

The Kowie Museum: Looking Back - and Forward

From a talk by Heather Howard, Secretary, Kowie Museum Trust, on 19 September 2024.

The establishment of our Museum and its subsequent 41 years as “the hub of historic Port Alfred” would never have happened without the perseverance, the vision, and the hard work of teams of dedicated people over the years – our Chairmen and Committee members, The Friends of the Museum, our Curators, our desk volunteers, our visitors, the supporters of our fundraising efforts, the donors of our collections, our all-too-few but much appreciated sponsors, our local press, our security firm, even Lungisile Sinqe at Tourism who kept the keys for us and always had a smile when we collected them from him for our duties or meetings.

In fact, it has been a true community project.

And who started it all? – well you did, the Lower Albany Historical Society! Way back when this Society was formed in 1958, a museum for Port Alfred was one of the main objectives.

From then on, members of the Society set out to collect material, and eventually over *20 years later*, a sub-committee was formed. In 1980 and 1981 they held an exhibition of the collections in the Town Hall and also at the Bathurst Showgrounds, where, ironically in a circle of circumstances, we are ending up!

Then a new automatic telephone exchange was built in Main Street and the old Manual Exchange at the post office, next to the Magistrate’s office, became available, rent-free, and by 15 December 1982, the Kowie Museum opened its doors there.

And so it continued until the building was sold and in 2013 we had the luck of moving into the old station buildings, opening exactly 31 years later - almost to the day - since our first opening ceremony. Imagine – a museum inside a National Monument dating from 1884! So appropriate. We were thrilled.

So much love and care went into the displays in our new home, which was constantly being added to. Historical photographs, displays of old Port Alfred, books, cabinets, dolls, maps, kitchenware, shipwrecks, and a fine and most appropriate collection of Railway memorabilia. Our Visitors’ Book was always full of kind comments. “A gem of a museum” was one of our favourites.

We did have a blip, as so many did, during Covid when we were shut for over a year, with no income coming in. And here I must just mention finance: the Museum has been run for 41 years without a single grant. We have existed on entrance fees and fundraising (luckily in rent-free accommodation) with no grants at all, which made the demand for rent from the new Transnet concessionaire such a shock to us. “Whither our Museum?” was the subject of many months of long, worried meetings. And it made the current ‘lock stock and barrel’ move an urgent necessity.

I must mention our Chairman in more detail. Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Woman! or as Google defines it: **when a hero is needed, one appears!** Yvonne’s task as leader of a small but willing team has needed, and received from her, perseverance, tact, hard work, physical stamina, decision-making, much time, and tanks of petrol but *above all* the **VISION** to see it all through. **Our thanks and congratulations, Yvonne!**



Alan Pike, previously Curator of Bathurst Agricultural Museum, with Yvonne Surtees, Curator now Chairman of The Kowie Museum, who jointly cut the ribbon most appropriately on Heritage Day 2024 – to mark The Kowie Museum’s installation in its new home at ‘BAM’ (Photo credit: Talk of the Town)

History... is an aggregation of truths, half-truths, semi-truths, fables, myths, rumors, prejudices, personal narratives, gossip, and official prevarications. It is a canvas upon which thousands of artists throughout the ages have splashed their conceptions and interpretations of a day and an era. Some motifs are grotesque and some are magnificent. Philip D Jordan