

## A Brief History of the RWAHS

The Western Australian Historical Society was founded in September 1926 with the immediate objective of raising interest in the State's forthcoming centenary. The young Society duly played a prominent role in the planning and conduct of the various public celebrations that marked the anniversary in 1929.

Happily, it succeeded in attracting a substantial membership quite rapidly from the ranks of the early colonists. High priority was given to recording their reminiscences. In similar fashion, five decades later, a new generation was treated to the personal recollections of the Society's formative years as told by two of its most active early members - Mr Ivor Birtwistle and Sir Paul Hasluck. Their accounts were published in the Society's journal, *Early Days*, in 1970 and 1977.

In those early years, the Society initiated many of the wide-ranging activities that continue to make up its regular program today. The most obvious of these has been the holding of monthly general meetings at which research papers are read on many different aspects of the State's history, and with some emphasis on biography. Since 1927, most of these papers have been reproduced in the Society's annual journal. This has helped to develop interest in Western Australian history among the general community. Thanks to specific benefactions since 1949, the wider public has been invited to take part in an annual prize for the best history publication,

The Society has built up an impressive library of printed materials, manuscripts, photographs and maps. It is used by the general community as well as by members. The Society has also assembled a sizeable museum collection comprising artefacts, costume and accessories, and artworks, many of which are displayed periodically and through special loans to State and Local government agencies.

In the past the Memorials Committee organised the placement of commemorative plaques on buildings and sites of historical significance. However, prime responsibility for the conservation of such features now lies with the Heritage Council and National Trust.

Prior to World War II there were already half a dozen branches of the Society existing in country districts, and their successors today are the more than seventy independent Affiliated Societies. The Society supports the work of these groups in a variety of ways, including their annual State History Conference .

The annual East Perth Cemeteries Memorial Service, inaugurated in 1953, tells an individual grave story in consultation with the family. There are other social gatherings organized by the RWAHS Auxiliary, such as 'History in the City', and the Tours and Events Committee has arranged an annual program of conducted tours. A research paper has been given at monthly general meetings since 1926 and today there are also monthly daytime Community Talks.

During the early 1960s a monthly newsletter, 'History West', was introduced and remains an important communication. Another great advance was made when the Society acquired premises of its own, which were given the appropriate name of Stirling House. Successive Governors of the State have been Patron since 1926. In 1963, a royal charter gave the Society the honour of adding the prefix "Royal" to its corporate name, a dignity it enjoys along with three of its counterparts in other states.

It is a founding member of the Federation of Australian Historical Societies Inc. which was formed in 1977.

One of the most important initiatives of recent years has been the establishment at Stirling House of a bookshop, which stocks a wide range of current publications on Western Australian history, including self-published works, and various kinds of archival products and stationery.

The Society relies on members' subscriptions and fundraising for its regular income. Special purpose grants from a number of funding agencies, including Lotterywest and the National Library of Australia, have helped the Society fund important projects connected with the management of its photograph, library and museum collections and in the display of museum artifacts.