

## An essay addressed to the Councillors of Nillumbik Shire, October 2018:

### About the Eltham War Memorial and the adjacent community-owned sites in Eltham that the Council threatens to sell

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#### **'I wonder how many of you will remember our beginnings?'**

- *Mrs Cairns Officer, first President of the Eltham War Memorial Trust, reminiscing 20 years later, in 1965.*

Who was 'Mrs Cairns Officer'?

Louise Officer (1888-1968) was one of the most distinguished and politically powerful women in Victoria in her time. She was an empire loyalist, long-term senior vice president of the conservative Victoria League and the Australian Women's National League, a consistent advocate statewide for children's health and welfare, and for country library services. An Eltham resident from 1936, she presided over numerous district service and political organisations. In 1945, on the foundation of the Eltham branch of the Liberal Party of Australia, she became secretary and delegate to its state council.

Mrs Officer and her husband, Adam Cairns Officer, lived at Lavender Park, Eltham – a large timber house, on ten acres on the Diamond Creek opposite Eltham Lower Park. When they left Eltham for Tasmania in 1951, the property was sold and the grounds were subsequently subdivided. Though many others shared in the Eltham War Memorial story, Mrs Cairns Officer was its motive force.

These are 'the beginnings' she was recalling:

#### **Eltham's War Memorial**

Eltham's Progress Society, at a well-attended meeting yesterday, decided that **its war memorial should take the form of a baby health centre, with a crèche and a children's library**. More than £300 was subscribed, and a committee will take in hand the raising of the necessary extra money and the selection of a site.

- *Argus, (Melbourne), 28 March 1945*

Seven months later...

#### **Health Centre as War Memorial**

**A Baby Health Centre as a war memorial is planned at Eltham. Efforts to raise funds have begun...**

- *Herald (Melbourne), 21 November 1945.*

When the Nillumbik Shire Council in January 2018 voted to take the first steps to destroy the Eltham War Memorial and its associated buildings, did the councillors really understand what they proposed destroying? Did they know the difference between this remarkable memorial and the RSL obelisk that now sits at the front of the site? Did they know why this memorial differs from all the rest - the other, more conventional memorials in the Shire that we honour and maintain?

(Let's call the site and the concept the 'Eltham War Memorial' for reasons of historical accuracy and consistency. Other titles and functions have been part of its collective history including Baby Health Centre, Infant Health Centre, Creche, Children's Library, War Memorial Hall and the current Eltham Pre-School and the Eltham Maternal and Child Health Centre.)

The Eltham War Memorial is unique, not just in the shire. It is the only one of its kind in Victoria.<sup>1</sup> It is a family memorial. It is a town memorial. It is a people's memorial. It is not a military memorial. It is a memorial that came to life chiefly through the actions of women. It remembers and grieves for the past but because its focus is on children it has never, ever stopped looking towards the future. Until now.

In practice it came into existence in 1945. And yet ever since its earliest stages there have been threats to the integrity of this very special memorial.

Oh yes, every time there was a good reason to over-ride the needs of the children for whom it was established. The original intention was to provide spacious grounds in the centre of town for a Baby Health Centre, a Pre-School and a Children's Library set in a garden of remembrance.

Consecutively, institutions have taken away, piece by piece, slabs of the Eltham War Memorial grounds. To the Country Roads Board for road widening. To the Country Fire Authority for a fire station. To the Elderly Citizens' Club for a meeting hall. To the RSL, via the local Council, to allow it to relocate its own war memorial.

Now the Nillumbik Council seeks to grab the last portion and pretend the history does not matter.

There is ignorance, and apparent confusion between the Eltham War Memorial and the RSL's memorial obelisk and its surrounds that now occupy much of the Main Road frontage.

This RSL obelisk began life as a World War One memorial on a different location in Eltham and was never part of the Second World War Eltham Memorial concept. There are virtues in its current placement where it now enjoys its own small heritage overlay; with interpretive panels and added names from later military conflicts, it

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in Australia there were just three designated Second World War Memorial crèches – two in Tasmania, one in Newcastle NSW. In Victoria there were some other baby centres designated as 'war memorials' post WW2, but none was part of a discrete complex of buildings dedicated to infant, child and maternal welfare.

now brings together the generations blasted by war, and is currently honoured and cared for – but it has been relocated twice in its existence, ending up here as recently as 2012 after the controversial closure of the nearby Eltham RSL building.

