

# The Richmond Local Resources Project

Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh  
Fieldworkers in Oral History

The Richmond Resources Project was set up at the Richmond Community Education Centre in Melbourne early in 1977 on a voluntary basis. We had both been teaching (one of us is a school librarian) at a local high school and had noted the lack of teaching material which threw any light on the lives of local people. Richmond is an inner working class suburb, which has experienced immense changes in the last years. Whereas the population had often been third generation working class families in the 1960's, with a strong Irish Catholic influence, by 1976, the school population was overwhelmingly Greek, Yugoslav, Turkish and Spanish. English speaking children often were newcomers living in the huge Housing Commission flats. One need was for teaching material that gave the experiences of immigrants in their own words, and to help fill this gap we wrote our first oral history, *The Immigrants*.<sup>1</sup>

In England in 1976, Wendy had seen and admired the work of the People's History of Hackney and other associated projects at the Centreprise Bookshop. In Richmond we found that the Community Education Centre had the facilities to start a similar project and were willing to find us an office and petty cash and to support our application for a Schools Commission Innovations grants. So, in March 1977, having resigned from teaching, we started to gather a collection of material available for loan, and/or for copying, based on the Richmond community past and present, useful for teaching in primary and secondary schools, which would also serve an archival purpose. We proclaimed rather grandly that we expected that schools and the community would play an integral part in building the collection. We aimed to involve students, teachers and members of the community, and community organisations such as the local library, in this work and hoped that it would be a continuing process which would be taken over by some local institution or group.

The Education Centre, which has a shop front at street level, proved an ideal place since it includes a darkroom, a range of technical equipment, cassette copier, photocopier, scanner, roneo machine, etc.,

all available free or at very moderate cost. Now, three years later, we have a small and reasonably well-ordered collection of local resources based there. There are two hundred or more 8" x 10" photographs of Richmond and Richmond people, past and present, each accompanied by explanatory notes. Many of these photographs have been donated by local residents, factories, etc., and since many early photos of the area had been taken from the Town Hall tower we persuaded an intrepid student to climb the tower again and take a set of present day shots for comparison. A score of the most popular have been enlarged to 18" x 24" and laminated for classroom display. The photograph collection is roughly categorised into geographical areas and/or subjects. The Richmond Library purchased a full set of photographs which we mounted, laminated and drilled for easy exhibition. These are lent to schools, etc. We also have a collection of historical and present day maps. On these can be traced the subdivisions made by Robert Hoddle, Surveyor of Melbourne, the now vanished gasometer, and John Wren's racecourse, now occupied by one of the first Housing Commission estates. Demand for these photographs has been such that the Centre has now bought another set of the photographs for loan, as the Library ones are often out.

Another major project has been the creation of a time-line history of Richmond on cards which fills one catalogue drawer. In the next drawer, the cards are arranged in subject order. There is also a small collection of tapes and interviews with Richmond residents, about half of which were made by school children. Through an Adult Education class we found former Richmond-ites who have interviewed others for the oral history program. These tapes have been indexed and can be used for reference or can be borrowed. Copies of some are housed in the Richmond Library and short passages have been transcribed for use in schools, etc.

A collection of maps of the Burnley area has been made dating from Robert Hoddle's early observations of the area up till the present, and have been re-drawn to scale so they can be used for a detailed area study. Overlays have been made from them for the overhead projector and the kids watched with interest as the changes in the area around their school were demonstrated.

We have also made a duplicated booklet — The South Richmond History Walk — which was compiled simply by extracting facts from the time line and from material supplied by the local Historical Society and the local papers. This is stapled together with photocopies of photographs old and new and made available where requested. It found a ready sale at the local Library. Others can easily be assembled.

Various small duplicated or photocopied publications have been brought out to cover special needs. A project in Burnley resulted in A Short History of Burnley School, Interesting Places in Burnley, and so on.

Several exhibitions of children's work have been held in the Library and in the Education Centre, and we have provided photographic

displays for local schools, taken part in centenary celebrations, run seminars in conjunction with the local teachers' centre. Our first exhibition, 'Women in Richmond', was designed to celebrate International Women's Day and featured drawings and writings from local children.

Other material in our files includes all available published material such as centenary booklets issued by local schools; historical notes about long-established Richmond industries (such as Bryant and May, and Rosella); newspaper clippings; a list of resource people available to help in schools, talk to groups or conduct history walks; notes supplied by the local Historical Society; and much material created by local school kids. This ranges from kindergarten children's art, 'Pictures of my House', books about 'My parents' school days', an exhibition of photographs of 'Working in Burnley' by talented senior students, to some very interesting writing.

