps and provide weather forecasts for the government agencies. See below for a weather Map for 15 February 1879 made from telegraph site data.



Discussion and Q&A
There is so much more to Sir Charles Heavitree Todd, but a time constraint meant Leigh finished with Charles Todd's death on 29 January 1910 and his burial in a cemetery just north of Adelaide. Those present were left to marvel at this amazing man and his achievements and to want to discover more about him.
Leigh then took questions such as "What was the Melbourne to Queenscliff telegraph line used for?" He replied mainly for the movement of ships through the Port Phillip Heads.
Many thanks to Russell Kenner for this report and images. Russell and Nola Kenner are occasional visitors from afar to our Society meetings.



Further explanation: - Russell Kenner
Although the title of the presentation was 'Hum in the Wire' Leigh did not discuss 'the hum' in his talk but it is a description of the noise that is on the telegraph line most of the time. The hum is the noise that is picked up in the wire and more likely in the earth return path if a speaker or headphones were connected to the line. This hum and other static noises are the reason why operators did not listen to the line directly and instead listened to their electromagnetic sounder triggered by the voltage being applied at the other end.
There has been a progression of new technologies that have been introduced into and across Australia and to overseas countries, but the Overland Telegraph Line was maintained until well after World War II finished. The new cable technologies included: multiple pair cables, coaxial cables and since the 1990s optical fibre cables. These were also supplemented by various wireless technologies.
For an interesting snippet on the Alice Springs station, check out: 'The telegraph station - a trip back in time' on YouTube
https://youtu.be/mf4r3WwUNYU?si=IrJjdJ-xyGYm0tOO

September Meeting Guest Speaker: Professor Jock Given
Topic: Marconi at Point Lonsdale

Background
Early communication such as telegrams were expensive where the English words were turned into Morse Code then back to English. It was a process of coding the language. The distance of 12,000 miles from the UK was daunting.

Guglielmo Marconi: He was born in 1874 in Bologna Italy, to wealthy parents, the youngest child. His mother was a member of the Jameson Whisky family. While still young he tinkered with electricity, and the family could afford equipment. His abilities attracted attention and as well he received a good education and was tutored by a scientist.

Marconi was the 'figure' for wireless invention. Marconi was the person who put it into a system. It is said he charged the world twice- wireless first and then short wave (in the 1920s). It was all seen as something "magical "because the system was so revolutionary. Others had demonstrated the concept of energy at a distance ie Morse code. There were submarine cables from 1860 and cables to Australia in 1872. The telephone did not operate over trans-oceanic routes until later and it was not until 1930 that the telephone operated to Australia ie over wireless means.

Development stages: The first British patent was in 1896/97. The first signal across the Atlantic Ocean to Canada from the UK took place in 1901. This was "amazing"!

Marconi sending the first radio signal

There was also a first demonstrated communication of ship to shore in Australia in 1901 at the time of Federation and was primarily seen as a political "stunt".

A Captain Walker was sent to Victoria from the UK by Marconi, accompanied by two technical assistants, to set up equipment in May 1906 at both Point Lonsdale and Devonport in Tasmania for a brief demonstration which ultimately took place a few months later in July. The aim was to interest investors in Marconi's planned business however, people did not want to invest in a company. When Captain Walker failed to convince investors, he returned to the UK.

Subsequently 5 years later, Ernest Fiske who was born in England and educated in both Australia and England and most importantly at the Marconi Training school in England, was tasked to collect the equipment stored in a shed near Point Lonsdale. It was only a 200 mile distance between Point Lonsdale and Devonport- a comfortable range for the apparatus at the time and success was probably not in doubt in the hands of Fiske the radio engineer, entrepreneur and businessman, and his two technicians.

Marconi was very grateful to Ernest Fiske. It must be noted that Marconi never came to Australia.
For the great event at Point Lonsdale, Marconi was represented by Captain Walker and two other technical assistants. Victorian politicians, at Walker's invitation, were present in full force and Parliament was put off for the day as three quarters of the House of Representatives had travelled by train to the event. The Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, had a house at Point Lonsdale and was very interested in the whole thing.

There was criticism that it was a "picnic for a foreign monopoly"! 200 children were lined up to sing the Anthem "God Save the King" and flags were in abundance. The masts with the radiating support wires were 162 feet in height. Messages were exchanged but unfortunately the Tasmanian politicians did not attend as there was a 'no confidence' vote on in their parliament. At least the Governor was there, and the message was eventually delivered to the absent politicians by more traditional means!
It was hailed as a moment of "Conquering Distance". Marconi's fame was cemented in Victoria.
In 1918, September 22nd, a signal was transmitted by Australian Prime minister Billie Hughes, from the long wave radio station in Carnarvon Water, Wales, to Wahroonga, NSW at the home of Ernest Fiske. This success gave Marconi great satisfaction for reaching "the antipodes", 17,000 kilometres (12,000 miles). It was regarded as wireless communication serving the interests of mankind."

Of course, Marconi was given the credit, but a lot of people were involved. Marconi had an ability to 'open doors' for himself and appeared to be a monopoly. The UK embraced him because of his English mother.

The Advantages:
Wireless communication was economical and efficient. It was important in WW1 with communication to ships, in the military and for broadcasting industries.
Many people wanted to work in the industry. Letters of self-recommendation flooded in.
Marconi received many accolades. Among them, was the 1909 Nobel prize for Physics (shared with Karl Ferdinand Braun)
A book was written by Marc Raboy "The Man who Networked the World".