One result of that recent relocation is that Councillors, and Council officers in making their reports to Council, have utterly failed to research and recognise the importance of the separate Eltham War Memorial site whose buildings are now partially obscured by the formal setting in front of them.

Ironically it is only the obelisk and immediate surrounds that are protected by the current heritage overlay, and which in some undefined way the council is promising to respect. The unique Eltham War Memorial behind is ignored. This is the place that needs protection. This is the place created by the community specifically to honour those local servicemen who gave their lives in the Second World War, for the benefit of ‘the little ones for whom they fought and died’.

Once again, as with the debacle over our community reserves earlier this year, Council and officers have failed to apply due diligence in their cavalier dismissal of the real significance of this property, locally and statewide. Cavalier, because the War Memorial status of the building complex was not even mentioned in the briefing paper presented to Councillors at their meeting on 30 January 2018. A simple referral to the Eltham District Historical Society would have put the council straight.

Subsequently, in an attempt to do so, Jim Connor, President of the Society, made a detailed presentation to Councillors and to Council officers outlining the layered history of the Eltham War Memorial Complex, the Elderly Citizens’ Hall, and the adjacent former Eltham Shire Offices site, currently also in contention. All these properties have a common history along with the Eltham Library, Shillinglaw Cottage, the trestle railway bridge and Alistair Knox Reserve, being once part of the historic Shillinglaw farm.

Jim Connor told Council directly of the special purpose of this memorial as expressed in the words of its creators at the time:

**Those who have had a member of their family in the fighting services will want to see that the form of memorial we are concerned with will be a constant reminder to us of those who fought for us and the little ones for whom they fought and died.**

Was it too late when he spoke to Council? Were Councillors already committed to private development? Is the epitaph of their four years in office as Nillumbik councillors to be their grandiloquent slogan ‘Millions on Pavilions’? Millions we don’t have and which Council has sought to procure at the cost of real public assets. Most residents see such projects for what they are – vanity asserted in the face of clear community preference.



*Source: EDHS Collection*

Here is a young boy holding a ceremonial spade, setting out to dig a hole – to turn the first sod of the Eltham War Memorial Infant Welfare Centre. It is a ceremonial yet human occasion. The date is 8 July 1950.

This boy is the son of a man from our town, Theo Feldbauer, who died as a Prisoner of War in Japanese-occupied Borneo, just five years earlier on the infamous Sandakan death march. The boy could only have been four years old when he saw his father for the last time. He was eight when his father died.

I am sure the boy's widowed mother is in the crowd pictured in the background of the photo, watching proudly.

The boy Theodore, named for his father, has just turned thirteen.<sup>2</sup> Young Theo lives in Research with his mother and his two older teenage sisters, June and Valerie. Their mother, Violet Feldbauer, has been looking after them on her own since her husband joined the AIF in 1941 to serve in the fighting forces overseas.

In the photo, young Theo is accompanied and gently encouraged by the state president of the RSL, Major Frank Stevens. It is an important day for the family and for Eltham.

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Here is his father, Theodore Albert 'Curly' Feldbauer, on the day he enlisted in 1941, as VX51733, a soldier in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Infantry Force.

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<sup>2</sup> CORRECTION – Please see note at end of this essay. The boy in the picture is Albert Feldbauer, on his tenth birthday. Theodore Henry Feldbauer (not pictured) was Albert's older brother



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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I don't want to depict Curly Feldbauer as especially heroic. He was, like many of his compatriots who joined up during the war, an ordinary Australian doing his duty. In reality he saw little or no military action before his capture by the Japanese.

Curly was born in Melbourne in 1909: his naturalised German parents moved several times during his childhood. Before he was 20 he was living and working in the Eltham district. He became a well-known local sportsman. He played cricket for the Montmorency Imperials in 1929 and 1930 in the Eltham Cricket Association, and excelled as a footballer and football coach. There are press references at the time to minor misdemeanours and accidents: evidently he was up for a brawl or two, but he was also able to do a recitation at a social night to launch the Eltham Girls Club in 1932. He married a local girl, Violet Teague, in 1933. Their first child, June, was born the following year. By 1935 Curly was honorary secretary of the Research Cricket Club. He continued playing cricket regularly, mainly for Research, through till the 1940 season, after the war had begun. The girls started at Research State School in 1939 and 1940 respectively.

