

## Melbourne Bearbrass Probus Annual Report 2021-2022

When I delivered the annual report 12 months ago I think we were all imbued with a sense of optimism that the next 12 months would see our community get back to “normal” fairly quickly. Who would have thought then that most of 2021 would be a roller coaster of restrictions on where we could go and with how many people, then the easing of those restrictions and then inevitably the imposition of restrictions again. Repeat!

Without meaning to sound as if I am forgetting or trivialising the real hardships and grief experienced by many members of the community, as a Probus club we found it difficult to get any continuity and plan anything other than short term activities. We had 4 face to face general meetings here at the Dock and the rest were done using Zoom. Other events were either face to face or via Zoom depending upon the prevailing restrictions.

The experience gained in being a mostly online club over 2020 was valuable and allowed us, I believe, to continue to be very successful and participate in a range of interesting activities despite the uncertainties surrounding us.

Our membership over the past 12 months has grown by 24% to 72 in total, however our male/ female ratio has changed from 40/60 to 25/75 and I'll talk a little bit about that later. We have lost a few members, most for the usual reasons of shifting out of the area and health problems but some others due to the impacts of transitioning from the club they joined, which was mostly online to the traditional Probus, face to face model.

Despite all the ups and downs, we have had a great deal of fun along the way. Over the past 12 months:

The speaker program ably managed by Jill de Araugo, has been first class. Topics ranged from the Boys Club running the AFL, stories of the early days of Melbourne, history of Puffing Billy and living in Japan as an ex pat, plus many other interesting topics.

We had a trip to Bright for 2 nights, organised by our event organiser extraordinaire, Jan Stewart. A great opportunity for us to get to know each other a little better and enjoy each other's company.

There has also been day trips to Port Arlington (organised by Tony Thomas), Castlemaine to the Buda House (organised by Jan Stewart), the Shrine of Remembrance (organised by Julie Reid), the Johnson Collection (organised by Rosemary Keillerup), Mary Quant exhibition (organised by Kerrie Matthee) and quite a few other interesting outings.

The regular monthly groups continued to thrive:

The Walking Group walked around historical sites in Port Melbourne, Fitzroy, Carlton, the CBD, Kensington, Maribyrnong and other places thanks mostly to the skills and knowledge of Dawn Riddel and Clive Gartner (next week on the 18<sup>th</sup> the walk is around Williamstown)

Our two cinema groups, one organised by Susan Bower and the other by Cate Thomson (and Julie Cookson too??) have given members the opportunity to watch films that are deep and meaningful cinematic master pieces to those that are just plain good old fashioned entertainment. These outings are always followed by serious discussions about “what really happened” over a bite to eat and a glass or two of something.

Sue Hoille's coffee mornings have been great successes, moving around various locations in Docklands and again getting our new group a chance to know each other a bit better.

Cate Thompson's Book Club was one of the first groups formed and has been operating regularly ever since. The group reads generally available current books that provoke vibrant discussions.

The Writers Group mentored by Tony Thomas late in 2021, was a wonderful initiative that produced the book of stories and poems we all received at Christmas. It also made me realise what a talented group of members we have.

The Wine Tasting Group organised by Jill de Araugo, has been enthusiastically supported (sometimes a little too enthusiastically) with a curated wine tasting one month and an outing to a wine bar the other month, generally followed by dinner (and a few more wines!).

A Probus club would not be legitimate if there were not plenty of lunches and dinners going on. Julie Cookson has done a wonderful job getting us organised for lunch after our monthly meetings and organising a number of weekend lunches and also the well-attended Christmas dinner. Picnics in the park were organised by Tony so we could emerge from lock-downs in groups small enough not to have us put in jail.

The bicycle riding group went out a number of times, thanks to Greg Jeffrey's enthusiasm and I'm sure he'd be happy to get some more riders involved.

The upside of Covid restrictions were the regular trivia nights, which eventually morphed from Zoom to Kahoot, which were great fun for all as we showed our knowledge of things that matter, but mostly about things that don't matter. A lot of work went into setting up these events and many people did so – I congratulate you all, because if I start naming people I'll definitely leave someone inadvertently out.

Coral-Lee's murder mystery night was another event with enthusiastic participation.

Unfortunately though, a range of events that I won't go through had to be cancelled due to the Covid restrictions – maybe we can pick them all up in 2022/23.

Communication is an integral part of the workings of our little group. Last year we used the website, email, an open facebook page and a monthly bulletin (as well as announcements at the monthly meetings) to keep members abreast of what was happening and what was planned to happen. Some of the questions included in the annual survey related to the effectiveness of the various communication channels. It became apparent that there was a significant amount of content duplication across the various channels, and a significant amount of effort was involved in pushing the material out to members.

Consequently it was decided that the monthly bulletin would be discontinued and the Facebook page would be made a members only closed group, to facilitate discussions between members. The focus of our digital communication is now solely on the website and direct emails to members. So please remember it is important to check your emails and the website frequently to keep up with what is happening.

