Preserving our past is our future
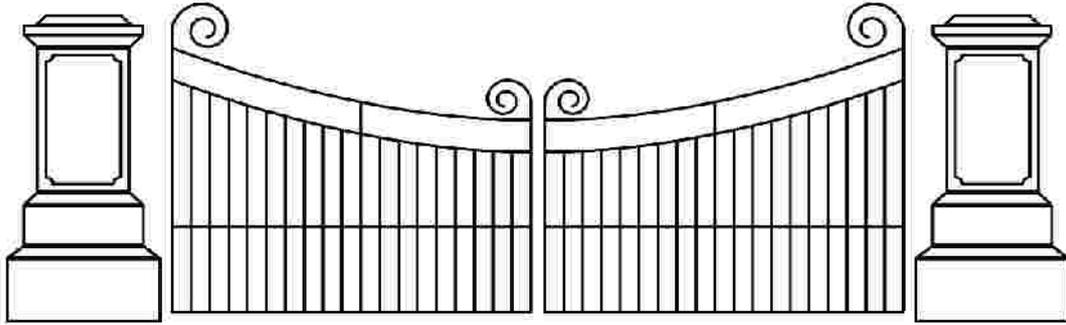
Chermside & Districts
Historical Society Inc.

Our speaker for February was Ivan Cowen who spoke about the manufacture of Horse Collars. It is no longer a common trade but was a vital one when horses were the main form of locomotion in the pre automobile age.
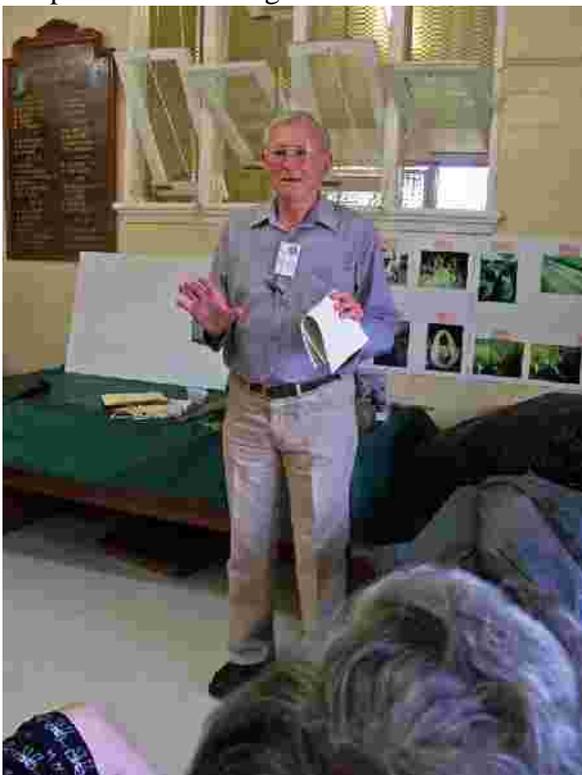
Ivan became an electrician but his father and brother spent their working lives making horse collars in the Deagon area. This trade has to be carefully distinguished from the other two leather trades associated with horses, viz saddlers and harness makers. The Chermside firm of Box & Beck started off as saddlers and then specialised as harness makers, but as horses left the scene they turned to sandal making for human feet.

Ivan's father, Michael Thomas Cowen, was indentured in 1903 to "learn the .art and mystery of collar making." He was apprenticed to L. Uhl & Sons collar makers of Spring Hill; the firm was founded in 1870.

This was in the days when parents sometimes had to pay the tradesman to teach their son the trade.

Ivan's brother, Jack Rowland Cowen, was indentured in 1934 to his father "to learn the trade." By this time there was no payment and the apprentice was paid a wage.

Like all the old trades the work was manual and

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great skill was needed so that the tradesman could work swiftly and accurately to keep costs down.

Different types and thicknesses of leather were used for the different parts of the collar; tough thick leather to withstand the weather on the visible parts with soft, pliable leather on the parts resting on the horse.


This collar measures, inside, 60cm from Throat to Yoke and the tubular construction can be clearly seen; it is for a large horse. The leather is made from cattle hides and can be shined.