Violet's sister married one of the Ingram family of Research, in 1936. The Teague family lived in Beard Street, Eltham.

You can see from the photo that Curly was a well-built young man, 32 years of age when he joined up. Despite the army short-back-and-sides, the unruly hair on top took him to a height of just under 6 feet.

The Australian War Memorial records provide some bare facts about his military service.

Curly was assigned to the 2/10th Ordnance Workshops, Australian Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, attaining the rank of Sergeant. Only months after his enlistment, Sgt Feldbauer was among the thousands of Allied troops captured by the Japanese in the fall of Singapore, early in 1942. His loved ones knew nothing of his fate until July that year, when his name appeared in the long list of those 'officially missing'. A glimmer of optimism revived when he was officially reported as a Prisoner of War in mid-1943. It proved to be a false hope.

**He was one of over 2000 Allied prisoners of war held in the Sandakan POW camp in north Borneo, having been transferred there from Singapore as part of B Force. The 1,494 POWs that made up B Force were transported from Changi [Singapore] on 7 July 1942 on board the tramp ship *Ubi Maru*, arriving in Sandakan Harbour on 18 July 1942. Sergeant Feldbauer, aged 35, died as a prisoner of the Japanese on 27 March 1945.**

- *Australian War Memorial*

His death was not reported in Australia until some months later. In the *Age* (17 November 1945) 'MRS. T. A. Feldbauer and Family wish to express their sincere THANKS for sympathy in the loss of their loved one. Sgt. T. A. Feldbauer, 2/10th Batt., P.O.W., Borneo.'

We don't have details of his death but if Curly died of 'illness', as recorded at the AWM, it was because he was one of the thousands of Australian victims of the infamous forced Death Marches from Sandakan, January - May 1945, of which there were only six survivors.

Tuesday 27 March 1945, when the Eltham Progress Association's public meeting put in motion its plans to create the Eltham War Memorial Baby Health Centre, Pre-School and Children's Library, was the exact date of Curly Feldbauer's death at Sandakan.

Records from the Australian War Memorial state that Sgt Feldbauer is commemorated on Panel 28 of the Labuan War Memorial Cemetery in Malaysia. His name is included on our local RSL obelisk. But the most meaningful commemoration is the actual fact of the Eltham War Memorial in Main Road, Eltham, where his young son and namesake, Theo, officially turned the first sod and started the building process on that winter day in 1950 - the 'constant reminder to us of those who fought for us and the little ones for whom they fought and died'.

### **The Heart of the Shire of Eltham**

Six months after that simple ceremony, the Governor of Victoria travelled to Eltham to lay the foundation stone. It was rare for the State Governor to make this trek to our Shire. We can be sure Mrs Cairns Officer was behind the invitation. The event was reported in the *Melbourne Age*:

#### **Children Featured in Eltham's Day**

The Governor, (Sir Dallas Brooks) won 800 new friends yesterday when he told children in the shire of Eltham that they could have a holiday on Monday in honour of his laying the foundation stone of the Eltham war memorial.

The Governor was greeted by officials. He met the chief guests and then passed along the guard of honour of guides, brownies, scouts and cubs, shaking hands with many of them. Then came the turn of the school children and they clapped and cheered for several minutes when told about the holiday in store for them...

Addressing the adults, Sir Dallas Brooks said that just as a human being must have a heart, so must a shire, town or city.

**"This memorial, based on the absolute determination that we of our generation will do our utmost for the next generation, will be the heart of the Shire of Eltham", he said.**

A baby health centre is the first part of the war memorial, and as finances become available other buildings will be provided. These will include, a crèche, soldiers' rest rooms, kindergarten and children's library, surrounded by a Garden of Remembrance.

- *Age (Melbourne), November 1950*



Source: Billion Graves

Violet Feldbauer died 32 years later and is buried in the Eltham Cemetery. Her headstone carries its one-word declaration. 'Re-United.'

