

Wonthaggi Woodcrafters Inc

CLUB HISTORY - STORY OF FOUNDING MEMBER, GEORGE HILL

Club member Nº 10

With three sisters (two older, one younger), an early indication of George's character was taking a part time job at Rowland's General Store in Graham Street (where the Julie Wade shop now stands) when he left school, instead of going underground at the mine as his dad wanted. Being unsuited to the work at Rowland's, George took up an apprenticeship as a Carpenter & Joiner with John (Jack) D Keady, Undertaker and Cabinet Maker in Graham Street (where the carpark beside the Wonthaggi Workmen's Club is now).

Apart from making cabinets and coffins, George was also required to drive the hearse to Melbourne for funerals (normally cremations of locals at the Springvale Crematorium) at the ripe old age of 15. Jack, who always wore a bowler hat to work and suffered from a terrible stammer, enjoyed a drink or two. When the local policeman also rode in the hearse officiating on these trips, George wore a peaked cap pulled low over his face to hide his tender years and lack of a drivers licence. To and from Melbourne, the hearse stopped at most pubs along the way for Jack, hence the need for George to drive! There was genuine surprise on the part of the policeman when George fronted up to get his driver's licence at the ripe old age of 18. The policeman took it well, sent George off by himself to do a number of deliveries around town and then gave him a licence on return to the station.



In 1955, George joined the Wonthaggi "Blues" footy team and earned their "Best and Fairest" award that year for being a clean cut and fair player. The team, including George, achieved the club's first premiership flag in 1959 (club was created in 1948 and played their first game in 1950). Nicknamed "Greyhound" as nobody could catch him, George was encouraged to eat lots of bananas and drink lots of milk to try and put "some meat" on his skinny frame, they might have tasted good but Mother Nature prevailed. George, together with Ron Gilmour were invited to have a kick with the South Melbourne Football Club to check them out. They were ignored by the other players, didn't like the whole thing and soon headed home. After completing his apprenticeship, George went out on his own as a builder, employing a couple of young apprentices, ?? Nesci and Peter McRae. When Peter finished his apprenticeship, George hooked up with Bill Collins for many years. Bill, we

understand, purchased the Keady business a few years after George had left and joined up with Henry Donohue to found Coldon homes. The Col is from Collins and the don is from Donahue.

George also worked with other local builders over the years including Joe Marsiglio and Charlie Griffiths. George and Dawn opened a Milk Bar beside the old Union Theatre (Milken's Funerals now occupies the site) with a nursery in the back yard, Dawn ran the shop during the week while George was building. Ron Snooks remembers the first time he met George when he went to buy Cypress trees from the nursery in 1967.

Harry Oates, George's brother-in-law together with Okke Huitema, invited George to the inaugural meeting of an, as yet, unnamed local woodwork group, in the Wonthaggi South Recreation Reserve Cricket Club Rooms on the 22nd February 1989 and as they say in the classics, the rest is history! George was elected secretary, Okke Huitema was elected president and Harry onto the executive committee. A perfectionist with a strong nature, George taught himself the craft of woodturning with the support of Okke Huitema who made George his first woodlathe. Everything George did had to be exactly right, this helped introduce a culture that has grown and persists in the now named, Wonthaggi Woodcrafters Incorporated.

To the early members who took part in club activities with George, he was a generous provider of his time, equipment, materials and practical advice, often making himself available at the expense and to the detriment of his own business.

At George's instigation, building plans were drawn up in 1997 for construction of our first clubroom, which today, is our main workshop. In the same year, the first "Down-Under Turnaround" was a great success under the guidance of the club committee led by George.



It was through George that the club made its new home at the Community Development and Learning Centre (CDLC, now the BCAEC "Jean Meltzer Centre") in 1998 and started turning demonstrations on a small Vicmarc lathe in the classrooms, these demonstrations have evolved into our various and popular group sessions.

In 1999, George, working with the BCAEC, got agreement to have the use of a building to be erected on the site, to his previously drawn up plans. In April that year, an old shade house and plant propagating area was cleared away by a club working bee to become our new building site.

Building plans were submitted to the council in 2001 but were not approved until June 2002 when building commenced with members supplying all the labour and grant monies paying for materials. The new building was officially opened by Vic Wood on the 4th December 2002.

Not only did George give up time from his own business and income over four to five months, to organise and build our main workshop, he "....put up his own monies to pay for some materials so as to ensure our first clubrooms were built...." Roy Fischmann observed of George in his 2013 life membership acceptance speech that:

"...and a more deserving recipient (George being awarded life membership in 2000) you will never find, in fact without George's leadership over many years this club would not exist today."

Ron Snooks, who was part of George's journey, both within the club and as a friend, recently observed: "We would not be where we are without him, he was the club!" George, Okke and Hartley Tobin taught a lot of new members the basics of woodturning, gave them the confidence to explore their abilities and allow them, their families, fellow club members and the community to benefit from what they achieved and to be proud of it.

Guilio Marcolongo, International Woodturner, Demonstrator and Instructor is a good example of their help and support. Guilio recently purchased the lathe from George that Okke had made. This seems an appropriate step along a path started by Okke and George, they spent a lot of time with and helped teach a young and enthusiastic Guilio, the finer points of the craft of woodturning. Each Tuesday night, George would show Noel Stubbs, Eric Thorpe, Ron Snooks and Bill Martin how to chisel and set up. His style set a very high standard for the club. George was also instrumental in establishing and participating in toy making for local kids each Saturday morning in his workshop, providing all the materials and gear.

George remained secretary of the club until 1994, was elected president in 1994, then 1997 until 2000 and 2002 until 2005 before stepping away from the day to day running of the club. Of the 26 years from 1989 to 2005, George was on the executive for 14 years or over half the time that the club has existed, five years as secretary and nine as president, a magnificent contribution to our club by any measure. During his time on the executive, our club got a name, a home, a workshop, while growing from 19 members in 1989 to 56 in 2005, membership is currently just north of 70. In recognition of his contribution to the club, he was the first member to be conferred a life membership in 2000, it was certainly well deserved.

Sources: Thanks to all those who took the time and trouble to provide their recollections of George. I had help from club members, Wonthaggi & District Historical Society, Wonthaggi "Blues" Football Club team mates, George's family and others. Thank you all.

This document was prepared by club member **Tony Hughes**