



# Leongatha & District HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Mechanics' Institute, McCartin St., Leongatha

*Preserving our Heritage*

*Newsletter*     Volume 18 Number 3, July 2021

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**Society rooms number:** 56622492

The Society rooms are open Thursdays and Fridays between 12 & 4pm

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**PO Box 431 Leongatha 3953**

## **Latest News**

### **Keeping the Historical Society rooms**

In order to open the Historical Society to the public we need help staffing the facility. Please give us an hour or two of your time in order to have the Mechanics' Institute open on Thursdays and Fridays from 12 to 4 pm.

Email [leongathahistory@gmail.com](mailto:leongathahistory@gmail.com) or call 0400249048.

### **Anzac lunch**

Our annual Anzac lunch was held on 21 April at the RSL. This was very well attended and enjoyed. Some of our men and women who lost their lives in WWII were the subject of the presentation by Lyn Skillern.

### **Anzac Day**

Two of our members spoke at services on Anzac Day. Alan McGuinness spoke at Mt Eccles – the Sandarkan death march, and Lyn Skillern at Mardan – the soldiers of Mardan and district.

## Cataloguing

Pat Spinks and Kellie Smith have started cataloguing again. As a number of items have recently been donated and we need help cataloguing them.

## GAAHS (The Gippsland Association of Affiliated Historical Societies)

Bob Newton was awarded a Gippsland History award at the GAAHS annual meeting at Yarram on 22 May. As Bob was unable to attend, Lyn Skillern accepted the award on his behalf. At the Leongatha Historical Society meeting on 14 July, Lyn presented Bob with his award. He was thrilled and honoured to be recognised for his contribution to the preservation and appreciation of Gippsland history. Bob's books on the history of street, road and place names in the former shires of Korumburra and Mirboo are available at the Society rooms. He is working on similar books for the former Woorayl Shire and South Gippsland Shire.



Bob and Lyn at the presentation. Photograph from the Sentinel Times 20 July.

## *Wiberg's Gold*

Following a recent request for information on this topic I decided to undertake some research. The following is the story of Wiberg and his gold, a real South Gippsland legend.

This story begins in 1877 with a large shipment of new gold sovereigns. These were being taken from Sydney to Sri Lanka. The coins were stamped with a very specific wreath design and they were unique. The shipment went from Sydney to Melbourne on a P & O ship called the *SS Avoca*. It was then transferred to the *RMS China* for the trip to Galle in Sri Lanka. The gold coins had been placed in six strong boxes, banded and sealed, then placed in larger boxes and surrounded by sawdust. These were then placed in the strongroom of the ship. The ship's captain held the only key. When the shipment arrived in Galle, the contents of one of the six boxes was found to have disappeared. It was not known on which ship the theft took place or how the robbery remained undetected for so long. In some reports it was stated that after the removal of the gold a quantity of bolts and iron or lead were placed in the inner box thus giving it a similar weight to the untampered boxes. When the boxes were taken from *SS Avoca* to the *RMS China* it was in one lot. It was therefore understandable that the theft was not discovered at this point.

Martin Wiberg (also spelled Weiberg or Wyberg) was the ship's carpenter on the *SS Avoca* travelling from Sydney to Melbourne. It was later discovered that Wiberg was an alias and he was really a Norwegian named Olsen. During the voyage he was asked to repair the lock on the strongroom door and although he was watched, he was able to make an imprint of the key. After the robbery it was

shown that there was a small hatch at the back of the deck just large enough for a small man to fit through. The seals and bands on the gold boxes were cleverly cut and replaced so that the theft was not discovered until the shipment reached Sri Lanka. By 1878 Wiberg was believed to be a main suspect. He had by now ceased working for the shipping company and had married a Rosina Brackley from Melbourne.

The following year Wiberg and Rosina had a daughter named Ethel Christina and Rosina was pregnant with their second child. Wiberg had taken up a selection of 120 acres near Tarwin Lower and had built a small cottage on the land. When he was arrested the officers searched the property and found two places where Martin had hidden a number of the gold sovereigns. One was a large carpenter's plane casually left in a nearby hollow tree. The plane had been drilled and filled with 54 of the gold sovereigns and then the plug was replaced. The quality workmanship made it almost impossible to detect if it was not for the excessive weight of the plane. 256 sovereigns were found in a drum of tallow and others were hidden inside cakes of homemade soap.



