

History & Heritage

Circulating throughout Bendigo, Eaglehawk, Heathcote, Castlemaine,
Maldon, Kyneton, Elmore, Echuca, and Rochester areas

A publication of the National Trust Bendigo & District Branch

October 2025



Cover Story: The Plaza Cinema and its interior

Next Branch meeting: Tuesday October 28th 5.30pm
Bendigo Library (enter via Hargreaves Street)
All members and supporters welcome.

Also: The Annual General Meeting will be on Tuesday 25th November. We are thrilled to announce that Thomas Heywood will be our guest speaker. Thomas is a world renowned organist, official organist at Bendigo's Sacred Heart Cathedral, and the co-owner of the beautiful Langley Estate.

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Cover image: Plaza Theatre, Mitchell Street, Bendigo, 1939. Photographer Lyle Fowler. Image: State Library of Victoria Collection.

If you're not already a member - why not join the National Trust?

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) representing 40,000 members, is the state's largest community-based heritage advocacy organisation actively working towards conserving and protecting our heritage for future generations to enjoy.

Membership unlocks access to over 1,000 remarkable places across Australia and around the world—and helps preserve Victoria's rich cultural and historic heritage. But more than that, it's a way to support conservation of Victoria's most significant heritage places, from grand mansions and gardens to iconic landmarks and landscapes.

The Bendigo & District Branch was featured with three articles in the recent National Trust Magazine, Winter 2025. Each edition of this NTV publication has Branch Updates where our Branch features prominently. [Click here](#) to join.



The National Trust (Victoria) supports and publicises our Branch's activities in their magazine. Examples shown here are the courthouse tours at the Heritage Festival, the Doney Photographic Collection handover and Branch Updates.

Cover Story: The Bendigo Plaza Cinema

Is it time to heritage list the remaining elements of its interior?

Felicity Woodward ('Bendigo Ghost Signs') recently took a good set of photos of what's left, which shows that the upper parts and the ceilings of both the lobby and the auditorium are largely intact.

Rohan Storey, a retired heritage consultant, who has worked in the heritage field for many years, has put a proposal that the Branch work with anyone interested to progress further listing of the Plaza interiors. He worked at the National Trust (Vic) and has a particular interest in cinemas. Rohan said, "I can say that not only are these ceilings unique in Bendigo, but they're very rare in Australia, since most of the more elaborate cinemas have long been demolished."

Rohan has prepared this background paper of some of the features of the Plaza Cinema and added a few comparisons, especially with the well-known Regent Theatre in Melbourne. The 1992 Bendigo and Eaglehawk Heritage Study listed the Plaza as a B, noting its unique design features, rarity and social value.



1970s patrons at the Plaza. Photo: harperandcharlie Instagram.
Inset: One of the remaining interior pillars. Photo Felicity Woodward

History

According to the Cinema Treasures website, the Plaza Cinema opened on 28th December 1934 with Bing Crosby in "We're Not Dressing" and Shirley Temple in "Little Miss Marker". It was built at 12 Mitchell Street, on the corner of Bath Lane, with the auditorium parallel to Mitchell Street behind the shops.

It was a project of the Backhaus Estate, a property company established by Dr Henry Backhaus, who was a noted Catholic priest in Bendigo from the gold rush into the 1870s. The income from the Estate went to Catholic projects in Bendigo, notably the Sacred Heart Cathedral. The Backhaus building next door to the cinema on Mitchell Street was also built by the estate in c1931. It was designed by the long-established architectural firm Cowper, Murphy & Appleford, who had designed some cinemas in the early 1920s. In the 1930s they came to specialise in this building type, almost all in the new Art Deco style.

The Plaza was independently operated and was closed on 20th December 1975 with Bruce Lee in "Fist of Fury" and "The Chinese Connection". There was apparently some discussion at the time that Bendigo Council might purchase the building, but instead it was converted into retail units in 1979. A false ceiling was inserted into the foyer to create one shop, while the auditorium was divided horizontally to create a two-level space, in both cases leaving the upper walls and ceiling mostly intact.

