

*We acknowledge the traditional custodians of Hunters Hill  
and show respect to Elders past and present.*



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# “Bunk”

“History is more or less bunk”  
HENRY FORD, Chicago Tribune, 1916

## A wartime secret finally exposed

Hunters Hill Historical Society celebrated Christmas lunch at Gladesville Sporties Club on Wednesday 8 December. Guests of honour were Trent Zimmerman, federal member for North Sydney, and Ross Williams, mayor of Hunters Hill Municipality. A highlight of the occasion was a presentation given by the Historical Society’s president, Chris Schofield, on the wartime signal centre at the Montefiore retirement village in Boronia Park.

The secret of the Boronia main signal centre only came to light when research of military connections in Hunters Hill was carried out; the establishment was not known to any members of the local RSL sub-Branch, for example. From the few records available some of its history has been pieced together.

The Montefiore Home for 26 Jewish residents was opened in 1939. It was a very unlikely site for a military establishment, with no main roads and no railway nearby, which is probably the very reason for its selection.

In 1942 the Army took over Montefiore and the nearby Isabella Lazarus Home for orphan children. Montefiore records indicated that a mysterious Major X inspected the homes and stated that he could place at least 100 personnel there – a wireless and telephone unit and a cipher unit. Subsequent records refer to negotiations with the Army on compensation for occupation of the homes.

The main signal centre had direct links to military headquarters in Brisbane and military establishments across New South Wales. The purpose was to report deployments and logistics and potential enemy activity.

Security was always the most important concern. Therefore, a need developed to enable signals to be sent that could not be deciphered. The early answer to this was the use of code books. The sender and receiver would use the same book to send

and receive the message.

For long and involved messages, this was slow and cumbersome, so machines were developed similar to the German ‘Enigma.’ Extreme secrecy surrounded the operation, so the



personnel were required to sign a 20-year bond of silence under the Official Secrets Act. The commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel A. E. Walters, R Aust Sigs, and in 1943/44 Lieutenant Morris Langlo West was on the staff. He later became a famous author. In 1943 drawings and specifications were issued for construction of three blast-proof concrete bunkers in the grounds of the property to house an emergency diesel generator and signalling equipment. This was about eight months after the Japanese submarine attack on Sydney Harbour.

It was not all high tech though. The station became the HQ of 2 Carrier Pigeon Section with 522 birds.

The lofts were maintained by the Voluntary

Defence Corps. Two pigeons earned the animal equivalent of the VC during the war, carrying messages across enemy lines in Papua in the South Pacific.

By mid-1945 the signal centre had been deactivated and approval was given for the Army to remove all the military items, including structures, and to restore the site to the Montefiore owners. *Research by Rod Stewart, past president of Hunters Hill RSL Sub-Branch.* *Pictures: On parade at the Boronia Signal Centre; Guarding the pigeons. Pictures courtesy Australian War Memorial.*



## Who was Mary Ann Bugg?

Mary Ann Bugg doesn't fit the stereotype of a 19th-century woman.

Often dressed in men's clothes, she was an expert horse rider and skilled bush navigator who roamed with her partner across NSW as he robbed travellers, stations, pubs and stores while eluding police. Most history books mention her as the partner of the infamous Captain Thunderbolt, the "gentleman bushranger" famed for escaping from jail on Cockatoo Island — but Mary Ann has every claim to being just as iconic.

Mary Ann was a Worimi woman, born of an indigenous mother and convict father near Gloucester on the mid-north coast of NSW. In 1860 she met Thunderbolt, whose real name was Fred Ward. Before his capture in 1870, she acted as his scout, informer, lover and confidante and bore him three children.

Thunderbolt is recognised as having the longest bushranging career in NSW, but it is unlikely he would have survived for so long without Mary Ann's help.

She taught the illiterate Thunderbolt to read. She helped provide food and shelter, and spread false information to help him stay ahead of the authorities.

Thunderbolt remains a legend, a popular folk hero and major tourist drawcard in New South Wales. Mary Ann Bugg is less well known and some even say she's been erased from the Thunderbolt legend.

And that's part of a bigger problem, where many Aboriginal people responsible for the survival of Australian folk heroes have been airbrushed from the history books.

Mary Ann's story marks her as an uncommon woman for her time. Though many relationships between settlers and Indigenous people on the frontier were violent and unequal, her parents' union was long-term and consensual. Mary Ann was the eldest of their eight children.

*(Continued on page 2)*

(Continued from page 1)

She and her brother were sent to school in Sydney when she was four years old.

As a result, she had a degree of literacy uncommon among people of her race and class, says historian and author Carol Baxter.

"She was educated at a time when Aboriginal children weren't educated. You've got this child who's a mix of two worlds, neither of whom accept her."

