

# OLD GEELONG GAOL



In protective custody  
1995—2019



THE MOST IMPORTANT PROJECT UNDERTAKEN BY THE ROTARY CLUB OF GEELONG



*The three remaining Rotarian Gaol Keepers from the original committee in 1995.  
From left to right:-  
Alec Hand, Bill Holt, Brian Hall*

## Introduction

*We take you back in time to set the scene...*

Building of the historic Old Geelong Gaol commenced in 1849 but was not completed until 1865. However the first prisoners were admitted in 1853 and from that time until 1991 the Gaol was in continuous use in a number of different roles.

When the Gaol closed in 1991 there was no immediate plan regarding its future role or use. It was not long before the buildings were being attacked by vandals, artefacts and historical pieces stolen and hundreds of pigeons took occupancy leaving parts of the building in very poor condition. Late in 1993 Ray Abikhair and Kevin Yelverton, both members of the Rotary Club of Geelong, initiated the idea that the Club consider leasing the Gaol and using the Governor's residence and former Warders' accommodation to provide an operational base for Serenity House – a community organisation helping people with drug or alcohol addiction.

## Commissioners Running Geelong

*At this time the City of Greater Geelong was administered by three Commissioners appointed by the State Government – Bill Dix (Chairman), Glyn Jenkins (a member of the Rotary Club of Geelong) and Frank Wilkes.*

In September 1994, after much consideration and detailed planning, Ray Abikhair and the then Club President John Julian submitted a comprehensive proposal to Mr Dix regarding the future management and uses for the Old Geelong Gaol. Key recommendations included that the City purchase the Gaol on behalf of the Community of Geelong and that the Rotary Club of Geelong lease the facility from the City. The Rotary proposal was accepted by Mr Dix and the City purchased the Gaol for \$360,000 with an interest free loan from the Victorian State Government. The initial base rental for the Rotary Club to lease the Gaol was set at \$25,000 per annum

## The Journey Begins

The Rotary Club's Old Geelong Gaol Project commenced in earnest in April 1995 with a massive and difficult clean-up undertaken by Club members on a voluntary basis. Six months later in November 1995 the Gaol was opened to the public. Thus began an exceptional 24 year commitment—by far the longest, biggest and most successful community service project ever undertaken by the Club. The key results on the next page emphasise the importance and outstanding success of this community service project:

## Key Results from 24 years at the Old Geelong Gaol

- ▼ *Total rental paid by the Club to the City of Greater Geelong actually exceeded \$650,000 (approximately \$853,200 in today's money).*
- ▼ *Net of rental and all other expenses total funds raised by the Club exceeded \$1,520 000 (approximately \$1, 835,100 in today's money).*
- ▼ *Over the 24 year period more than 30,000 voluntary hours were provided by members of the Rotary Club of Geelong – emphasising that Service is the very basis of Rotary*



## Key Facts

### The whole Community has enjoyed the benefit

Thousands of visitors local, intra/ interstate and overseas have been able to visit the Gaol and experience part of Geelong's early history. Similarly thousands of school children and members of social groups have also been able to visit the Gaol and learn some of the early history through presentations and guided tours.

Various community organisations and enterprises including Serenity House; Mental Health Consumers' Union; Brotherhood of St Laurence; Karingal, Diversitat; Lazarus House and Barwon Health have been able to lease parts of the Gaol at significantly below normal commercial rates.

All funds raised have been used to support deserving local and international projects.

## Key Objectives

The following pages provide an outline of how this project of the Rotary Club of Geelong developed - the initial objectives, key contributors, tourism and educational activities and the leasing of parts of the Gaol to a range of community and other business organisations.

Without doubt the prime mover in developing the proposal presented to the Chief Commissioner of the City of Greater Geelong (Mr Bill Dix) was Ray Abikhair (Pictured left).

At the time Serenity House was making use of the front buildings of the Gaol and this was taken into account in developing the Rotary proposal. The Club's key objectives in the proposal to Mr Dix were as follows:

- ▼ To provide cost effective usage of the Gaol facilities for the benefit of Geelong and other communities and their charitable organisations.
- ▼ Continue to permit Serenity House Drug and Alcohol Program use of the front buildings at a discounted rental for housing, counselling, administration, as well as for therapeutic and maintenance work opportunities, workshop training opportunities and fund raising.
- ▼ Secure for the Rotary Club of Geelong a long term and high quality fundraising opportunity.
- ▼ Maintain and preserve the Gaol as a building of unique historic significance for the general public to appreciate as a cost positive tourist attraction.