Detectives found 310 of the 5000 missing coins at the farm. Officers later located another 1420 coins including those Wiberg had sent to Melbourne for the purchase of a boat.

The detectives interviewed Wiberg who finally confessed to the crime. It was reasonably clear that he must have had an accomplice as it would have been very difficult to transport 5000 coins with a combined weight of 1500 kilograms without anyone noticing. Wiberg named the ship's first officer, Robert Elliston as his accomplice. Elliston had left P and O and was living in England. Eventually it was proven that Elliston was innocent and he was eventually given compensation for damages to his reputation. The accomplice was never found. There is a theory that the assistant brought a boat up alongside the *Avoca* while it was sailing near Inverloch. The gold was possibly transferred during the night and then taken through Andersons Inlet and moved up the Tarwin River.

The police made a deal with Wiberg who was to show them places where he had hidden the gold on his selection. He had supposedly hidden a large number of sovereigns in a kettle in the Tarwin River. Wiberg travelled up the Tarwin with two detectives and a boatman and they dragged the river using a pole and hook without success. Wiberg was not handcuffed and he helped the others. On the second day he took the chance and escaped.

Wiberg was on the run for about 5 months living in the bush between the Inverloch and Walkerville. He made friends with a man named Pearce who took sovereigns to Melbourne and returned with supplies. Wiberg is believed to have camped regularly in a cave near Eagles Nest, Inverloch. He was an excellent swimmer and often swam across Anderson Inlet braving the freezing water and sharks.

He must have been a good swimmer to be able to achieve this feat. It was this that finally led to his capture. Using field glasses detectives watched the inlet from a cape nearby. In May 1879 they saw Wiberg swimming across. They recaptured him, he pleaded guilty and he received a sentence of five years.

After his release in 1883 Wiberg and his brother bought a small yacht called the *Neva*. They sailed it to The Glennie Islands near Walkerville. Rosina was living in Walkerville (then called Lime burners) with their youngest child and working as a housekeeper for a local family. It is believed Martin left his brother in the *Neva* and rowed a small boat to Walkerville. The sea became very rough and Wiberg had been drinking. He may have visited one of his hiding places and collected some of the gold. He tried to get Rosina and the child to come with him but Rosina refused. Wiberg attempted to row back to the *Neva*. The waves were massive and he disappeared. Soon after the small boat and an oilskin coat belonging to Wiberg were found washed up on Yanakie Beach. It was therefore thought that Wiberg had been drowned.



The steamship *Gazelle* was in the vicinity and her master, Captain Leith, went out to the islands and found Martin's brother on the *Neva*. The *Gazelle* towed the *Neva* in to Walkerville. The brother refused to believe that Wiberg had drowned and many locals seemed to feel the same. It was reported that lights and fires were seen on the nearby islands and Captain Leith made another investigation of the islands. He found nothing. Eventually the *Gazelle* towed the *Neva* to Melbourne with Rosina and her younger child on board the *Gazelle*.

In December of 1883 it was published that Wiberg had not drowned but had boarded the steamship *Sorata* and was on the way to London. Further rumours came about that Wiberg had settled in Sweden and owned a large hotel.

Just to add confusion to this incredible story it was reported in 1894 that a young man by the name of Radcliffe had discovered a skeleton while digging a drain at Waratah Bay. The skeleton was complete except for a small portion at the back of the skull. The general consensus of opinion was that it was Wiberg but of course this leads us to the question of who murdered him.

No more of the gold was found until 1904 when a farmer near Inverloch found 75 gold sovereigns while chopping an old tree for firewood. In all, 1775 sovereigns were retrieved. This means that 3225 solid gold sovereigns with a present-day value in the millions have not been found.

The selection once occupied by Wiberg's was sold to Frances Longmore. Longmore and his sons searched the property for 15 years and never found a single sovereign. He sold the property to J and C. Widdis who in turn sold to Peter Clement. He purchased this property for his sisters Jeannie and Margaret Clement. The Wiberg selection was part of the property known as *Tullaree*. Jeannie and Margaret Clement eventually lost their fortune and lived on this property in poverty until their deaths. Jeannie passed away first and in 1953 Margaret Clement, known as the *Lady of the Swamp* disappeared. She was believed to have been murdered but the mystery was never solved.

Over the years many have searched for the gold without success.