This degree of European learning would help Mary Ann in her later encounters with the justice system, after she began bushranging with Thunderbolt.

Mary Ann Bugg brought up her children at a time when the NSW government was enlisting Aboriginal trackers and troopers from Queensland to drive people off their traditional land and prepare the way for European settlement.

Without any kinship connections, or sympathy for local clans, the strangers had a reputation for cruelty.

In her thesis, *Mary Ann Bugg: The Captain's Lady*, Kali Bierens argues the pair were typical of the occasional collaborations between Aboriginal people and white settlers.

Thunderbolt's relationship with Mary Ann meant he was included in Kamilaroi kinship obligations, Bierens writes, sharing his loot with local people.

In return, he was supplied with fresh horses, rations and shielded from detection in their country.

Some retellings of the Thunderbolt legend hold that Mary Ann died a tragic death from pneumonia in 1867, and was mourned by Thunderbolt, who died three years later at Uralla, NSW.

However, Carol Baxter says this is based on a misunderstanding of the primary sources.

Her research concludes it was another Aboriginal woman who died after being taken as a lover by Thunderbolt, and that Mary Ann outlived her famous partner by another 35 years.

According to Baxter, Mary Ann and Thunderbolt parted ways for good in 1867. In the decades afterwards, she gave birth to at least five more children, became a nurse, and married another man.

*Source material by Carol Baxter, who has been a speaker at the Historical Society*

## Something fishy at Woolwich

Australia's early indigenous inhabitants loved oysters which were to be found in abundance in the country's waterways.

So it is not surprising that colonial settlers and future generations also developed a fondness for this shellfish delicacy.

To supply the growing demand, a Greek immigrant, Athanassio Comino (1844?-1897) opened a chain of oyster saloons across Sydney. His first store, opened in 1878, was at 36 Oxford Street.

Around 1882, he took up the lease of oyster beds at the mouth of the Lane Cove River at Onions Point, Woolwich. His aim was to revive the farming of New Zealand flat oysters, a larger cousin to the Sydney rock oyster.

However, his venture at Onions Point proved unsuccessful. Whether this was due to disease or pollution caused by human habitation is not clear.

By 1886, he had forsaken the unrewarding lease at Woolwich and taken up a new lease of two kilometres of foreshore on the Evans River in northern New South Wales. In any case, by that time Port Jackson, as Sydney Harbour was then called, had been closed to any future oyster leasing.

Comino survived fluctuations in his business enterprises to become known as the "Oyster King". He never married, and died at the age of 53 at Darlinghurst on 30 December 1897. He bequeathed the sizable sum of \$5217 to his brother, John, and other relatives.

He also left the template for other Greek immigrants to go into the seafood business. By the 1950s, a flurry of small fish cafes lined the streets near Central Railway Station.

From those beginnings came the Greek milk bar, the Greek corner shop and the Greek café.

*Chris Schofield.*



HUNTERS HILL HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC

ABN 72012103152

Address Mail To The Secretary  
Hunters Hill Historical Society Inc  
PO Box 98 Hunters Hill NSW 2110

Phone 9879 9443

[www.huntershillmuseum.org.au](http://www.huntershillmuseum.org.au)

Email: [contact@huntershillmuseum.org.au](mailto:contact@huntershillmuseum.org.au)

Editor: Ian Adair

## The Russian and the nurse

In 1935, Victoria Road Gladesville, was the scene of a tragic murder-suicide.

The incident occurred at around 7am on the morning of Friday 2 August. A 24 year old woman, Mrs Mary Emmeline Andrews from Ultimo had just alighted from a tram outside Gladesville Mental Hospital to begin a ward shift there at 7.30am.

She was confronted by a Russian emigrant, Peter Kopviesky, a 58-year-old waterside worker from Chippendale. An argument ensued during which Mrs Andrews turned to run away from the man. Kopviesky then drew a revolver and fired a shot. Witnessing what was happening, a passing motorist accelerated suddenly in an attempt to run the man down but missed. Kopviesky fired two more shots at point blank range at the head of Mrs Andrews, who collapsed onto the tram tracks. By this time, the motorist had stopped his car. As he got out of the vehicle, Kopviesky turned the gun on himself.

A note in Russian, found on the man stated that Mrs Andrews owed him 65 pounds and that: "I have fulfilled my oath". He had earlier been heard to say: "I fix she up. I just make her face ugly".

It seems that Mrs Andrews, who was estranged from her husband, had been in a long-term relationship with Kopviesky, a married man who had become infatuated with her. Kopviesky had given Mrs Andrews sums of money from time to time. When he had demanded the money back, she had refused. This resulted in Kopviesky seeking revenge, and in a frenzy, as the coroner concluded, he had shot Mrs Andrews and then himself.

*From SMH articles, August 1935*

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