

FOUNDING MISSION BEACH
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The histories published by Mission Beach Historical Society are as accurate as we are able to make them. Few accounts of history are 100% correct and there are going to be more errors when we recall events of many years ago. We always welcome suggested edits and additions or deletions and where possible we will edit where we find we are in error. However, the oral histories we record are the words of the people we interview and we can only alter those with the authorisation of the people we interview. At times we record the full story of a family and have it on record for research purposes yet publish an abbreviated version on the web page to make it more readable and relevant to our regular audience.

Cover

Mission Beach Historical Society designed by Leonard Andy, Djiru Elder and Traditional Landowner.

FOUNDING OUR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Mission Beach in north Queensland, on the coast in the wet tropics, is steeped in art and culture, with a rich history made up of local indigenous people, *bêche-de-mer*¹ stations, timber-getters², coffee, banana and tropical fruit farmers, environmental activism and tourism.

The Djiru people have lived in the Mission Beach area for many thousands of years³. The colonisers in the 1800s dispossessed these people from their traditional land and culture and often violated their rights, humiliated them and treated them as criminals by incarcerating them.⁴ This was a dark and grisly time in the history of Mission Beach. Many members of the Mission Beach Historical Society and all of its currently active authors concur with the statement that ‘the responsibility to come to terms with the Australian past is a morally inescapable component of what it is to be Australian.’⁵

The Mission Beach Historical Society began informally in 2000 when a small group of residents explored the history of the Mission Beach State School to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. A teacher and a teacher-librarian worked with two enthusiastic locals to research the school story and published a book to commemorate the occasion. This included much historical information about the town as well as the school and has become an important reference.⁶

This group was not known as *Mission Beach Historical Society* and did not appoint Society Office Bearers at that stage yet this represented the first signs of such an organization forming. However, as with many small regional towns and rural communities, because of a lack of people to do the intensive work required of such a Society, it was not sustained.

Two factors reduced the ability of the district’s community to develop an historical society. Firstly, Mission Beach’s four main villages were divided politically. Originally, the town was in the Cardwell Shire, established in 1884, but the boundaries were changed in 1937. The northern section of Mission Beach then became part of the Johnstone Shire, and the southern section was part of the Cardwell Shire. Mission Beach changed again in 2008 when the Cassowary Coast Regional Council (CCRC) was formed, and the two local governments amalgamated, so the villages of Mission Beach were once again united as one town. Secondly, Mission Beach was hit by two significant cyclones in a short timeframe, cyclone *Larry* in 2006 and cyclone *Yasi* in 2011, which meant the residents of Mission Beach were preoccupied with disaster recovery for several years.

There were significant historical writers active before the school group started, such as Miss Constance Mackness who wrote *Clump Point and District: An Historical Record* in 1959 and published a second edition in 1983. The four books of Edmund Banfield while essentially novels were published between 1908 and 1925 and have considerable historical content so in a way he was our first historian. James Porter also wrote an informative book on the history of the near-shore islands of the district, *A Family of Islands: Dunk and Bedarra group, North Queensland*. That was first published in 1983 and a

¹ *Bêche-de-mer* also known as ‘sea cucumbers’ Protected Zone Joint Authority. (2021) *Torres Strait Beche-de-mer Fishery*. Retrieved 16 August, 2021, from <https://www.pzja.gov.au/the-fisheries/torres-strait-beche-de-mer-fishery>.

² Timber getters’ were also known as axe workers, and harvested trees for the timber and wood industry (National Film Board, 1952)

³ Cooper, Alan, Williams, Alan N and Spooner, Nigel; *When did Aboriginal people first arrive in Australia?* The Conversation, UNSW, August 2018, accessed September 2021 at <https://theconversation.com/when-did-aboriginal-people-first-arrive-in-australia-100830?>

⁴ Pool, R., *Nation and Identity*. Routledge, London, 1999.

⁵ Pool, R., *Nation and Identity*. Routledge, London, 1999, P. 127.