Her elder son, Theo junior, died in Echuca in 1999. He is buried at Taradale Cemetery.

What will the Nillumbik Shire Council tell the families, the descendants of Curly Feldbauer, and of his son who turned the first sod? The RSL stone obelisk is no substitute for the living Eltham War Memorial.

### **The Women of Eltham**

The Eltham War Memorial Pre-School is very much a memorial created by the efforts of the women of Eltham. That is another particular circumstance that makes this



memorial special. The public-spirited men who succeeded Mrs Cairns Officer as president of the Trust went out of their way to emphasise that fact.

Foremost among those men who praised her was Stanley Simpson Addison, distinguished resident of Kangaroo Ground, an Eltham Councillor (1949-56), Shire President (1952), and a president of the Eltham War Memorial Trust (from 1957). Addison made it his duty to be a careful chronicler of the War Memorial Trust, of which the Nillumbik Shire Council is so ignorant. His work has informed this account.

Addison himself had a fine record of public service: he understood better than many the indirect suffering caused by war, over and above the death and injuries suffered by combatants. In the First World War 'he was among those selected and trained to inquire after missing soldiers. He served on Lemnos, at Gallipoli, in Egypt and France, and was mentioned in dispatches.'<sup>3</sup> He is included in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, especially because of his work with Australian Red Cross:

As secretary-general in 1938-39, he played a major role in preparing its early wartime organization and emergency services. He was assistant-director, Central Bureau for Prisoners of War, in 1940, chief controller of Voluntary Aid Detachments for the Commonwealth in 1942-47, research officer for postwar reconstruction in 1943 and joint secretary of the Australian Council for United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in 1944.

The new tragedies involving Australian prisoners of war, such as Curly Feldbauer, and the effects of these on their families, had particular significance for Stanley Addison.

The Eltham War Memorial Trust, he always pointed out, was initiated by a woman. The earliest and most effective fund-raising and community consciousness raising was done by women. The Trust's Women's Auxiliary remained the predominant fund-raising body until finally its objective was achieved.

Earlier informal discussions, and the first related fund-raising efforts by the women of Eltham, dated back as far 1943, maybe even earlier. Eltham District Historical Society has in its collection the telegram hand-delivered on 3 May 1941 to Mrs Annie Castledine at her home 'Araluen' on the Old Eltham Road, Lower Plenty. It informed her that her 26-year-old son George had been killed in action, in Greece. He was the first soldier from the Shire to be killed in the war. The Society has recently chronicled his story, which concludes with these words:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See *Australian Dictionary of Biography* - <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/addison-stanley-simpson-9312>. See also Jim Connor on Addison in *Fine Spirit and Pluck: World War One stories of Banyule, Nillumbik and Whittlesea*, Yarra Plenty Regional Library 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The Eltham District Historical Society website will be telling this story on its '#ThrowbackThursday' post for 8 November 2018.

**It is in memory of George and all the other fallen soldiers of our district that the Eltham Women's Auxiliary first banded together to raise funds for the establishment of the Eltham War Memorial as a living memorial....**

Vera Addison, Stanley's wife, later described the 1945 meeting as the culmination of 'the activities of a small group of public-minded people... who saw the opportunity of realizing a dream.'

The Progress Association meeting appointed a sub-committee, and Mrs Cairns Officer took command. She enlisted the help of three men with strategic skills: local Eltham medico, Dr Ron Bradbury; businessman Eric Siggins;<sup>5</sup> and a university expert in company law, Mr G. Rogers. To keep the purposes of the Trust on track, they swiftly registered a limited liability company, 'The Eltham War Memorial Trust Limited'.

Decision-making powers of the Trust were vested in a 20-member Council (not to be confused with the Shire Council, though there was some overlap of personnel). In time the RSL was invited to nominate one member of the Trust Council.

As a legal entity, the Trust in October 1945 was able to negotiate the purchase of 1 ½ acres of land on Main Road from the Shillinglaw family, whose colonial cottage stood nearby and whose farmland still stretched from today's former CFA building to Bridge Street. It was a perfect location for its purpose, near the railway line and potentially forming a precinct with Eltham's new Shire Hall (built in 1941 on the opposite side of Main Road at Arthur Street). The price paid was £1225.