Basically the collar was made of tubes of leather, double stitched using two needles, one from each side to hold the leather tubes securely. The tubes were then stuffed with dried 'blady grass' which grew locally and was useless for fodder. Other forms of packing medium were cotton waste, horse hair and rye grass. The grass was tied in a small bunches and inserted in the tubes; as the space filled a steel ramrod was used to compact the grass in the tube and insert more grass. The outside of the tube was then hammered with wooden mallets, and more grass rammed in till the whole tube was firm.

The stitching holding the tubes together had to be very strong and the tradesmen made their own 'thread' by combining several lengths of blady grass side by side into one thread and rubbing it with bees wax.

The same collar reversed shows the section covered with soft leather called 'basil' which is made from sheepskin; it does not take a shine. The strip of basil hanging down on the right is cut from a rectangular piece of basil. See below.
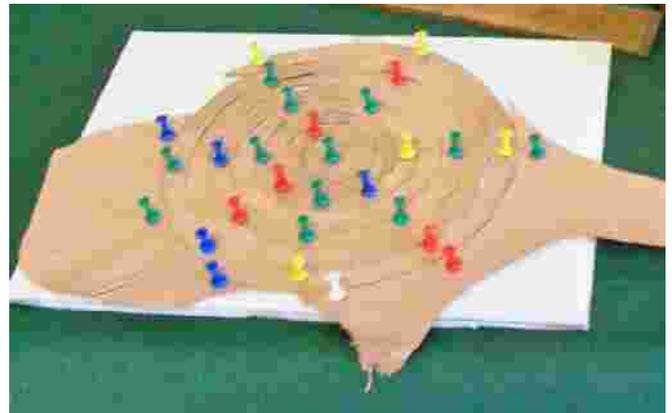
All the leather was cut by hand using patterns for the different pieces, but the long strips of pliable leather used for binding were cut in a continuous strip using a circular cutting motion. The strip measures about 15mm in width. The coloured pins are to keep the strip in place; a good tradesman never wastes his materials.

This sheaf of blady grass is about a metre long, has been cut with a reaping hook, dried in the sun and finally bound with blady grass; all very traditional, because it was the best way to do the job.

A good tradesman, still using manual methods and working an eight hour day, can make six collars in five days. There are still a few collar makers working in Australia, one of whom makes collars for buyers in Ireland. He receives the horse measurements by email, but the process is still the traditional one. Another source of collars is the Amish people in Pennsylvania USA who use horse power extensively.

What the Chooks dug up at 97 Meemar St Chermside!

The house at No. 97 was built in the home building boom that followed WWII and is on the site occupied by the Australian Woman's Army Service camp during the war.

In the early 1950s, Peter Hill, then about 5 years old, moved into the house with his family. Like many families in those days they kept a chook yard and the chooks, looking for food, scratched in the dirt. Over time they dug up 43 "dog tags", as well as hypodermic syringes, unit badges and other odds and ends.

Everybody in the armed forces is issued with two "Dog Tags"; the round one is for identification if they are injured and the hexagonal one is to be tied to a big toe if they are killed; hence the name toe tag. Beverley Isdale researched the names on the tags and has listed the details of most of the soldiers.

Seventeen of the men left two tags while the remaining nine left only their identity tag. Both tags recorded the same information viz name, number, blood group and religion.

Peter Hill, who donated the tags to the CDHS in 2012, was present and added that, in addition to the tags, there were army badges and old glass syringes in amongst what seemed to be general rubbish. He felt that a hole had been dug as a dump and that the tags were dumped with the rest of the rubbish.

David Parker from the Canungra Military Museum was of the same opinion. He said that the dog tags were a necessary nuisance which the soldier carried but often dumped as soon as they were discharged.

There were 43 males from a wide variety of units; Infantry, Artillery, Anti-Tank, Postal, Machine Gunner, but the main group, of 23, were in Signals i.e. Intelligence. Origins: Ten from Queensland (8 from Brisbane), the remainder mainly

from NSW and Victoria but none from Tasmania and WA.