Comparison

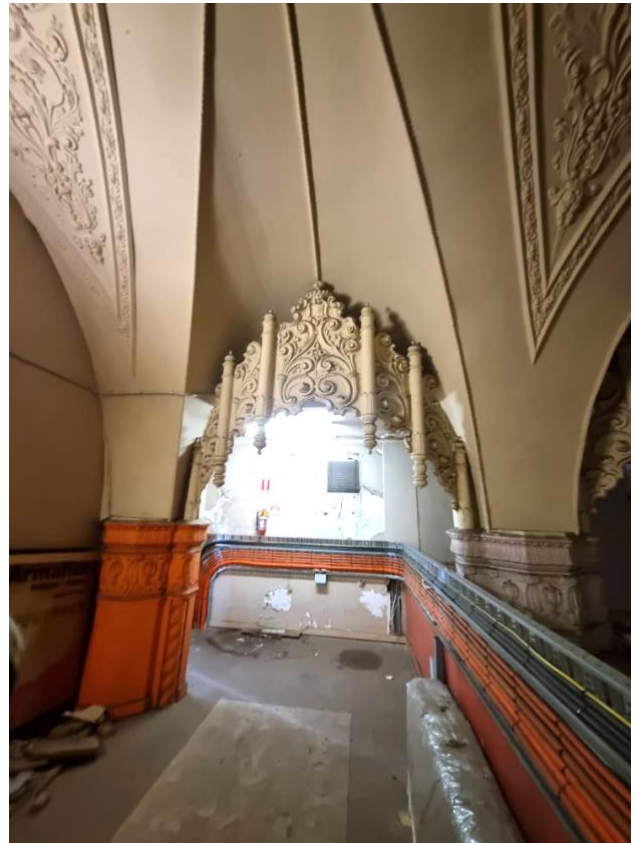
There are no other surviving interwar cinemas in the City of Bendigo. Looking further afield, it is clear the design owes a lot to the lobbies of the Regent Theatres in Melbourne and Brisbane, both built in 1929. Though nominally by different architects, they are very much versions of each other and were probably both derived from a design imported from the US. They both feature a double height groined and painted ceiling, and tall arches each side, with elaborate bowed pediments, and highly elaborated columns/piers between. Though very similar in effect, the detailed patterns are somewhat different.



Above: the Regent Theatre lobby, Melbourne.
Photo: supplied

The Plaza Cinema - Comparing the original to now - The lobby

Looking from the doors, vs back towards the doors. Tops of columns remain, as well as vaulting and the elaborate scrolled pelmets.



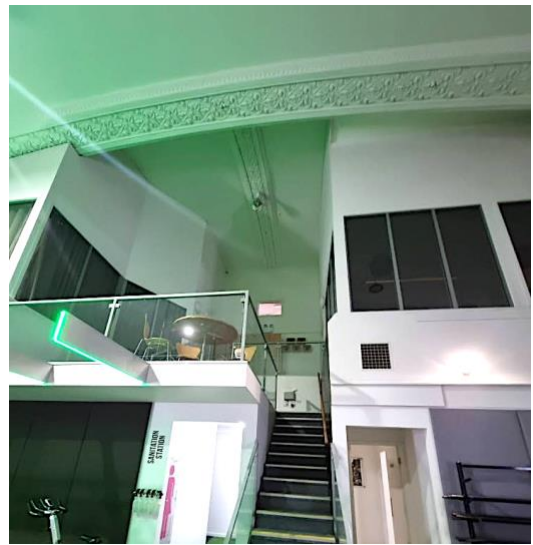
Black and white photos: supplied; colour photos: Felicity Woodward.

The Auditorium

Below: The arch above the proscenium is intact, as well as the decorative borders of the ceiling, and the tops of the side 'boxes', but the angled walls with their screened panels either side of the stage have been removed. Black and white photos: supplied; colour photos: Felicity Woodward.



