



Merewether Historical Society

"A society aimed at recording memories of the past for the benefit of the next generations."

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The Chronicle

August 2026

The next Meeting will be held on Tuesday 8th September

Guest Speaker For September

Kerrie Shaw on "Newcastle Library digitizing archives"

Meeting: Next meeting, Merewether Bowling Club, Caldwell St. on Tuesday 8th September at 10:45. Club opens at 10:30. Complimentary tea, coffee and nibbles are available.

NO Lunch - the restaurant is NOT open on Tuesdays any more.

The guest speaker at our August meeting was Prue Viggers OAM, who talked, very knowledgeably, on the development of Newcastle library. Prue also interspersed this history aspect with interesting anecdotes about individual artworks and artists.

In 1929 the Civic Theatre and the current Town Hall were built in the heart of Newcastle. It became even more glaringly obvious that this second largest city in the state of New South Wales did NOT have the other normal cultural facilities such as an Art Gallery, Library or Conservatory of Music.

Some art was donated to council but there was no place to conserve and display it. Serendipitously in about 1952 a Doctor Roland Pope had made a Benefaction of his very extensive and expensive artworks and sculptures to "a regional city or council who would build an Art gallery to house and display them". The crown jewel in this collection was the set of first edition illustrated Bird books by John Gould and his wife.

Newcastle Council was the successful recipient of this Benefaction and together with State funding and donations the building was built by Doran Constructions. The "War memorial Cultural Centre" was opened on 26th October 1957. This building is now the current Library but when opened it housed the fledgling Art gallery and Music Conservatory as well.

The very impressive bronze sculptures in the foyer of the library created in 1957 by



Lindon Dadswell are gazing upward at??? I've been to the Newcastle library at least 100 times but until Prue's talk I never thought to follow their gaze to see what they are looking at. Have you?

A stand-alone, separate art gallery was opened by Queen Elisabeth in March 1977 and then between 2022 and 2026 it was closed for extensive renovation and the addition of a NEW building.

On February 26th 2026 the now-new Art Gallery was reopened.

The new construction was funded by donations over 20 years, notably from Val and Peter Ryan – \$10 Million, State and federal donations of \$5 million each, and the Margret Ollie trust. Of local interest is the Les Renfrew Merewether Bequest a perpetual yearly prize for upcoming artists.

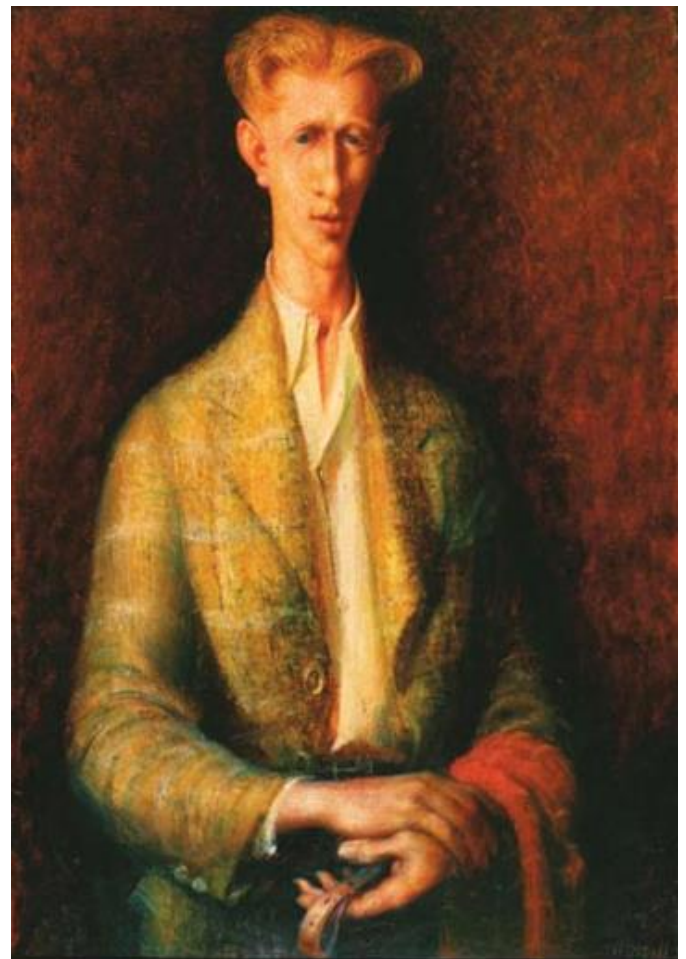
Some of the art that Prue spoke about includes the Bret Whitely sculpture *Black totem II* (donated by his wife Wendy in 2013) outside the original Art gallery entrance.



Inner view of Newcastle. c1818



Looking towards Prospect Hill. c1818



Dobell's Portrait of a strapper 1941
AARGH run out of room!!!!!!

The art gallery has had seven director custodians each with their own distinct style and artistic emphasis.

Let's organise a guided tour of the new Art Gallery. Anyone interested?

The two landscapes by convict forger Joseph Lycett were 'commissioned' by the then commandant of the Coal River convict base. They advertise the commandants progress in establishing and developing the settlement of Newcastle in 1818. This is a very idealised clean, bright image to highlight the progress under his leadership.