The rank varied from Private to Lieutenant Colonel with everything in between except Major; one was a Lance Sergeant which was a Corporal acting as a Sergeant. The rank was abolished in 1946.
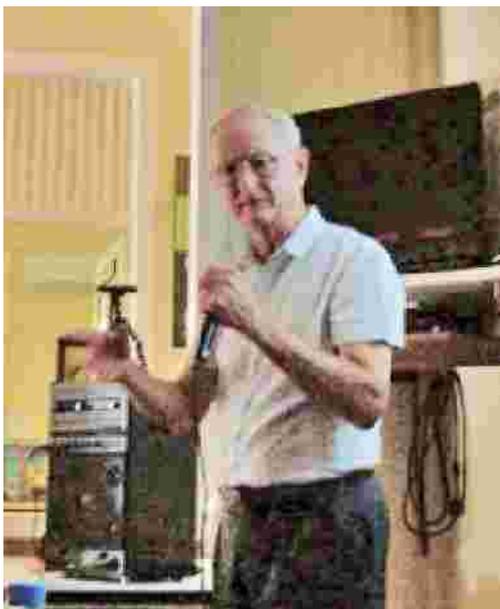
Robert Isdale researched widely for this article and presented some of the results on Sunday

The next question, is why were they dumped in the AAWS Camp site? We don't know, yet but that will involve further research and the longer it takes the fewer of the AWAS will be around to interview. Maybe some documents will be found!

The Australian Women's' Army Service camp, Block H, was on the south side of Hamilton Road, with Kingsmill Street on the west and Meemar Street, on the south. On the east was Block G which housed the 20th Works Company,.

Some of the women staffed a large garage at Nyaramble, which was, and is, a stately home at 21 Henry St., Ascot. When asked what did they did the reply was, "We are in Signals." This vague statement told enquirers nothing, which was the intent, as they were sworn to secrecy till long after the war. They were actually in the Intelligence service working with top secret messages directly in contact with General MacArthur's own signals intelligence unit in the AMP Building in the city. Written material was sent by dispatch riders, on Harley Davidsons, to and from 21 Henry Street. Exciting? Not really just routine but of vital importance.

Each day the AWAS women were transported in military trucks to Nyaramble where they worked with encrypting and decoding machines on top secret messages. They probably staffed the place around the clock; the photo below of AWAS women is labelled Part of B Shift.

They were also in touch with overseas places including the legendary Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire north of London which was the WWII British code breaking centre; Bletchley penetrated the German Enigma Machine and intercepted vital enemy military data.

In 2011 this group of eight ex-AWAS were each presented with the Bletchley Medal, a very rare award given to the band of WWII code breakers.

By 2011 these women would have been in their high 80s and early 90s; maybe they are numbered among the "Immortals".

The Bletchley Medal and the recipients' photos were presented by Coral Hines (nee Osborne), one of the original AWAS women working at 21 Henry Street in the dark days of WWII.

Now back to the 1930s with one of our long time, long distance supporters. Val Ross (nee Fullwood), recounts a story from the days of the dunnies long before the sewer arrived in Chermside.

The toilet man, or the dunny men as they were called, would visit the school to collect the used pans (drums) and make replacements for another week.

The men were at a disadvantage, if the children were not in class; we would stand a short distance away, and in chorus, all chant, Dan Dan, the dunny man, washed his face in a dunny can, combed his hair with the leg of a chair, Dan Dan the dunny man.

One day the men had been taunted too long and too often, and they were going to give us the lesson of our lives.

This day they grabbed the nearest boy, who happened to be Gerald (to protect his dignity I will not divulge his full name) and shoved him inside the truck with the soiled pans, and off they drove.

We entered the class room without Gerald, Miss Shock was the teacher, nothing was said but we were filled with fear. About 15 minutes later, Gerald walked into the class room, all smiles and unharmed, but maybe alarmed like the rest of us. That ended the chanting those workmen had suffered for so long

A Cricket Match in Marchant Park

A re-enactment of the match played at ANZAC just before the withdrawal from Gallipoli in 1915 is to be staged in 1915. Lawrence Christi, Warehouse Cricket, is organising the match.

We will publish more details as they come to hand. CDHS has been invited to play a part in the organisation. Any of our members who are willing and able may like to play? Any takers?