Above: The pelmets and groining between survive, but the 'boxes', have been infilled. Below: The rear of the auditorium was simpler, and the ceiling here is still intact. Photos: supplied and Felicity Woodward





Above: While most details at Bendigo are far simpler, the bowed pelmets are almost as elaborate as those at the big city cinemas. Bowed pelmets in the Regent Melbourne (left), and the Plaza Bendigo (right). Photos: supplied and Felicity Woodward

Spanish style

The Plaza Theatre below the Regent in Melbourne is of Spanish style, as is the Plaza in Sydney (1930). Like the two Regents, they are by different architects, but the style and detailing were very similar (only the façade and lobby remain of the Sydney Plaza). They were both far more elaborate than Bendigo. There were many other Spanish style theatres built across Australia in the interwar period, but they have either been demolished or the interiors largely lost. Another comparable example of the Spanish style from the period is the former Kellow Falkiner car showrooms from 1928 on St Kilda Road Melbourne, by Harry Norris, where the exterior features have similar elaborate detailing. The Plaza by comparison is a simpler stylised version.



Above: Kellow Falkiner. Photo: supplied. Right: The Plaza Bendigo. Photo: Felicity Woodward.



The Allan Doney Collection

A large collection of Bendigo photographs taken by Allan Doney will be donated to the Bendigo Historical Society by the National Trust (Vic) in mid-October 2025. The Historical Society and the Trust are thrilled with this outcome. The Branch will have a full story in the November edition of *History & Heritage*.

BHS is looking for local sponsors to help in getting the images online and to have an exhibition in 2026. [Email the President](#), Euan McGillivray, if you can help.



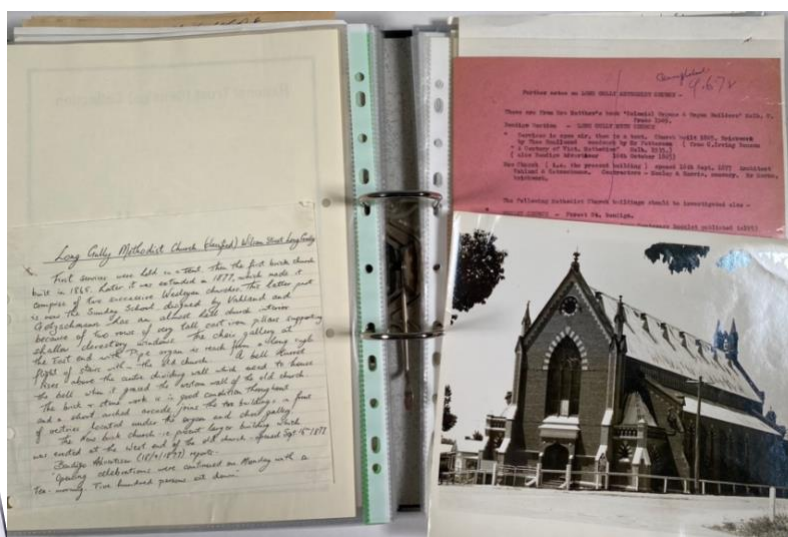
One of the over 16,000 images taken by Allan Doney to become part of the Bendigo Historical Society Collection: Bendigo Easter Fair, 1954. (Note the sideshow on left - The Amazing Vilsteys were quite an attraction in the 1950s - 'an aerial dental act'.) Photo: Allan Doney

Bendigo Branch and Bendigo Historical Society collaboration

The Bendigo Branch is collaborating more and more with the Bendigo Historical Society. Some National Trust (Bendigo) books such as *Bendigo at Work* and *Postwar Portraits* – photographs by Allan Doney, can be purchased at the BHS *History House* 11 MacKenzie Street Bendigo. See full list of publications [here](#).

BHS is cataloguing and storing many significant Bendigo Branch papers. Below is an example of the type of items BHS is sorting, managing and making available. If you would like to assist the BHS in sorting or cataloguing National Trust material, please email the BHS President [here](#).