⁶ Bull, D., & Heath, J. *1953 Mission Beach State School 2003* [Limited edition]. Bookmen Publishers & Erinport Pty Ltd, Northgate, Queensland, Australia, 2003.

revised edition was released in the year 2000. R. J. Taylor wrote *The Lost Plantation: a history of the Australian tea industry* in 1992 as well and that has much included in it about Bingil Bay's history.

A list of the district's history sources is available on the Mission Beach Historical Society's web page which includes a short paper by Ken Gray, H008, *Mission Beach History, A Reading Guide*.

Despite the discontinuation of the working party on the school Anniversary project, historical work in the area was continued by several people and organizations. At the end of the twentieth century Helen Pedley, a local historian and librarian for the Council in Tully, researched and published works on the region and its people, and later wrote a brief story of Mission Beach's early history.⁷ Peter Kellett advised the Mission Beach Community Arts Centre on historical issues in the early years of the twenty-first century. He also wrote the signage for the *Cutten Walking Track* and an account of the Walk's importance in 2014. The Track's name honours the earliest pioneers of the Mission Beach district.⁸ In 2014, the Queensland Government leased a property known as *Ninney Rise*⁹ to the *Friends of Ninney Rise* to care for and exhibit it. This happened after its listing on the Queensland Heritage Register in 2010. It was the house in Bingil Bay that John and Alison Busst owned and from there they organised the successful 'Save-the-Reef' campaign in the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Friends of Ninney Rise* have a small collection of images and history as well and a library donated by Cardwell environmentalist, Margaret Thorsborne AO.

Just before we started Mission Beach Historical Society in late 2020, there was a further spurt of historical writing when some of our current Society members began to write. Sue Foley wrote *A Conversation with Bob Bolton* for example and Ken Gray wrote a book describing the history of World War II events in the district (*War and Beach*, eBook, 2020) and a book outlining the long history of the Mission Beach Aquatic and Recreation Club (*A Pool to be Cool*) in its struggle to attract funds to build an Aquatic Centre here.

In 2018, Trudy Tschui, a history enthusiast, revived interest in the history of Mission Beach and started a *Facebook* page, *Mission Beach Memories*. That was a big success and soon built up a strong following with more than 660 members in 2022.

In 2020, when Trudy was elected as Division 3 Councillor for the Cassowary Coast Region, her commitment to ensuring Mission Beach had an official historical society was affirmed when she called a meeting at the Progress Hall on 21 September to discuss the idea of starting anew. Many, mainly older residents, attended and the response was highly positive with a wealth of tales related and many willing to be involved in providing oral histories.

The next meeting was also called by Trudy and was held at the Mission Arts Centre, 14 October 2020. Trudy contacted all the people she knew of who may be willing to lead such an organization. At this meeting, the group comprising Trudy with Margaret Remilton, Judy Heath, Diane Bull, Dr Valerie Boll, Sandal Hayes, Sue Foley and Ken Gray agreed to form a committee. Ms Trish Ernst, President of the Innisfail and District Historical Society attended in support of Trudy and endorsed the newly formed society offering the fledgling group the opportunity to be a branch of the Innisfail organisation.

⁷ Pedley, H. (2002). *A Brief History of Mission Beach*. Accessed from the *Dorothy Jones Library Historical Collection*, Tully, Queensland: Dorothy Jones Library, Cassowary Coast Regional Council.

⁸ Mission Beach Tourism. (2021). *Mission Beach Cassowary Coast Community Projects*. Mission Beach Tourism. Retrieved 10 August, 2021 from <https://missionbeachtourism.com/about-mission-beach/community-projects>.

⁹ Friends of Ninney Rise. (2021). *Friends of Ninney Rise*. Retrieved 16 August, 2021 from <https://www.ninneyrise.com/about.html>

At the first meeting of the Society, on 14 October 2020, Trudy Tschui was Chair and Dr Valerie Boll was elected President with Ken Gray as Secretary. Margaret Remilton, Judy Heath, Sue Foley, Diane Bull and Sandal Hayes all became inaugural Committee Members.



