

Balwyn Historical Society Inc.

September /October 2026

NEWSLETTER

Upcoming Meeting including the AGM

On

Thursday October 8th at 7.30 pm

at

THE BALWYN LIBRARY Meeting Room

Corner WHITEHORSE RD AND TALBOT AVE, BALWYN

PARKING Available beside Library

Entry -MAIN FRONT DOOR

Visitors are very welcome.

Guest Speaker -Professor Kate Burridge – Australian Linguist

Professor Kathryn 'Kate" Burridge is a prominent Australian Linguist specialising in the Germanic languages. Kate currently occupies the Chair of Linguistics in the School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University. Kate is a member of the Australian Journal of Linguistics. She is a regular language presenter on radio (ABC and 3AW).

TOPIC: Slang expressions – the loose cannons of the linguistic world

One of the many puzzling features of slang is its lifecycle. English had amassed around 2,500 drink -related expressions, yet most have dropped by the wayside. So why did booze and grog survive…. and thrive…. for hundreds of years? In this short talk, Kate will explore what might account for such slanguage success stories, what factors combine to create the "perfect lexicographical storm" and give these terms such a long shelf life?

Diary Dates:

***September 28th to November 8th -Margaret Picken Exhibition at the Camberwell Corridor, Camberwell Library 2026** (full details in later page)

*** Here Comes the Bride- a Wedding Exhibition of wedding dresses from the late 1890s to present day, memorabilia and photos, presented by Surrey Hills Historical Society and Canterbury History Group at The Maling Heritage Centre,190A Canterbury Rd until Fri October 9th, 2-5pm Daily**

***November Thursday 12th at 7.30 pm - our final Balwyn Historical Society meeting for the year.**

Email: balwynhistory@gmail.com Website: balwynhistory.org.au

AUGUST Meeting 2026 Guest Speaker: Professor Leigh Peterson
Topic: George Hubert Wilkins

George Hubert Wilkins is not well known today, having largely been shunned by his home country. But given his contributions to polar exploration he deserves to be remembered as a great Australian.



He was born in Mount Bryan East in South Australia to a Methodist family, 13th of 13 children. He became interested in photography early on and eventually studied at the Adelaide School of Mines. Following this study time, he went to England and worked with Gaumont Studios doing newsreel footage with very early, rudimentary cameras and started to hone his skills. His work found him joining a project with the Canadian Arctic Expedition, which was one of the first serious attempts to photograph and thus document the expedition itself. This helped him develop his skills on how to survive in very cold climates, which was to come in useful later.

In 1917 during the First World War, he returned to Australia and joined the Army, becoming one of the official photographers. He soon became known for documenting and reporting the brutal realities of war, rather than the sanitised official version of events, which caused controversy back in Australia – people were largely unaware of the appalling conditions in which their family members were serving.

George Hubert Wilkins was awarded the Military Cross and a bar to his Military Cross for bravery, the only known reporter to have received two medals for bravery and the only Australian official photographer to ever receive a combat medal. He received his bar for assisting a group of US soldiers who had lost their commanding officers during the 1918 Battle of the Hindenburg Line



The young Hubert Wilkins and the Soldier

After the War he joined Ernest Shackleton on his expedition to Antarctica aboard the 'Quest'. Following this expedition, he returned to Australia to work for the British Museum to record the people, flora and fauna of Northern Australia. He again courted controversy at the time by publishing photos of local indigenous people – many were shocked at their visibly poor health and conditions.

In the 1920s there was a race to become the first person to fly across the North Pole. Initially the famed polar explorer Amundsen was in the lead to fly an airship to Spitsbergen (present-day Svalbard). However, a competing group called the Detroit Expedition was formed to compete using aeroplanes instead. Hearing of Wilkins' abilities in polar climates, this group made him commander. Both of their first planes were destroyed in crash landings during trials.

Their selected plane was a bright orange Lockheed Vega made of plywood. As it had no creature comforts flying over the Arctic, those on board had to wear thick, heavy jackets. It was a difficult plane to fly but after five days, they arrived in Spitsbergen having departed from the remote Point Barrow in Alaska.