As Vera Addison later said,

**The Memorial is in a really wonderful position, and a constant reminder to all who pass by of the sacrifice freely given, while at the same time a Centre of practical service to the community.**

Fund raising for the memorial fell, as it so often did, to a Women's Auxiliary, also known at the time as a Ladies' Committee. Mrs Cairns Officer was its first president too. Among its leading figures was Mrs C.L. (Dorothy) Tingate, wife of the Eltham Shire Secretary. Others recruited to the cause included Beatrice Morrison ('Mrs J. Morrison'), of Killeavey on the Yarra. She was the daughter of Eltham's most distinguished citizen, Sir William Irvine (1858-1943) former Premier, Chief Justice and Lieutenant Governor of Victoria. A long list of Eltham and district women joined the cause.

Among the hardest workers was Mrs D.H. Lyon: she was born Ada Apted, part of the well-known family of orchardists in the countryside on Arthur's Creek. In Vera Addison's words, Ada Lyon 'lived for the completion of the Memorial, it seemed to

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<sup>5</sup> Siggins's company manufactured 'Malties' breakfast cereal in Richmond.

all of us, working and planning as she did right up to the time of her final illness.’ There is a small monument to Ada Lyon in the grounds of the Pre-School, still. She died in 1962.

It was at the 20th anniversary event in 1965 that Vera Addison summarised this history. Like her husband, she made particular mention of the work of the women;

**The auxiliary worked hard for 20 years raising money towards the cost of establishing and completing the memorial.**

The Auxiliary was endlessly inventive, organising card parties, plays, concerts, dances, street stalls, fashion displays, raffles and the annual Springtime Fete in the Eltham Shire Hall – the main money spinner. Year after year they baked and embroidered, made jams and marmalades, published a cookery book, potted up seedlings, made dresses and hats, and badgered their neighbours to come to the events.

All was for what they called the Living Memorial. Vera Addison added:

The men supporters of the Trust organised each year the Easter Gymkhana in the Eltham Park, a function successfully carried on for many years. They gave service with excellent returns, much appreciated, **but no words of mine could adequately express what the Women’s Auxiliary meant to the Trust. It was indeed a band of hard working people inspired by an ideal.**

To achieve its ambitions, The Eltham War Memorial Trust consulted regularly with relevant government departments, both to seek additional funding and to ensure that standards were met. Again, women played an important part. A key ally was a distinguished practitioner in child health, Dr Doris Officer. Dr Officer’s husband was a cousin of Adam Cairns Officer. Another was Dr Barbara Meredith, Director of the Infant and Maternal Welfare Branch of the Dept of Health.

### **The Buildings**

Less than two years after Sir Dallas Brooks had laid the foundation stone, Dr Barbara Meredith officially opened the first stage of the Eltham War Memorial project, the Baby Health Centre. The date was 15 November 1952. She spoke proudly of:

**‘The fine and beautiful centre for an indispensable public service which would contribute to the health of the coming generation’.**

Through 1953 and 1954, fund-raising and construction work continued. A front fence, coloured pillars and wrought-iron entrance gates were installed, supplied by the Chuck Fence Company, along with an ornamental archway inscribed ‘Eltham War Memorial’. Each addition was hard-won. This was a small outer suburb with very basic services, dealing with an influx of young families, creating its own war memorial through self help.

The Trust commissioned an honour board recording (in gold-painted lettering) the names of 'the fallen' in the Second World War. It asked the Forests Commission to help supply 20 Torulosa pines for the grounds. The original conception was to make full use of the whole spacious site.

The architectural firm of A.K. Lines, MacFarlane and Marshall (Flinders Street Melbourne) was now at work on plans for the next structure, the Pre-School building. It opened in 1957.

Arthur Keith Lines deserves further comment in this story. He resided in nearby Greensborough and had strong local connections. Lines served as a councillor in both the City of Heidelberg and Shire of Diamond Valley (part of which was later incorporated into the current Shire of Nillumbik). A.K. Lines Reserve in Watsonia is named after him. He served as President of the Victorian Society of Architects. He died in 1981. His earlier partnership, Lines and Marshall, had designed the 1941 iteration of the Shire of Eltham Offices on the corner of Main Road and Arthur Street. Regrettably this was demolished for a supermarket in the late 1960s. This modest late art-deco structure was in red brick. With the war memorial buildings designed by these architects, a comparable aesthetic was at work.