It has been a good year for publicity too – many articles have been published in the various Probus publications, but also we have begun to get some exposure in local Southbank and Docklands newspapers, both hard copy and in the digital editions, which should lead to some new member interest.

On balance things are going well for our club and the future looks bright. However, I would like to bring to your attention a number of challenges which we will need to address to ensure our future success and ongoing viability.

The first is our gender balance. Melbourne Bearbrass was established as a mixed gender club (quaintly called a "combined" club in Probus head-office speak). For the initial period of our club we had a male/female ration of 40/60. Our current gender balance is now 25% male and 75% female. Probus South Pacific in its "Club Handbook – Helpful Guidelines for Management Committees", recommends that clubs endeavour to maintain a gender balance of 50/50. The operative word is "endeavour", not "must", and it is obvious that obtaining gender balance is a very, very challenging objective akin to Collingwood winning another premiership in my lifetime. The management committee has discussed this issue and plans to put in place some strategies to attract more male members in the future (this of course does not mean that any women wishing to join the club will be discriminated against). In the short term, if you could all give some thought to any males you know who would enjoy the benefits of membership of Melbourne Bearbrass, please invite them along to try us out.

The second challenge is that of the identification and organisation of events. You will have noticed that due to the contact restrictions placed on us all during the various lock-downs there has not been a simple forum to discuss what events we should be doing or when and who will organise. Many of the events put up so far have been the ideas of individual members of the committee, rather than as a result of canvassing the membership for ideas. This top down approach is simple but may not mean that an event will have broad support amongst the membership. You will recall at the last monthly meeting there was a discussion about four possible overnight trips and members were given the opportunity to provide their preferences. It would be great if we could have more input like that. I believe that we will get higher levels of interest and greater participation in events if ideas come more broadly from the membership and if the workload of organising events is spread more widely across the group. So please come forward with your ideas – help will be provided should you need it.

The last challenge is a perennial one for most Probus clubs. It is crucial that management committee positions are filled and refreshed and that there is a timely turnover of occupants of roles and the committee in general. We can have a management committee of up to nine members. For 2022/23 my understanding is that we will have a committee of seven. Nearly all members of the club have backgrounds that would allow them to be effective members of the management committee. It isn't too onerous being a management committee member and it can be very rewarding to help influence the direction and activities of the club.

I must also take the opportunity to thank the other committee members for their hard work and enthusiasm over the past 12 months.

As you all know Anne Fairhall started the year as Vice President and Welfare Officer but unfortunately due to many pressing personal issues had to resign from the committee mid-year. Many thanks to Anne for being a very supporting vice president and an active Welfare Officer.

Consequently, our Secretary Sue Hoile offered take the role of Vice President (and of course president-elect) in addition to her existing, time-consuming role as Secretary. The secretary role is the busiest in the club and includes a myriad of activities from doing the minutes, organising meeting agendas, handling new member applications and inductions, liaising with Probus South Pacific and all the other administrative things that allow us to function as a club. Oh and of course having to put up with me as President.

On behalf of the club Sue, please accept this pot plant as a small token of appreciation.

Mike Brophy, who couldn't make it today, is retiring from the treasurer role and has done a great job keeping us financially liquid and making sure the bills get paid.

Tony Thomas, who also couldn't make it today and who is also stepping down from the committee, was very instrumental in getting quite a few events off the ground this year and did a great job in providing constant updates to the website, plus organising publicity in local newspapers and the Probus South Pacific publications.

Jill de Araugo, is another who couldn't make it today, but did a wonderful job with organising the speaker program, another very time consuming task. Jill also undertook a review of the effectiveness of the club's communications channels too.

Greg Jeffrey has done a mighty job in being our website guru and ClubRunner czar, and also providing tech support to those members who need it.

Cate Thompson, who is retiring from the committee, has done great work in keeping track of the scheduling of all the events, activities and interest groups, so we don't have overlaps and developing the procedures to help convenors provide the details to ensure all of our activities go off smoothly.

Julie Cookson, who is also retiring from the committee, is "Ms. Reliable" – she has organised all the lunches and dinners over the past 12 months, with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of fun and enjoyment.

Cate and Julie, could you both step forward please? I have a small gift for each of you from the club in appreciation of all the hard work you have both put in over the past 2 years!

It would be remiss of me not to thank Ray and Gaylene Duncan and Jean Houston for the work they put into organising the meetings at the Dock – so thanks to all of you.

So, that is the “year in review”- as I am sure you will all agree, the club is going pretty well and will continue to thrive under the leadership of our next President Sue Hoile.

It has been a great privilege and pleasure to be President of Melbourne Bearbrass Probus and I have appreciated the support from all the committee members and the rest of the membership, especially my wife Pam, in undertaking what has been a thoroughly enjoyable role over the last 2 years.

Mel Gray  
President 2021/22  
Melbourne Bearbrass Probus