Hubert Wilkins the aerial explorer – Australian Geographic

As a result of this achievement, Wilkins was knighted for becoming the first British citizen to fly over the North Pole. This brought him fame and new income through speaking tours. He married the Australian actress Suzanne Bennett, they were to lead largely separate lives, given their respective professions.



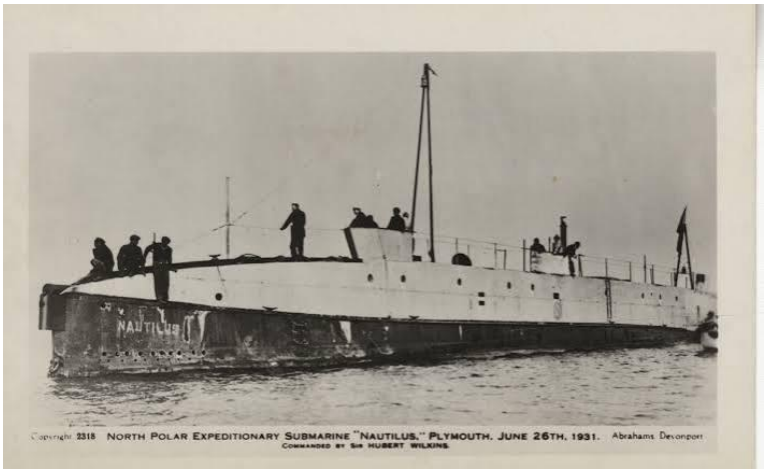
Photo from 'The illustrated Hubert Wilkins'- Jeff Maynard

After the North Pole, Wilkins' interest turned south. The Antarctic was not well- understood or mapped at the time and there was growing interest in the region. Wilkins started using planes again, based at Deception Island – an ideal base for this purpose. He used this transport to photograph hitherto unseen areas of Antarctica on several flights. These photographs uncovered many new things including that the continent had large mountains, unlike the Arctic. The primitive camera technology of the day was not suited for use in a small plane like those used by Wilkins however, eventually he acquired a Leica 1929 35mm camera, which he was able to use.



William Hearst, a wealthy US newspaper publisher and politician who supported the Nazi Party through the 1930s and 40s, was a sponsor of this project. During a discussion between Wilkins and his also-wealthy friend Lincoln Ellsworth, they started plans for a postal service across the North Pole via submarine and airship.

This led them to form a group, which included Wilkins. They leased the 'Nautilus' submarine from the US Navy for $1 a year for five years but had to pay for expensive modifications. The submarine was plagued with issues and was found to be unsuitable for its intended purpose during testing, so the plans were abandoned and the submarine scuttled. Wilkins was now destitute, having spent his life savings on this endeavour, and was now the subject of ridicule.



"Nautilus" --Photo from Ohio State University libraries

Ellsworth then partnered with Wilkins again, as Ellsworth had plans to cover himself in glory for polar exploration, but had not the experience and expertise, while Wilkins had all the required skills and more. Ellsworth then came up with the idea to fly over the South Pole and enlisted Wilkins to assist. Although Wilkins completed all the organisation, planned the navigation and cleaned up after the expedition, Ellsworth never gave Wilkins credit for the expedition. Wilkins role during the flight itself in 1935 was to sail the *Wyatt Earp*, the support vessel. His navigation planning and training was so precise that the plane landed within a few hundred metres of its intended destination, having flown across the entire continent of Antarctica without any modern navigation aids.

Following this, Wilkins attempted to assist with Australia's growing interest in Antarctica. He suggested setting up weather stations as well as other proposals but was stymied by Douglas Mawson who was an opponent of Wilkins. Instead, Mawson created the plans that eventually established three research bases that continue to operate to this day – Casey, Davis and Mawson.

Wilkins continued to find that he did not feel welcome or appreciated in his home country. He tried offering his considerable expertise to the Australian military, but they were not interested. Instead, he returned to the United States, where he was welcomed with open arms, and found a role with the US military. Despite his old age he continued to be heavily involved in polar research.