*One of the hundreds of school groups that have visited the Gaol over the 24 years.*



*The clean up team preparing for the grand opening*

## Inaugural Gaol Committee

The Club's original Old Geelong Gaol Committee of 1994/95 comprised the following Club members:

Ray Abikhair	Chairman
Bill Holt	Secretary/Finance
Margaret Cameron	Marketing, Publicity & Promotion
Leigh Dicker	Presentation/History
Brian Hall	Merchandise/Catering
Alec Hand	Member Co-ordination
John Hume	Buildings/Maintenance
Colin Walker	Projects Planning

*Attachment 1* lists the eight Club members who headed the Old Geelong Gaol Committee over the twenty-four years of the project.

As shown above Bill Holt was the Gaol Committee's original Secretary and continued in this role for the entire 24 years of the project.

For many years Ewen Urquhart was the Gaol Committee member responsible for handling requests/enquiries to hold functions at the Gaol.

Over recent years he was assisted in this task by Frank Thompson after completing no less than eight years as Gaol Committee Chairman.

Various Club members looked after visits to the Gaol by schools and other groups but the greatest load was borne enthusiastically by Brian Hall.

Legal matters for the Gaol Committee were handled by member Gary Bent (of Ingpen & Bent) and later by his business partner Peter Gillham

## Sponsors of Push button recorded information stations

- ▼ **Brockman & Son.**  
(John Brockman)
- ▼ **McCanns Pumbing**  
(Ray Abikhair)
- ▼ **Geelong Radio Cabs**  
(Bill Ahern)
- ▼ **Geelong Moteliers Association**
- ▼ **K Rock/Bay FM**

## Early Promotional Material

- ▼ **Go To Gaol**  
(A brochure produced by Dary Heath's Pace Advertising and sponsored by Club Members Ray Abikhair, Ewen Urquhart and John Verell was distributed widely to Motels and Caravan Parks in Geelong and surrounds.)
- ▼ **Promotional Signs**  
Professionally produced signs, including the Rotary logo, were installed on the outer front wall and the entrance to the Gaol.
- ▼ **Tour Guide Brochure**  
1997 Brian Hall developed a Guide brochure to assist members on Gaol duty.

## Early Development of the Project

As indicated on the previous page, before the Gaol could be opened for visitors a massive clean-up was undertaken by Club members over many days. Pigeons were a huge problem and cleaning up the mess they left certainly was no easy task. After the cleaning, netting was installed in guard stations and other areas to prevent further pigeon access. Other maintenance tasks included painting and re-connection of electricity.

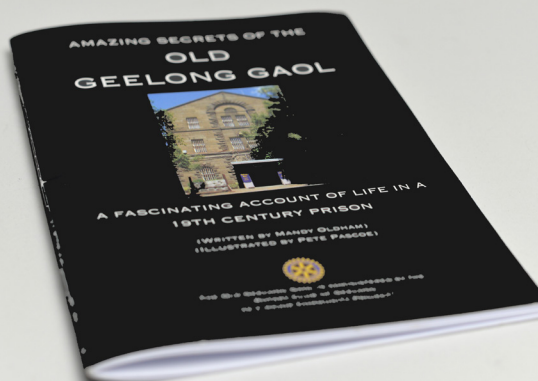
With the Gaol in reasonably clean condition, work proceeded with the installation of signage and exhibits in various cells. The Club engaged the services of Shirley Peters as a part-time Manager. Not only did she ensure the Gaol was kept in clean condition but, on her own initiative Shirley did much to make visiting the Gaol more interesting and informative by adding items of historic interest and displays in many of the cells. With skill and abundant energy she redeveloped the Gaol front courtyard garden which was in a sorry condition after years of neglect. Shirley's contribution in the early years was very significant and much appreciated.

The Club spent some \$15,000 on the production of interpretive panels and displays. Member Ray Slack did much of the original research including interviewing former warders of the Gaol. Using material developed by Ray and members Margaret Cameron and Bill Holt, in 1996 five push button recorded information stations were installed and maintained by Peter Wood and his company 'Clockwork Productions'. Four of these stations were sponsored, including three by companies of Club members. K Rock/Bay FM was acknowledged as the fifth sponsor in recognition of their free advertising of the Club's Old Geelong Gaol project.

