

PRESERVING OUR PAST

Community Heritage Grants

Alex Philp describes the benefits that a Community Heritage Grant can bring

The collection of records recently donated to the Mackay City Library are so fragile that merely unfolding the pages will break the brittle paper into fragments. The records document the lives and employment of South Sea Islanders on canefields in the Mackay area in the late 1800s. Linda Alexander, Information Services Librarian at the Mackay City Library realised the records needed conservation, and applied to the National Library of Australia for a Community Heritage Grant (CHG). A grant was awarded in 1999.

Since 1994 the National Library of Australia has run the CHG program, providing funding and training for preservation projects on community-held documentary collections, such as the South Sea Islander records now in the care of the Mackay City Library. This year the pool of available funds for the CHG scheme has been increased by \$40,000 to \$120,000, recognising the importance of the grants, and the success of the program in the past.

Grant recipients this year reflect the diversity in the Australian community. Included in the 32 approved projects this year are the Australian Refugee Association, the Western Australian Cricket Association Museum, Queen's College at the University of Melbourne and the Balmain Hospital Archives. Common to all the applicants is a passion for their collections and the desperate need for the funding.

The typical CHG recipient is a regional historical society, which holds a varied collection of photographs, maps, manuscripts, sound recordings and paintings.

Most of the organisations are run by volunteers, with little or no budget to care for their collections. Archival storage materials such as acid-free boxes are expensive, and difficult for volunteer organisations to afford. Conservation treatments for individual items can cost hundreds of dollars.

Although CHG funding for these small organisations will not solve all their preservation problems, it does provide an impetus for the general care of the collection. Linda Alexander explains the effect of the initial funding on the Mackay City Library: 'The CHG has shown the local community and the Council that the Library is being proactive in taking care of the collection.' Other benefits noted by Ms Alexander are



Linda Alexander receiving a 1999 Community Heritage Grant from the Minister for the Arts and Centenary of Federation, the Hon. Peter McGauran MP Pictorial Collection

2000 Community Heritage Grants Award Recipients

Applicant	Amount	State
St Francis' Church	\$2200	VIC
Walcha and District Historical Society	\$3850	NSW
Polish Historical Society in Australia	\$2000	ACT
Western Australian Cricket Association Museum	\$3300	WA
Balmain Hospital	\$3850	NSW
Warnambool and District Historical Society	\$3500	VIC
Maroochy Libraries	\$8250	QLD
Bega Valley Genealogy Society	\$1500	NSW
Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement	\$3850	VIC
Melbourne Women's Liberation Archives	\$3500	VIC
Royal District Nursing Service	\$5472	VIC
City of Albany	\$7700	WA
Coolooloa Shire Library Service	\$3850	QLD
The Uniting Church in Australia Property Trust	\$6930	NT
Subiaco Museum	\$3850	WA
Kimba and Gawler Ranges Historical Society	\$3850	SA
Cooperative for Aborigines (Tranby Aboriginal College)	\$2750	NSW
Wangaratta Historical Society Inc.	\$5500	VIC
Community Radio Federation — Radio 3CR	\$6600	VIC
Uniting Church Records and Historical Society	\$3850	NSW
Wirrimbah Direct Descendants Aboriginal Corporation	\$3850	NSW
Joskeleigh Community Association Inc.	\$2420	QLD
Mackay City Council Library Service	\$4950	QLD
Yarra-Melbourne Regional Library Corporation	\$3850	VIC
The Glamorgan Spring Bay Historical Society	\$2310	TAS
Shire of Kalamunda	\$2860	WA
Sydney Jewish Museum	\$3850	NSW
Albury City Council	\$3850	NSW
Australian Refugee Association	\$3850	SA
Co.As.It. Italian Australian Welfare Association Inc.	\$3850	QLD
Queen's College University of Melbourne	\$3850	VIC
Geraldton Regional Library	\$5500	WA

'networking with other CHG recipients both at the National Library and afterwards. My knowledge in Preservation was increased as a result of the application process'. This beneficial outcome is typical for organisations that receive CHG funding.

Support from the National Library for the successful CHG applicants extends beyond the monetary contribution. A representative from each organisation attends a workshop at the Library, where they participate in training sessions instructing them in general preservation principles. This year the workshop has been extended to two days to include more intensive training, tailored to the individual needs of each organisation.

The CHG that Mackay City Library received in 1999 was used for a preservation survey of the South Sea Islander historical records collection. It was awarded a grant again this year, receiving funding for conservation work for the collection as recommended by the survey.

An unexpected benefit of the preservation survey of The South Sea Islander collection was discovering the actual number of documents in the collection. According to Linda Alexander:

The records were so fragile, so brittle, that we didn't dare unfold them, so we couldn't tell how many documents were in the collection. We estimated 50 individual records, but it turns out there are 135 in total.

Preservation surveys are a common first step for CHG applicants. The survey gives the organisation a good starting point for looking after their collection. Julia Donaldson, Conservator at Preservation Services, State Library of Queensland, assessed the condition of the South Sea Islander records for the preservation survey, and will carry out the conservation treatment. She says:

Preservation surveys are a fantastic idea for small collecting bodies, the condition report is useful as an overall indicator for the collection, and the survey report also provides solutions to making the collections accessible.



Linda Alexander, Information Services Librarian, Mackay City Council Library Service displaying some of the fragile South Sea Islander documents.

Photograph courtesy of the *Pioneer News*

The grant approved this year is for the fragile records to be repaired by trained conservators. The records will be preserved firstly by being flattened, then lined with archival repair tissue. Julia Donaldson reflects on the expected improvement to be gained by the treatment: 'The documents should be in the same preserved condition in around 100 years, and will be able to be duplicated.' The treatment will be a painstaking process, requiring an estimated 50 hours to complete.

Once stabilised, the documents will then be open for examination by researchers, the public, and specifically the local Kanaka community. Some of the documents can be read now, and give a preview of the hidden information inside. They make reference to the financial arrangements made with the plantation owners, who brought the Kanakas to Australia, as well as details of shipping arrivals and departures. There are estate pay sheets and the curiously titled 'Three Monthly

Reports on Polynesians'. A number of the documents record which islands the indentured labourers came from. The information will now contribute to local communities being able to uncover some of their family history.

Local residents Warren and Barbara Hill donated the records to the Mackay City Library, after their discovery in the roof of the old Mackay ANZ bank building. The documents were uncovered following a cultural audit of the region as part of the Regional Arts Development Fund. They were then transferred to the Mackay City Library for permanent care, where they will form a central part of the local history collection.

The Mackay City Library has plans to digitise the records after the conservation treatment, with a view to making them all available electronically. This is an expensive process, and the type of project that will be eligible for funding in the 2001 CHG program.

One of the assessment criteria for CHG applicants is for the project to increase access to the material. It is obvious in the case of the South Sea Islander collection that access to the information was impossible due to their original condition, and that the records will be readable and able to be duplicated as a result of the conservation treatment. The successful applicants also get listed in nationally accessible databases, such as Australian Libraries Gateway, Australian Museums OnLine, and the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts—thereby further making their valuable collection known.

From being too fragile to unfold, to accessible via the Internet is typical of the success stories generated by the CHG program. With the expansion of the program for this year and into the future, more stories like this are possible.

ALEX PHILP is the National Library's Community Heritage Grants coordinator