The main reference for this story is *Buried Treasures* by Anne O'Riley

## McCartin's Commercial Hotel

John Hyett has discovered some interesting information regarding McCartin's Commercial Hotel. The hotel site was purchased by Hugh McCartin at the first Leongatha land sale on 2 April 1889. He had the hotel built and needed to run it as a coffee palace before gaining a license. John found this list of licence holders which starts with Hugh McCartin in 1895. It is very unlikely that no license was obtained before 1895 so we have a question mark here. The person holding the licence is not of course necessarily the owner of the hotel. From the list below we see that Hugh McCartin was followed by as licensee by a John P Rowan in 1901. Percy Rowan followed in 1910. Solomon Maddern Jr was next running the hotel from 1911-20.



McCartin's Hotel when the Rowans ran the hotel

### The Madderns

Richard Trembath Maddern was born in Cornwall and immigrated to Australia in the 1850s with his wife and three children. Two of these children died shortly after arriving. The surviving child was Solomon who married Isabelle nee Foster in 1876. They had two children born in Eldorado, a mining town between Wangaratta and Byawatha where Richard was farming later in life. James Foster Maddern was born in 1878. Around this time the family moved to Tasmania where another eight children were born between 1882 and 1897. These were born in Emu Bay (now Burnie) and at Waratah, a mining town in the north west. The early birth records list Solomon as a miner and later a storekeeper.

At this point we get to the hotels. Two hotels were licenced to Solomon Maddern prior to him coming to Leongatha. By 1913 Solomon Jr was recorded as hotelkeeper of Leongatha. By 1914 most of the rest of the family had arrived in the town. Solomon Snr was recorded as a man of

independent means at one point. William Foster Maddern was a cordial manufacture. In 1922 there are 16 Madderns registered in the Leongatha area with Solomon Snr being a grocer.

In the 1920s aeroplanes were a novelty and when one came to town it was a highlight. The first recorded visit of an aeroplane was at the Caledonian Sports Carnival in 1920. It landed on the outskirts of town in Sol Maddern's paddock on Koonwarra Road. The pilots hoped to take passengers for a joy ride but the weather was too windy. They did make some money charging 1s 6p for a look at the aeroplane. Sol Maddern changed the name of his property to *Aeroview* in honour of the aeroplane visit.



Rowan's cart 1900 to 1911

### **Licenses of the Commercial Hotel Leongatha**

1895 H McCartin. This appears incorrect as he built the hotel in 1890 and ran it as a coffee palace briefly before obtaining a licence. This would not have taken four or five years.

1901-1909 John P Rowan

1910-1911 Percy Rowan

1911-1920 Solomon Maddern

1920-1921 Edward Sheehan

1921-1925 Margaret Sheehan

1925 John C Simpson

1928-1930 W G Hickson. There were 24 bedrooms and 1 bathroom and it was proposed to add 10 more rooms and some bathrooms.

1930 Miss A M Falkenberg

1936 Mrs A Falkenberg

1939 Mr E Gibson

1941 James Howard

1949 Mrs A M Falkenberg

Mrs Aileen Mary Falkenberg had the licence for the period 1930-1936. She then moved to a Korumburra Hotel in 1937 and in 1949 was recorded as a licensed victualler in Queensberry St North Melbourne. Why was she listed as the licensee of McCartin's at this time is unknown. The Howard family ran the hotel from the late 1930s until the 70s. They could have taken over the licence sometime from 1939 to 1941. When Jack Howard enlisted in the army in 1940 he gave his occupation as hotel manager and his address as the Commercial Hotel Leongatha.

**The Exhibition on Volunteer Emergency Services and Medical Care.** This is now complete.

Thank you to Alan McGuinness for all his work in seeking out material for display and setting up the exhibition. Thank you also to George Misson for his excellent work on the display on the history of

surf lifesaving in South Gippsland. As soon as this Covid lockdown ends we will be open on Thursdays and Fridays 12 to 4 or by appointment for those wishing to see the exhibition.

**Membership form. For the Year 2021-2022**

A reminder that your annual membership is now due.

\$30 for individuals                      \$40 for Family

A direct deposit may be paid into the society's bank account at Bendigo Bank, Leongatha:

Leongatha & District Historical Society

BSB: 633000 a/c: 182712406

(Please include your name as reference, and notify us by e-mail to leongathahistory@gmail.com

You can copy this form, paste it to a new document and email back to us.

or post to

PO Box 431 Leongatha 3953

**New memberships** are welcome or updating your details by completing the form below:

**Membership type:**                                      **Single \$30**                                      **Couple/Family \$40**

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