Further to the crucial role of local women in bringing this project to fruition, Lines's architectural partner Jessica MacFarlane was one of the first women in Victoria to enter into an architectural practice.

The third and final building for the site was the Children's Library. This was opened in 1959. In the following decade the building was repurposed as the Eltham War Memorial Hall when the Shire finally established its own municipal library branch in its then new, adjacent, Shire Offices.

As with the Eltham Baby Health Centre, both the Pre-School and the Children's Library were up and running in temporary quarters before their purpose-built premises on Main Road were ready to occupy. Today we are inclined to take kindergartens and libraries for granted, with local council support. In the 1940s and 1950s few communities the size of Eltham enjoyed such facilities.

The unpretentious buildings created on the Eltham War Memorial site are disparaged in today's Council jargon as 'aging and stand-alone'. They are not to be despised. They are exactly what the community wanted and could support, financially, in the post-war decades. They were correctly acclaimed at the time as 'bright' and 'modern', reflecting the emerging ethos of Eltham. It was the period when Alistair Knox and fellow thinkers were making a name for Eltham as a place where people could make their own homes from natural materials to a modest format.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Knox's first mud brick houses were provisionally approved by the Shire of Eltham in March 1948. (Shire of Eltham Minutes 8 March 1948).

The War Memorial buildings are not mud brick but nevertheless they authentically represent Eltham in this period. They speak to us still of good community values. Properly maintained and respectfully renovated, there is no reason why they should not continue to fulfil their original functions and be honoured as fit for purpose.

### **Interconnection with the other sites under threat**

The threat to demolish the Eltham War Memorial buildings is more insidious than just the breach of trust it represents with the community which funded and gave time and labour to create these facilities – and those citizens who continue to depend on them.

In some commentary about this precinct, it has been assumed that the Eltham Elderly or Senior Citizens' Club hall and facilities are not part of the Eltham War Memorial complex. This is not historically so.

Stanley Addison's detailed account of the history tells us that the building of the club's hall was achieved only with the approval of the Trust. The club requested a small site, 100 feet by 60 feet, behind the existing buildings. It was approved on this condition:

**The Trust desires, in a strongly held opinion, that the building to be erected accord, as nearly as possible, with those already on the Trust's property.**

This resolution – 'strongly held' – was respected in the modern domestic scale of the hall as constructed. In other words, it was designed to harmonise with the buildings for the children, and it does.

The request to use this land came at the very time that the Eltham War Memorial Trust was in the process of transferring ownership – and trusteeship – of the whole site to the Shire of Eltham. This took place not because the Trust was in debt or in trouble, but because it confidently felt that its work was done and that surely the local Shire Council would be the community body that would now take care of what had been achieved. That is really a sacred trust.

Ironically the Elderly Citizens' Club – while it respected the wishes of the Trust in the form of its building – had to wait until the Shire owned the property before it could apply for the government grants it needed to help pay for the hall it wanted.

As for the former (1960s era) Shire Office site adjacent, the Eltham community is entitled to claim a moral share and a proper say in its future too. It may be 'Council property' but, as with the Eltham War Memorial, it represents a very long history of community contribution. It should not be sold out of that common ownership.

Briefly, back in 1934 the former Shire of Eltham moved its office quarters from Kangaroo Ground to Eltham. It acquired a small block of land on Main Road (corner of Arthur Street, site of section of the current Coles arcade), built art-deco style Shire Offices designed by Lines and MacFarlane in 1941, but did not have the funds to include a Public Hall. The Shire Hall (pictured below as part of the complex) was included only through public fund-raising through a Public Hall Committee – and, again, it was a Women’s Auxiliary who did most of the work to raise those funds.

A meeting of the Eltham Public Hall Committee as early as 1940 urged the Council to agree to incorporate a Hall with the Shire Offices, the building to include provision for a Baby Health Centre. It offered some initial funds and it proposed financing the rest of the hall project through a loan to be organized by the Council, to be repaid by the Hall Committee from rental of the hall and other fund-raising activities.