MOSAIC	National Trust Collection Topic List
3084.62	Leigh Lodge 12 Bannerman Street Formerly Selb Villa • Description of house + land.
3084.63	Limerick Castle Hotel • Letters re proposed replacement building • History + description • Four colour photos • Letters re sale of building • Series of articles from Bendigo Advertiser
3084.64	Lister House 37 Rowan Street • Letter re closure of Northern Distn Ct School of Nursing • Letter re restoration of 'Gold Office' and 'Old Stables'
3084.65	Long Gully • Typed history of the area



Volunteering with the National Trust

National Trust Australia Victoria Volunteer guidelines:

NTAV (National Trust Australia – Victoria) is always looking for new members to volunteer in a large number of roles. An extract from NTAV website below states:

Make a difference and volunteer with the National Trust.

Help protect and celebrate Victoria's remarkable natural, cultural, and Indigenous heritage by volunteering with the state's leading heritage and conservation organisation.

Our dedicated volunteers play a vital role in supporting our events, programs, and conservation initiatives. By sharing your unique skills, experiences, and passion, you'll contribute to preserving the stories and places that make Victoria special.

A link to information to become a volunteer with NTAV can be found [here](#).

Bendigo Branch National Trust Secretary Position vacancy:

Michael Lake will be standing down as Secretary at the AGM in November 2025.

Nominations are being called from NTAV (National Trust Australia – Victoria) members and other interested people to take on this position.

The Secretary MUST be a financial member of the NTAV.

The Secretary duties usually take around 6 hours per month, including attending the monthly Branch meeting and the monthly Committee/Editorial meeting, taking and distributing minutes and other matters.

The official guidelines from NTAV Member's Branch Committee Terms of Reference are listed below.

Please [email Michael Lake](#) or [President Phil Howe](#) to discuss the position.

(Extract from NTAV Terms of Reference)

6. Branch Secretary duties:

6.1. Branch Committee members must meet the requirements of being a registered volunteer of the NTAV and must become registered within 20 business days of their election to the committee.

7.2. The duties and responsibilities of Branch Committee Office Bearers are as follows:

The Secretary is generally responsible for the management and recording of all Branch meetings and correspondence.

7.2.3.1. It is the Secretary's responsibility to ensure meeting minutes and Branch correspondence are filed with the NTAV archive.

8.4. Meeting Minutes

The minutes of each meeting must be kept, and should be an accurate record of all decisions, outcomes and actions (including passed or failed resolutions) of the meeting.

The minutes must note who is present, absent, and who has given an apology, as well as any additional internal or external guests.

The minutes should record high-level, key discussion points, all decisions (motions and resolutions, and whether they are approved) and proposals, with the name of the people responsible, any declarations of a conflict of interest, a summary of relevant other/new business, the date and location of the meeting, along with the open and closing time of the meeting. The standardised templates include consistent wording for the recording of minutes.

Clear actions should be recorded, with a proposed completion date listed, and the appointment of the individual responsible for the action.

Minutes of all meetings must be saved to the NTAV Archive.

The National Trust (Victoria) Bendigo Branch 2026 Australian Heritage Festival

The festival will run from April 18th to May 18th 2026, and, like this year, will require volunteers. This year's festival was a great success highlighting amazing places and stories about Bendigo and region. Check out this year's April and May issues of *History & Heritage* to see the range of wonderful activities that were presented in 2025.



Examples of volunteering at past Heritage Festivals in Bendigo. Left: Peter Cox and friend outside the Old Lawcourts; Right: Don and Mary Leversha helping at one of the open miners' cottages. Photos: Bendigo Branch

You may have ideas on what you would like to see our Branch open for the 2026 Festival. You may also have questions about how to volunteer. Send your ideas and/or questions to Phil Howe at [this email address](#).

