

A History Museum for Bendigo

Bendigo has a first class Art Gallery and a unique theatre – the Ulumbarra. What is lacking is a general historical Museum. A History Museum has been on the city agenda since the first Bendigo Historical Society was formed in 1935 and the item is still widely discussed by Bendigonians.

Much of the following appeared five years ago in the Bendigo Advertiser and is repeated here, with updated information for the Bendigo Historical Society Website:

The Bendigo Historical Society (BHS) contributed a number of significant items to the ‘Landmarks’ Exhibition in the National Museum in Canberra. These artefacts include a miner’s cradle, windlass and kibble (bucket), a gold buyer’s sign and an illuminated address to a famous early Bendigonian, Sir John McIntyre. These items featured in an Arts program on the ABC. The gold buyers sign and the Sir John McIntyre illuminated address are still in Canberra.

The then Director of the National Museum, Andrew Sayers, wrote an article for a national newspaper, in which he argued that museums should be thought of as educational resources. Sayers is uncomfortable with the idea of museums being considered to be arts organisations. Rather, he argues, museums should be better characterised as educational resources, rather than as buildings where collections are held. Collections are seen by governments as more of a problem – the source of demands for ever-increasing storage facilities – rather than as the assets they are. Arguments for collections have to be framed in terms of the social good inherent in using those collections. The BHS is very familiar with this idea and has pressed for years for remedies to its vast, varied and valuable collection, many items of which is currently stored in ships’ containers. The Society has stressed on many occasions that many of the items held are of national importance.

The phrase, “telling our stories”, occurs frequently in discussions. This is an area where museums play a vital role and the stories often inspire artists to retell these stories in other art forms. Local artist, Geoff Hocking, has used many of them in his art work featuring Major Mitchell for example. Sayers claimed that there are many ways in which collections of Australia’s museums could be deployed for great social return. Museum collections have already been effectively paid for by the taxpayer so unlocking the cultural value of these public assets – especially through digitisation – is a smart use of public funds. Already the BHS heeds this advice with a massive digitisation project which has added over 20,000 items to a Mosaic database.

Sayers went on to write that one way in which collections can be deployed is through exhibitions. The BHS has been mindful of this by having a great number of its photographs and artefacts used in exhibitions at the Post Office Gallery in Pall Mall Bendigo and now in the Society’s front-of-house, Specimen Cottage in Hargreaves Street. Such exhibitions enhance the prestige of collections, develop the professionalism and networks of staff and put Australian collections into context. Museums are offered a great opportunity through broadband access, which will allow them to deliver content across Australia.

The Director concluded his article by saying that if the true currency of cultural institutions is their capacity to generate original ideas and to act as repositories of our unique stories, then the opportunities offered by widespread connectivity are there to be imagined, invested in and celebrated.