Ernest Fiske was to run the Australian Business, AWA, from 1911 until he went back to the UK to manage EMI. He returned to Sydney in the mid-1950s. Sir Ernest Fiske died in Roseville in 1965. The AWA building with its tower was the tallest building in Sydney until the 1950s. AWA and the Government had equal shares in the company. There is also a sculpture at Wahroonga to commemorate that first communication signal.

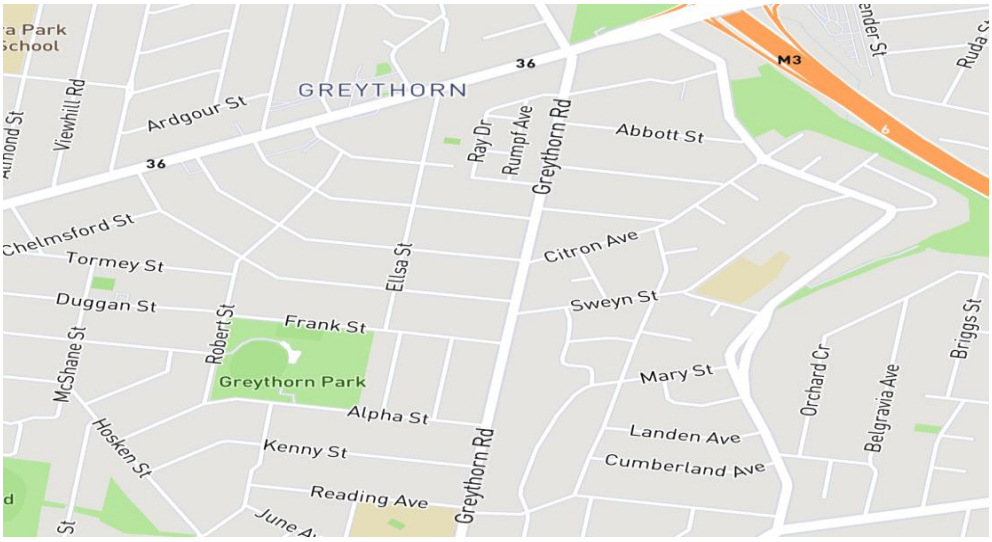
Telegrams in Australia, that early form of communication, continued until 1993, From 1975 the use of telephones and computers began to replace their use. By 1985, 90% of households had telephones.

The other side of Marconi: With Mussolini in power in Italy in the 1920s, Marconi joined the Fascist Party. He liked to be on the side of the state and governments. Perhaps to Marconi, it was always "the importance of opening doors"?

From White to Grey – a little bit of North Balwyn History

Philip Mallis

At only 1.6 kilometres, Greythorn Road is one of the shortest main roads in Boroondara.
It shares its name with Greythorn, a locality within North Balwyn. There are not any fixed boundaries, but it's generally understood by locals to be an area bounded by Balwyn Road, Gordon Barnard Reserve, Belmore Road, Winfield Road and Koonung Creek.
But, it wasn't always like this – 'Greythorn' used to be 'Whitethorn'.
So why did it change?



Early European settlers moved into the area throughout the 1850s. During this time, the ‘road’ (little more than a dusty track) was named ‘Towt’s Road’ after one of the families.
John Towt of this family purchased land in the area in 1856 and named his estate ‘Whitethorn’. Some sources claim that the name came from whitethorn hedges planted in the area but I cannot find anything definitive. The original home from 1868 was still around at 47-51 Kenny Street until 2019 when it was unfortunately demolished to make way for a new building.

Nevertheless, the name seems to have stuck, and Towt’s Road became known as Whitethorn Road.

By complete coincidence, the nearby Three Chain Road was renamed to ‘Whitehorse Road‘ after the White Horse Hotel which had set up shop in Box Hill to service its many tired and thirsty travellers. This in turn had been named for a white horse owned by Henry Elgar, an early surveyor of these districts who can be directly blamed for many of the road layout curiosities in Boroondara and Whitehorse.

Such proximity of Whitethorn Road and Whitehorse Road obviously caused a lot of confusion amongst non-locals and a source of constant annoyance for those who lived in the area.

This hilariously indignant letter from one such resident to the editor of the *Hawthorn, Kew and Camberwell Citizen* in October 1917 is one example.

As a result of these ongoing mix-ups, the decision was taken to rename the road to ‘Greythorn Road’ in 1923.

Despite some other former names surviving elsewhere in Melbourne through things like school or shop names, the only trace of the name 'Whitethorn' that can be found today is at the new Greythorn Community Hub on the door of one of the meeting rooms.

As a footnote, the road was almost named 'Narrak Road' in 1917. A motion proposed by Cr William Freeman Nott of Camberwell Council proposed acquiring properties along Narrak Road (also partially the present-day Caravan Street) to widen it and thus rename the entire stretch of road between Doncaster Road and Whitehorse Road. He claimed that some owners had offered the land at no cost to council for this purpose. The motion was narrowly lost.

Philip is a member of our Historical society. He has a broad interest in local history and has written on many topics. Thank you to Philip for allowing us to reproduce this item.

.....And it is still Greythorn Road over a century later! ED.

Balwyn Walks - Matthew Etty-Leal

Matthew conducted / lead another walk which has raised $ 105 towards purchasing a very good voice amplifier. At present, thanks to U3A for a loan of one.
Optimistically a further walk will be held on Remembrance Day, November 11th, that will bring us closer to the purchase range of $205- $245.

A happy photo of some of this group taken by one of the other 'walkers', Dr Helen Smith.