National Trust Branch Presidents' Meeting September 8th - Phil Howe

As the new interim Branch President, I was delighted to attend the Branch Presidents' meeting at the head office of the National Trust Victoria in Melbourne - otherwise known as *Tasma*. For me as a "newbie" I was there to meet and get to know a few other presidents and to learn how their branches are run and how they are faring. I also managed to meet the staff of *Tasma* and to learn what support they can offer us in Bendigo, which they did admirably.

A major area of discussion for Melbourne at this stage is the newly announced State Government zoning scheme for infill housing projects designed around railway stations. The issue at stake is the absence of any mention of heritage areas or buildings within these zones. This could become a problem for regional branches, as the scheme will probably be rolled out further from Melbourne in future.

A fair amount of time was also taken up by the report of the Chief Financial Officer concerning the banking arrangements for branches. It was fairly complicated stuff, which I am leaving to our treasurer to continue discussions with the C.F.O. to determine how we should proceed. Overall, a worthwhile experience for me and one that bodes well for the future.



Tasma Terrace, East Melbourne, the NTAV head office. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Melrose (South Australia) Courthouse Museum - Phil Howe

At the foot of Mt Remarkable in the Southern Flinders Ranges in South Australia lies the town of Melrose, the first town north of Adelaide and the home of the old courthouse and police station. It was developed with cells and stables for a police force which at the time looked after the largest police district in the world!

The complex is operated by the Melrose Historical Society who received a state grant of over \$500,000 for restoration work and facilities. This enabled them to open to the public, which now occurs 7 days a week. Opening is a one-person affair with the volunteer taking an admission fee, providing you with a plan of the layout, giving suggestions for an itinerary and a brief summary of what to look for with highlights for each room. Thereafter it's just follow the map and read all the large information boards at each display; some of these are for historical information and some more whimsical.

The accompanying photos show an example of the information board at one of the displays (left), the gaol cells (right) while another shows the main building with the courthouse and accommodation for staff, and the last. The whole affair is very professionally done, thoughtfully laid out and kept in a very good and clean condition by a small team of volunteers.



As a member of the National Trust in Bendigo - a city of over 105,000 people - I was very impressed with how the Melrose community - about 340 people - have saved such an historic building and have presented it in remarkably good condition to the general public every day of the year except Christmas. It gives me hope that in the near future we can achieve the same experience with the old Bendigo Law Courts.

September Branch meeting summary

Tuesday September 23rd 2025 at 5.30pm Bendigo Library

Topics discussed:

- Branch Presidents' meeting at TASMA:
- All Saints Church damage and vandalism:
- Old Law Courts update:
- Demolition by Neglect:
- Gasworks Update:
- National Trust Banking system update:
- Annual General Meeting November 25th.
- John Beebe Observatory and residence update:
- History and Heritage newsletter articles:
- Next Editorial and Committee Meeting to be Thursday October 2nd at 10.00am at Bendigo Library.

Next Branch meeting will be Tuesday October 28th 2025, at 5.30pm at Bendigo Library.

History & Heritage Branch newsletter - receive, contribute, read past issues

Everyone has a story that, when combined with others, provides a record of the social history of our region and draws attention to the significance of local built heritage. The Branch welcomes your ideas, contributions and photographs for the newsletter which is published monthly. The contribution deadline for *History & Heritage* is the first day of each month. For previous issues of *History & Heritage* [click here](#)

To help increase circulation send it to your friends and family or sign up your organisation to receive it. To join the editorial group, contact **Gary Hill - 0428 467 409**.

Next Branch meeting, Tuesday October 28th at Bendigo Library 5.30pm

Next Branch Committee Meeting Thursday 6th November at Bendigo Library at 10am

Next Editorial Group meeting Thursday Thursday 6th November at Bendigo Library at 11am

Email: National Trust of Australia (Vic) Bendigo & District Branch [click here](#)

You can see the current Victorian advocacy issues at the Trust Advocate blog: [Click here](#)

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and recognize the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past, present and future.

