

The Family History Group of Ryde District Historical Society:

a brief history by Kevin Shaw

The idea for the Family History Group (FHG) as a sub-group of the Ryde District Historical Society (RDHS) came from the president of 1987 and 1988, Anthony Duignan. Julie Dawson and I liked the idea and developed it. Julie had been a family historian before she was a Ryde historian and my genealogical researches about Ryde people had turned me into a family historian. A number of other members were enthusiastic as well, including Doug and Olive Conley and Fred and Elva Charlier.

It was decided to call a public meeting for 2:00 pm at Willandra on Saturday 25 June 1988 to gauge the depth of support for a family history group in the general public of the Ryde area. As a Cumberland Press journalist, the Charliers' daughter-in-law Ann was able to publicise this first meeting in the Northern District Times and there was a similar article in The Weekly Times as well.

The inaugural meeting was very positive. It decided on a time for subsequent meetings, namely the second Saturday of most months at 10:00 am. The motto of the group was "helping Ryde people with their family history" rather than "doing Ryde family history"; the latter was to remain the preserve of the main group of the Society. However, it was also decided that FHG members were to be full members of the RDHS, with the same subscriptions as everyone else. If there was any resentment about this arrangement, I never heard anything about it and it became a model for a number of other historical societies, even quite large ones like Parramatta and Ku-ring-gai.

Megan Martin, Ryde's Local Studies Librarian, gave a short address on the genealogical resources in Ryde Library. Julie Dawson was elected FHG Secretary and I was elected Chairman and we were commissioned with organising the first regular meeting on 13 August. Once again this was publicised by both local newspapers on 10 August and there was a roll-up of twenty-six people, including Joan Harrison, Mary Cadman, Gwenyth Oake, Lorraine Prothero, Bill Wilson, Dorothy Heber, Don Whitham, Elva Charlier, Robyn Hogen, Pat Hancox, Clover Wilson, Roslyn Sutherland, Doug and Olive Conley, Shirley Noble, Ron and Heather Freeman, Anthony Duignan, Dorothy Brown, Edith Turner, June Ball, Margaret Torrens, and M Holmes.

The guest speaker for the first meeting was Janice Brooks of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. She spoke of the resources of the LDS or Mormon libraries and their locations in the Sydney metropolitan region. This was a wonderful start for the group as these libraries are still amongst the most powerful resources of family historians researching overseas.

The September meeting agreed to have a Gazette as a separate supplement to the Ryde Recorder and Lorraine Prothero volunteered to edit it. This supplement survived for several years but was eventually absorbed into the Recorder with a general agreement that there would be articles of interest to family historians in every issue.

On Saturday 10 December, the FHG began a tradition of replacing some meetings with outings to libraries and archives so that members could learn about resources and do some research in company. The first visit was to the search room of the State Archives at Globe Street in The Rocks. In those days, the present State Records was called the Archives Authority and there were primary records available for reading at Globe Street. Now, of course, there are only printed books, microfilms and microfiche. Seventeen members and four non-members attended this seminar.

Another tradition that started very early and has continued to this day were the "mutual help" workshops that are held on alternate months. These are based on the conviction that the accumulated wisdom of all the members of the group is often more valuable than the imported wisdom of guest speakers. If people are willing to stand up and tell the meeting about some problem they are having in their research, described often as a "roadblock" or a "brick wall", there is usually someone present

who can help with making a breakthrough. It is part of the excitement of coming to the FHG meetings.

Another valuable part of the FHG is the way it publicises to its members the latest research aids, books and other resources for family history research. Of course, in the early meetings a fair amount of time was spent with each member sharing what they knew about books that had helped them along the way. As new members join, they have new contributions to add and the older members can help them out with resources that have been valuable in the past.

The group has also influenced the subscription policy of the RDHS, which now subscribes to several genealogical publications that it never used to before the FHG was formed. This has proved to be a valuable way of spending the extra membership subscriptions that have come into the Society since 1988. I think it would be fair to say that the genealogical periodicals are borrowed with much greater frequency than the general run of books and magazines. The RDHS also has a large collection of genealogical microfiche and CD-ROMs that members can access.

The FHG was very dynamic in its second year, 1989, and included the following activities:

February	a visit to the Parramatta LDS library,
March	an address by Faye Young on library resources generally,
April	an excursion to Kingswood Repository,
July	an address by Portia Robinson on female convicts,
August	an address by Commander Swan of the Society of Australian Genealogists (SAG),
September	an address by Trevor McLaughlin on Irish resources, and
November	an excursion to Kiama combining a tour of the district with research in the Family History Centre.

The law of diminishing returns would make one expect that this pace could not be maintained but 1990 was not much quieter. It included talks about the Australian Archives (now National Archives), shipping records, German records and the Land Titles Office (now Lands Department) and an excursion to the LDS library at Mortlake and another visit to Kingswood. The Society also began helping SAG with its headstone transcriptions of the Field of Mars Cemetery. As members of SAG, some of our members had also worked on transcribing at Rookwood and later at Waverley and South Head, but for most of us it was a new experience. The organiser, Laurel Burge, was very rigorous and dynamic and being a part of such a professionally run activity was a revelation to most of us. I helped a few times at Field of Mars and once or twice at Macquarie Park.

Subsequent years have settled down to a bit of a pattern, with meetings from February to November followed by a whole-Society Christmas Party on the second Saturday in December. The February meeting is usually a "members meeting" as are alternate meetings through the year. The other months have either a guest speaker or an excursion. Sometimes these excursions are to libraries or archives, sometimes they are a walking tour of a nearby suburb or attraction. One thing is constant: the people who participate enjoy themselves.

When the Society needs volunteers, the members of the FHG put their hands up with equal enthusiasm as the other members. In fact the Ryde District Historical Society is a remarkably unified organisation, given that it is supposed to have two different groups within it. This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the formation of the Family History Group. Given the success of this "group within a group", I think there needs to be a celebration of some sort, perhaps on the second Saturday of July, the 12th.