Some of this student created material is of high standard and was created for exhibitions at the Education Centre and/or the Library. These have featured family histories and books made by children on some aspect of the local community and presented to us and/or the Richmond Library. As the Richmond community is now largely multicultural, any exploration of the Richmond community must include the background of the children, who are encouraged to interview parents and grandparents, to recall their life at home and in Australia, the experience of migration and their reactions to a new country.

A 'Back to Richmond' weekend is currently being sponsored jointly by the Council of Adult Education, Carringbush Library and the R.C.E.C. and speakers, participants, and much of the material will be drawn from our informants and our archives. The proceedings are to be recorded.

As for our success? We feel we have just started getting our material in some sort of shape because we have been bedevilled by too much success, which put demands on our material before it was organised enough to be able to use conveniently. This has led to a catastrophe or two including the loss of a number of our (uncopied) cassettes when we put them on display at a Centre Open Day.

Since our original purpose was to involve people — children, teachers, and if possible, the broader community — in the creation of a local archive, involvement was seen as more important than the material itself. However, a contradiction has arisen in that quite apart from the educational program, an archive has in fact been created, which serves the local schools and history-minded locals, but is on the whole not very useful to serious tertiary students because their needs are more particular and they still need to go to the academic libraries and the archives. Tertiary students have come (sometimes in numbers which made it hard for us to cope with them and with our work) and our attitude has been: 'We'll help you if you will promise to send us a copy of your essay, class paper, slide set or whatever'. We have lectured when requested to university groups and been promised that copies of the resulting work

would be lodged with us. Sadly we have to record that we cannot recall even one such student and/or university lecturer who has ever been heard of again, who has ever helped us in any way. We say sadly, because so much really valuable essay and assignment work is done by university students which, because it is not available, might just as well not have happened, that is from the point of view of the broader community. We are also sad because we now do not feel justified in spending our very limited time with tertiary students. And this means that one important aim of our work, which was to create a real local resource centre containing a large variety of material, has not got off the ground. However, one lecturer at the nearby Institute of Childhood Development did send a group of her students to record children's stories at Burnley Primary School with an emphasis on their multi-cultural story-telling heritage in the hope of making books which could be used in literacy teaching (another idea from Hackney) and also to collect children's traditional games and play rhymes for possible use in our projected Burnley School Book.

However, we have not quite given up hope that we will attract class papers, essays, copies of theses, etc., that touch on Richmond, because this would make the archive useful, not just to local history enthusiasts and schools, but to a wider community.

How successful have we been? We're not quite sure. We have always been very welcome at schools but we feel that the material is often an extra rather than an integral part of the curriculum. When we have gone into the schools and taught the unit ourselves it has been very successful and the children's enthusiasm intense, but when that is over, it tends to be the end. The peripatetic nature of the Victorian teaching service means that almost as soon as we found teachers who really wanted to be involved they would vanish to another school out of the area. In fact, almost every teacher who expressed interest in the project when we started has now moved out.

The idea of the Schools Commission Innovations Program was that innovative projects would be funded for a finite period (two years in our case) and, if they proved worthwhile, they would be taken over by some local bodies such as state education authorities. However, in the present crisis in education funding, there is no finance to carry on with. We had expected that the local library would prove hospitable to our collection and at least house it and give it token care, but they too have more than their share of financial stringency and a hunted look in their eyes when more work is suggested. So, we are putting our affairs in order and looking for volunteers who can organise the material that is coming from many quarters.

We have decided to crystallise at least some of our work in the form of publications which should have the effect of 'selling' the collection. Our first publication, *Growing Up In Richmond*, was launched last December.<sup>2</sup> We published it ourselves for greater economy and it is being circulated through the Richmond Education Centre. The price was fixed

at \$3.50 for the outside world but it is available cheaper to Richmond schools. Our strategy is to sell it by subscription (as part of a Richmond Series) to outsiders and to libraries. Thus we hope to repay the R.C.E.C. who financed its publication and to create a fund which will enable us to publish more. *Working in Richmond* is the next major venture. An outline history of Richmond, suitable for school use, is being produced in a simple typed format, and other books, this time using children's work, are projected.

We are also preparing kits of photographs, maps, notes, clippings, and the like, for sale. These are not very cheap — they have to pay for themselves — but we are finding that schools are willing to support the venture. If this support can be extended to other educational institutions, libraries, etc., the project may survive on the basis of voluntary work by the unemployed librarians and teachers who are now turning up.

Is it worthwhile? We think so. This week, a teacher from the local secondary school came along to say that she plans her year 8 English course around local studies and hopes the class will produce books about Richmond and Richmond people. This is a hopeful and necessary sign because although the Centre can continue to house and lend the collection, we cannot continue to promote it in schools ourselves. It must stand or fall on its own merits.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh, *The Immigrants*, Hyland House, 1977; Penguin, 1978.
2. Morag Loh, ed., *Growing Up In Richmond*, Richmond: Richmond Community Education Centre, 1979. See review in this issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*.