For a long time two Rotarians were scheduled for each day the Gaol was open (week-ends, school holidays and most public holidays). One member was at the reception desk and the other provided a brief commentary on the Gaol's history and, if required, conducted a brief tour of the facility. In more recent years, with a lower Club membership, only one member was scheduled but encouraged to get a friend or family member to accompany them.

For many years Alec Hand was responsible for ensuring the Gaol Roster was filled; more recently this task was undertaken by member Trevor Lunn.

Ray French ensured the current Gaol Roster and relevant operating notes appeared in every Club 'Tatler'. He designed and managed the printing of promotional brochures and other publications including this brochure.



*Mandy Oldham's Book, "Amazing Secrets of the Old Geelong Gaol"*

*Mandy Oldham in conjunction with our Club, was the author of "Amazing Secrets of the Old Geelong Gaol" published in 2013. This booklet has had several re-prints and has provided a modest income stream for our Club. Mandy was responsible for designing and producing some of the postcards sold at the Gaol. She has been a frequent, voluntary guide at the Gaol, helped maintain exhibits and looked after the Old Geelong Gaol Facebook page. Mandy also assisted in the research for this publication.*

## Ongoing Support & Involvement

In addition to Shirley Peters and the sustained contribution of members, our Club acknowledges with gratitude the help received from others including:

- ▼ Laurie Maxwell and Phyl Williams for painting the surgery and other areas of the Gaol.
- ▼ Pentridge Warders Association for the provision of useful information and exhibits particularly about Pentridge Prison.
- ▼ Wilson's Real Estate for making their Geelong office available for many years as a pick-up/drop off point for the Rotary satchel (containing cash, keys etc. used by members on Gaol duty) and for their staff banking and recording daily takings at the Gaol. (The Principal, Guyon Wilson was a member of the Rotary Club of Geelong for many years and Chairman of the Old Geelong Gaol Committee in 1998/99).
- ▼ Over more recent years the pick-up/drop off location for the Rotary satchel was the home of Club Treasurer David Barkley who then had immediate access to Gaol revenue for banking and the recording of daily takings.

## The Gordon Connection

Around 1997 the Club commenced an active association with the Gordon Technical College through which Tourism students gained practical experience as guides for school visits to the Gaol after being trained by member Brian Hall. The association was one of mutual benefit with the Club providing the Gordon with \$3,000 for the development of promotional material and an annual award of \$1,000 for the best Tourism student as selected by the College. The practical experience gained by the Gordon students was appreciated by the Gordon while our Club benefited by being able to have a greater number of other school visits to the Gaol by using Gordon students as Tour Guides. This association of mutual benefit lasted some ten years and during this time Gordon staff members Monica Evans and Lyn Papworth were regular attendees at our Club Gaol Committee Meetings.



*The Rotarians assisting Tony Robinson at the Gaol.*



*International Bonnet competition Ceremony at the Old Geelong Gaol*

## Filming at the Old Geelong Gaol

In 1995 the Gaol Committee negotiated with the ABC for the filming on site of the "Correlli" series. The \$30,000 from the ABC more than covered the cost of demolition of the non-heritage listed mess hall adjacent to the Gaol kitchen, the fabrication of a temporary structure at the Gaol South Gate exit and its removal on completion of filming. An item of interest with regard to this filming is that it was at the Old Geelong Gaol that acclaimed actor Hugh Jackman met his future wife Deborra Lee Furness.

In 2012 a United Kingdom TV Miniseries "Mrs Biggs" (wife of the great train robber Ronald Biggs) was filmed at the Gaol. At least one Rotarian member still likes to brag about appearing as an "Extra" in this film!

The Old Geelong Gaol featured also in one of Tony Robinson's "Australian Time Walks" series with a mock 'break-out' by a group of Rotary members.

## Functions at the Old Geelong Gaol

Over the past twenty-four years many functions including corporate events, birthday celebrations, theatrical events and the occasional Rotary luncheon have been held at the Old Geelong Gaol. It was the site for a very successful 1997 Rotary District Conference Dinner attended by some 180 delegates. In March 2008 it was the venue for "Ceremony of the Bonnets" – a presentation relating to early convict history in Australia.