When it came to the official opening of the Shire Offices and Hall complex in November 1941, the local newspaper made clear the role of the residents on the Public Hall Committee. (*Eltham and Whittlesea Shires Advertiser*, 21 November 1941

“They have paid £1500 in cash to the Council which has borrowed a further £1000 to complete the work. The £1000 is to be repaid to the Council by instalments of £100 a year for 10 years, after which time the building will be handed over to the Council as a gift from the people. **It is doubtful if such a gesture has ever been made by the residents of any district in Australia.**



Source: EDHS Collection

Two cramped ante-rooms to this Shire Hall became home to that first temporary Baby Health Centre in Eltham, two hours a week under Sister Houghton, in 1945, until the Eltham War Memorial Baby Health Centre opened in 1952.

Shire of Eltham Minutes for the period are specific in detailing the separate roles of the Council and the Public Hall Committee. The committee was responsible for leasing out and maintaining the hall, which was used for many community functions. It served as Eltham's movie theatre and dance hall.

The point here is that it was the community, not the Council, who paid for the 1941 Hall. As with the Eltham War Memorial Trust, the Eltham Public Hall Committee achieved its goals and entrusted its contribution to the Shire Council.

In 1952 the Committee transferred assets and ownership of the Shire Hall into the care of the Eltham Shire Council. This, consequently, represented real community capital when in 1960 the next Shire of Eltham Offices were constructed on Shillinglaw land – the Shire Office site now in contention, next to the Eltham War Memorial complex. Funds from the sale of the 1941 Shire building helped pay for the new site and new 1960 Shire Office. The public purposes and investment in the old site were transferred to the new.

In this way the current Council must understand that it is only in the legal sense the 'owner' of the Shire Office site. Morally it is simply the custodian of the site, on behalf of the community. This is the point that the community is asserting.

### **The Current Shire's Process**

A final word on the current Shire of Nillumbik's method of trying to dispose of this site. On the record, that process began on the very same night, 30 January 2018, that the Nillumbik Shire Council set out to sell 17 community reserves. As part of that same packed agenda, up came consideration of this site.

In a briefing paper, council officers stepped the councillors through the stages of – what seems to the outsider – illusory community consultation that would be undertaken before reaching a predetermined conclusion.

That predetermined conclusion was that the former Shire Office site and the war memorial site next door, should be sold out of community ownership into private hands to enable some kind of landmark semi-commercial building to be constructed, with some gestures towards including public spaces.

In that briefing the history does not appear. The councillors were not properly apprised of the complex background story. Claims were made that those old standbys, 'stakeholders' would be consulted. Representatives of both the Eltham Pre-School and of the Senior Citizen's Club have stated publicly that they have been seriously let down by a consistent lack of meaningful consultation.

This is certainly not the first time that 'the old Shire Office site' (the 1960s version) has been under contention, but at least on the previous occasion the Eltham War Memorial was not included in the land grab.

In the briefing, no mention was made of the community anger in August 1996 when the Eltham Shire Office was clandestinely demolished by the decision of the unelected Council commissioner who had local government power over the Shire at the time. Nor was admission made that the site was offered for private sale at that time, resulting in the forced reversal of that sale after pressure from the local community.

No admission was made that the Shire Office site in 2007 was rezoned (and gazetted) to Public Use by a Council listening to its citizens. The purpose then was to ensure that this site remained in community hands.

The next steps in the Council process seem designed to obscure and obfuscate. How could expressions of interest from architects and developers meaningfully have been obtained in the space of just a few weeks without prior knowledge? Was the land, as advertised by real estate agents, actually 'For Sale'? How can decisions be made when a so-called community consultation on the future of Eltham's Activity Centre remains incomplete?

Little wonder that the residents and ratepayers are bewildered, dismayed and angry. Once again.

The naked state of the former Shire Office site offends the current councillors, bringing to mind that now infamous expression invoked in the description of community reserves as 'unused grass'. It is no more 'vacant' than the adjacent Alistair Knox park. The simple fact is that the original Shillinglaw cottage once occupied that site, followed by the Shire of Eltham offices for a mere 30 years. There is no imperative for buildings to go onto this site.