He lived just long enough to be told of the successful transit of the USS Nautilus under the Arctic ice, the first submarine to do so, in August 1958. Wilkins died just a few months later, on the 30th November 1958, in Framlingham, Massachusetts USA. As per his request, his ashes were scattered at the North Pole by the submarine USS Skate.

Today there is an ice shelf named for him on the Antarctic Peninsula, rapidly deteriorating due to climate change, and he continues to be relatively unknown in Australia. The only thing is a small metal sign at his birthplace, located – in a twist of irony – on the Mawson Trail in South Australia.

Almost none of his extensive documents or personal effects are in Australia, although the Burra Library does have a small collection available to visit.

Thank you to Philip Mallis for this comprehensive summary of Leigh Peterson's fascinating talk.



Postscript. It is unthinkable that during his lifetime Hubert Wilkins was an unsung hero in his own country. He was such a remarkable scientist, photographer, soldier, aerial explorer, mariner and polar adventurer. Belatedly he is now more recognised in Australia. We are grateful that people like Leigh Peterson have drawn our attention to Sir Hubert Wilkins. Editor

Further Reading:

'The Illustrated Sir Hubert Wilkins'—Jeff Maynard

'The Incredible Life of Hubert Wilkins' – Peter Fitzsimmons (Booktopia)

September Meeting 2026 Guest speaker -Dr Liz Rushen AM

Topic- The Hoddle Grid: the Great Land Grab.

Dr Liz Rushen began her talk by explaining the difference between plans of Melbourne's Central Business District which were drawn up by the surveyors Robert Russell, and Robert Hoddle, concluding that Hoddle used Russell's topographical drawing as a base to lay out a rectangular street plan that loosely aligned with the Birrarung/Yarra on its southern boundary. The Hoddle Grid forms the heart of Melbourne's Central Business District.

On the first day that land was sold in the Hoddle Grid, 1 June 1837, Assistant Surveyor-General Robert Hoddle climbed onto a log at the south-west corner of Collins and William Streets and commenced selling the first 100 allotments of land in the newly surveyed grid. Liz explained that the Hoddle Grid originally comprised 32 sections, but only 29 of these were offered for sale before 1850 – the other three were reserved for public purposes (as were some allotments in other sections).

The allotments were sold in 11 sales held between June 1837 and December 1848. In all 271 people purchased allotments in the Hoddle Grid – many only purchased one allotment, but Irish-born Captain Sylvester Browne of the East India Company was the largest single purchaser of sites – he picked up 18 lots, many purchased in Sydney before he moved down to settle in Heidelberg. Developer Hugh Glass was a close second, but many of his purchases were as part of different syndicates.

Liz then talked about some of the purchasers, including George Porter, Skene Craig, Emily Lockett, one of the five women who purchased land in the sales, Matthew Cantlon and Michael Pender. Liz also provided a few statistics on the backgrounds of the purchasers, concluding that the purchasers were typical of people who own land in Australia today – immigrants; people who work hard to save the deposit; wealthy people who own several lots of land; people from a range of ethnic, age and religious backgrounds.

Liz encouraged us all to visit her exhibition titled 'Hoddle Grid: the Great Land Grab', which is on display at the Royal Historical Society, on the corner of William and A'Beckett Streets, until 11th November 2026.



Surveyor General, Robert Hoddle

Boroondara Historical Societies Association



Margaret Picken Exhibition

The six historical societies of Boroondara showcase the work of artist Margaret Picken at the Camberwell Corridor, Camberwell Library, from 28 September to 8 November 2026.

Her unique pen and ink property illustrations on drafting paper are invaluable for tracing the evolution of residential architectural styles in Boroondara.

The year each illustration was published is also a useful record for house historians and property owners, as a number of the buildings depicted, have since been altered or demolished.

Camberwell Historical Society

HAWTHORN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BALWYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The place, the people, the story

THE CANTERBURY HISTORY GROUP

KEW HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.
ESTABLISHED 1958

Surrey Hills Historical Society Inc

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