## Long Term Associations

*Geelong Radio & Electronics Society. On a long term, rent free basis approved by the Rotary Club, the Society was able to house and exhibit memorabilia, with access from the main hall.*

*Barwon Health  
In August 1997 the South East Yard was leased to Barwon Health to provide 55 car parking spaces for use by their staff.  
In 2012 Barwon Health leased the laundry for storage and the North East Yard for additional car parking.*

*Following use by Serenity House, the Governor's Residence was leased to Mental Health Consumers' Union and later to Barwon Health for office space.*

## Tenants of the Old Geelong Gaol

As indicated previously the ongoing use of the front buildings (Governor's Residence and Warders' accommodation) by Serenity House formed part of the Rotary Club's original proposal to the City in 1994. From then leases were negotiated with a range of community groups and other organisations generally at rentals well below normal commercial rates. Thus effective use was made of this community asset in addition to opening the facility to visitors.

A list of tenants follows:

Corilong was the first tenant in the Recreation Room, followed by St Laurence who established Art Unlimited (art for the disabled). St Laurence spent \$50,000 to make the area suitable for use by the artists.

The first floor above the Recreation Room was leased to the Gayle Burrill School of Entertainment and the Kerry Louise Dancing School.

For a brief period David Miles (Aquiess) leased space on the first floor above the kitchen/cool room area. He is now selling his weather moderation technology on a world-wide basis.

The former Gaol laundry and the North East Yard were leased to St Laurence for their gardening operation .

The former Trade Workshop was leased initially to Back to Back Theatre and later to St Laurence Art Studio, in both cases for use by people with disabilities. In October 2014 this area was taken over by Karingal (now known as Gen U).

In 2017 the Recreation Room was leased to Protective Services, a private organization providing training in protective and custodial services.

Over recent years the former Warders' Accommodation was leased to Diversitat (a Geelong based migrant resource centre) and then in 2017 to Lazarus House (assistance/accommodation for the homeless), in both cases at significantly discounted lease rates.

In terms of business agreements negotiated with the Rotary Club, Limelight Tours (previously known as Twisted History) has conducted Candlelight Tours of the Gaol. More recently an agreement was negotiated with Escape Room Games Ltd to conduct real time puzzle games in the Gaol.

Both of these tourist activities have received good public support.

## Conclusion

With the recent sale of the Old Geelong Gaol by the City, this 24 year service project of the Rotary Club of Geelong ends officially on June 21 2019. Relevant negotiations for our Club were handled primarily by Members Frank Thompson and Robert Creece

By any standard this service project has been an outstanding success, not only in terms of the funds raised to support deserving local and international needs, but also in preserving an historic community asset and enabling thousands of visitors to experience part of Geelong's early history. In addition, many community organisations have been able to make use of the property at rentals well below normal commercial rates.

The Rotary Club of Geelong thanks all those who took part in the journey of this project.



### *Key drivers of this project*

*Front Row:- Brian Hall, Bill Holt, Ray Abikhair, Neil Thomas, Back Row:- Ray French, Andrew Lawson, Gyon Wilson, Alec Hand , Frank Thompson,. Inset Ewen Urquhart.*

*Absent Clive Nicholas*

## Attachment1

### Rotary Club of Geelong Chairmen -- Old Geelong Gaol Committee

1994/95 – 1995/96	Ray Abikhair
1996/97 – 1997/98	Alec Hand
1998/99 –	Guyon Wilson
1999/2000	Brian Hall
2000/01 – 2002/03	Clive Nicholas
2003/04 – 2007/08	Andrew Lawson
2008/09 – 2015/16	Frank Thompson
2016/17 – 2018/19	Neil Thomas



## Attachment2

### Rotary Club of Geelong Final Old Geelong Gaol Committee -- 2018/19

From top Left to Right

Neil Thomas Chairman

Robert Creece

Alec Hand

Leslie Hatton

Bill Holt

Trevor Lunn

Frank Thompson

Ewen Urquhart



#### Legend

- 1. Wardens Residence
- 2. Governors Residence
- 3. Recreational building

- 4. Laundry Building
- 5. Main Cell Block
- 6. Trade Workshop
- 7. Recreational Area





*End of an Era 21st June 2019*

**Rotary**  
Club of Geelong Inc.



*Authors:- Alec Hand & Bill Holt April 2019*