If it were to remain perpetually as open space, with some gestures towards Eltham-style landscaping, it would provide at little expense a superb and inviting approach from the commercial part of town to the current Shillinglaw Cottage, the Library, the park, ovals, trestle bridge and walking trails along the Diamond Creek.

This would be consistent with the State Government's Practice Planning Note 56 which deals with the best usage of Public Land within defined Activity Zones.

Or it could, within that space, accommodate Judith Cordingley's brilliant idea of a low-profile, essentially inground bushfire shelter, a place of last resort, for local emergency workers and co-ordinators in the event of advancing bushfire in the Shire. There is a model for such a functional building in the beautiful glass-fronted inground library at John Marsden's Candelbark school at Romsey, or in a comparable refuge (used ordinarily as classrooms) at Geelong Grammar's Timbertop campus in bush near Mt Buller. Such a building in Eltham could spend most of its life as a secure setting for a modest art gallery. Councillors have all been circulated with this



proposal via the council's chief planning officer and by the good offices of Jim Connor.

In short there are vitally necessary, constructive options for these sites that would truly serve the community and honour the inspiration of the Eltham War Memorial Trust, consistent with the spirit of Eltham, appropriate to the town.

The dissenting vote of Cr John Dumaresq at several key moments in this series of events has been heartening. The community has told the Council in no uncertain terms earlier this year: we do not want our Council to sell our community assets. And the Eltham War Memorial cannot be allowed to be summarily destroyed.

I wonder how many of you will remember our beginnings?

**Andrew Lemon**

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*30 October 2018*

*cc: Eltham District Historical Society*

*cc: for public circulation*

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*Amended version*

*7 Nov 2018....*

**Important Addendum and Correction to the essay addressed to the Councillors of Nillumbik Shire, October 2018:**

**About the Eltham War Memorial and the adjacent community-owned sites in Eltham that the Council threatens to sell**

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Thanks to the amazing power of community, the essay on the real story of the Eltham War Memorial site has been reaching a large audience in and beyond the Shire of Nillumbik.

In one crucial point, I was wrong. But the new information only adds to the power of the argument being made and the story being told.

The little boy pictured with the ceremonial spade, turning the first sod of ground in July 1950 on the site where the Eltham War Memorial was to be built, was not Theodore Henry Feldbauer (13 at the time) but rather his younger brother *Albert* Feldbauer – exactly as the Eltham District Historical Society had said when it catalogued the photo.

The good news is that Albert Feldbauer is alive and well and living in Western Australia. Albert is now 78 years old, and has been on the phone to me. His father Theodore ‘Curly’ Feldbauer, who died as a Prisoner of War in the infamous Sandakan death march in 1945, had left four small children behind him when he enlisted in 1941, not three as I had stated.

Albert was the youngest. The reason for my error is that I found only the three eldest children listed on the Research State School register. Albert began his schooling in 1945 directly at Our Lady Help of Christians in Eltham. Born in 1940, he was one year old when his father enlisted. His mother Violet was left to cope with four children under eight.

That ceremonial turning of the first sod took place on 8 July 1950. It was Albert Feldbauer’s tenth birthday. One of his daughters, in Brisbane, still treasures that ceremonial spade.

The family lived in Thomas Street, Eltham East. Albert grew up to play cricket for Research, as his father had done before him, and football for Eltham. He recalls playing in a grand final in his late teens. But he long ago left the district to make his life in Western Australia. He has four children and six grandchildren.

While Albert’s sister June and brother Theodore have both passed away, his eldest sister Mrs Valerie Waller lives in Healesville. For her, the memories of her late father remain personal, as she was five years old when he left to serve in the war. Four years ago, Valerie and one of her daughters made the pilgrimage to Borneo to the site of the Sandakan POW camp. If you are not aware of the shocking history of this place, explore the story.

These are the people for whom the Eltham War Memorial – in its special form as a material claim on the future, as a place for the children of the next generations – meant so much. Albert forgives me for leaving him out of the story. Valerie Waller tells me that if there were to be a protest march to prevent the loss of this memorial, she would willingly be there.

*Andrew Lemon, 7 November 2018.*