Blast From The Past

Bradley Scott

Chermside News Feb & Mar 1914

About this time debate was brewing regarding transport in Chermside. Bus services had been diminished and the tramline was not to arrive for another thirty years. As Chermside was still largely rural, a large concern was the transportation of goods, and as such it was proposed that a rail link pass through Chermside.

In 1914 (as today), the closest train station was about 2.5 kilometres from the centre of town. This would have been much more of an inconvenience back then, without the benefit of car ownership (or a regular bus service).

There was a plan to quadruplicate existing rail lines between Mayne Railway Junction and Northgate in the works when a group of Chermside residents proposed to construct the "Mayne Railway Deviation", where the line would travel north through Kedron and Chermside, meeting the existing railway at Zillmere. More about this in the next issue.

In other news, the entire land area of the Kedron Shire Council was valued at only £157,000. This was a reflection on the largely rural nature of the area covered by the council.

(Ed.) It is interesting to note that in the 2013

Marchant Lecture the speaker, Everald Compton, strongly advocated the building of a rail line from Geebung through Chermside as the start of a circle line for the whole of Brisbane. --------------------

Archivist's Column – Beverley Isdale

We have a collection in the Youatt Room called the Marion Eaton Archives. Marion was one of our foundation members and lived in Zillmere for many years. During her early morning walks, she noticed changes in the district and she was interested in the history the local people and places.

She collected newspaper articles, real estate brochures, photocopied interesting items, took photos and gave them informative captions, interviewed long-time residents and kept everything. She put anything of interest into large white ring binders and gave the collection to the Society.

It is an invaluable collection as many of the things that interested her don't exist anymore. Some of the information was never available through usual methods of research – most of it came from the people who lived in the area and they are no longer with us. They lent her family photographs, many of which are notable for the background items in the photos. She had a great interest in architecture and old houses fascinated her so she spoke to residents about their houses and the changes that had taken place. Her binders on Zillmere Handford Road, and Church Road document the changes from the time of small farming to high density housing.

She also made binders with information on families. The Grenning/ Alfredson, Mackie, Lee/Marquis, Pfingst families' binders contain much information about early farming families, their lands and crops. Her interest extended to industries such as those operated by Butts, Fischle/Vellnagel and Hacker families.

Other members have done research and we have added their work to the Marion Eaton Archives - Powell, Reid, Simpson, Carr, Werda, Wallace Street Chermside, Aspley Business centre, and Rangeview Street Aspley are some of the newer collections.

All these binders have been scanned and are available for use. Several local groups have found them very helpful to their organization's programs and sometimes for art work.

Marion now lives in Sydney and we continue to appreciate and enjoy her enthusiasms. ----------------------

Robertson House
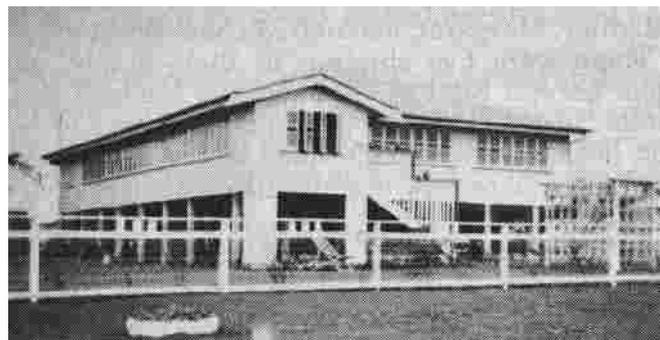
This is the only photo we have of the Robertson house (now in Kilburn Street), once the last house in Webster Road before the intersection of Gympie & Webster Roads in earlier days.

I have heard the first owner was a Mr Robertson, who was a Barber in George Street, Brisbane and a well-known character. Any more information or even verification of this information would be good. This house was discussed at a CDHS meeting many years ago. The new owners would like to find out about the house's history.
Carol Cunningham. ------------------------------------

CDHS Photo Display at Age Expo 2014

The Age Expo was held at Kedron Wavell Services Club in March and we had a stall upstairs and this display in the foyer. The display was so popular we were invited to keep it on for a fortnight after the Expo ended. We need some more helpers for such displays. It takes two people two hours to set up and two hours to dismantle – total of eight human hours. Get it?