Founder Trudy Tschui, Co-founder Trish Ernst and Inaugural President, Dr Valerie Boll.



Attendees at the Inaugural Meeting of the MBHS (Photo by Trudy.)

Mission Beach Historical Society is a typical small, local group, made up of volunteers who are working towards capturing oral histories, to protect, preserve and exhibit the history of the locality.¹⁰ The group chose its top priority as capturing oral histories of elderly long-term residents. The aim is to tell stories that are relevant and significant for today's multi-cultural societies, with emphasis also on the history of the Djiru people to achieve reconciliation and healing of the past. To achieve this it will follow the strategic framework of Bilali and Mahmoud,¹¹ that is, by raising awareness; adopting historical thinking; engaging with a range of perspectives; and creating shared historical stories.

The geographical area for the Mission Beach Historical Society follows that of the Djiru Country, which includes the Mission Beach villages from Carmoo to Midgereebar plus two villages that are not strictly part of the Mission Beach district, El Arish and Merryburn, but the Society's area of influence

¹⁰ Doyle, D. A. (2012). *The Future of Local Historical Societies*. Retrieved 15 July from <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2012/the-future-of-local-historical-societies>

¹¹ Bilali, R., & Mahmoud, R. (2017). Confronting History and Reconciliation: A Review of Civil Society's Approaches to Transforming Conflict Narratives. In P. C., C. M., & Č.-C. S. (Eds.), *History Education and Conflict Transformation*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54681-0_3

doesn't include East Feluga and El Arish has its own *Diggers Museum* which is an active group with similar goals.

The committee has ten people including two researchers with doctoral degrees, who advise the society on ethics, security of storage of data, and other data collection methods. Elder and Traditional Owner, Leonard Andy, represents and advises the group on all matters relating to the Djiru people and refers matters to the Warrangburra Aboriginal Corporation when required.

In its first year, the Society produced a *Purpose-Mission-Goals Statement*, a *Guideline for Recording Oral Histories*, a logo (designed by Leonard Andy and shown on the front cover of this publication), a *Facebook* page and a *Mission Beach Historical Society Newsletter* (Dr. Penelope Goward, editor) for communication and promotion of activities. We have completed an *Area Definition* which defines our geographical area of operation, agreed on a standard *Template for Histories* and started several of these essays on significant people in the area, such as John Busst and Hugo Brassey. The Society has also started to research the history of the street names in the four main villages and will make this and other essays available online when we complete our website in the near future.

The Lions Club of Mission Beach generously funded our purchase of a digital voice recorder so we were able to start our oral histories.

Mission Beach Historical Society has recently been awarded funding through The Culture, Heritage and Arts Regional Tourism (CHART) program, administered by the Australian Museums and Galleries Association, to develop an interactive website.

The Society also received a donation from Rotary Mission Beach to cover some administrative costs and enable incorporation.

In our *Purpose-Mission-Goals* statement, the Society agreed on the following statements, among others:

WHAT WE DO

We are dedicated to collecting, preserving, exhibiting and interpreting all of Mission Beach history.

WHY WE DO IT

To ensure that future generations may fully see and appreciate the rich heritage of our community.

As with many small community groups starting out, funding for promotion and exhibiting of collections is a challenge, but we are now able to incorporate due to the generosity of Mission Beach Rotary. In the meantime, funding applications rest on the goodwill of incorporated local organisations such as C4 to auspice any monies.

In the Journal for the *Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, Sarah Maddison wrote:¹²

It is only when a nation has found the ability to acknowledge past wrongs and break the bonds of solidarity with the perpetrators of historic injustice that the past can become history.

As authors, we appreciate that insight and hope that many of our members and residents of Mission Beach find that view to be a useful and valid approach when recording our complex early history.

¹² Maddison, S. (2012). Postcolonial guilt and national identity: Historical injustice and the Australian settler state. *Social Identities*, 18(6), 695-709. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2012.709000>

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