

Building on History

Organisational

Sustainability

and

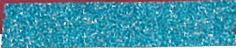
the

Ipswich

Historical

Society

Edited by Emily Kirry, Sarah Baker & Zelmarie Cantillon



Sustaining Community Heritage zine series

Series editors

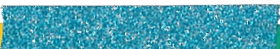
Professor Sarah Baker

Dr Zelmarie Cantillon

The Sustaining Community Heritage zine series emerges from an Australian Research Council-funded project, 'Co-creating a sustainable future for the community heritage sector'. This project explores the organisational sustainability of Australia's volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums and historical societies which serve important functions in shaping public history through the collection, preservation and display of local, everyday and marginalised heritages. However, the sector faces a sustainability crisis. Mounting pressures pose a threat to the long-term futures of volunteer-run heritage institutions, putting at risk the diversity and accessibility of the nation's historical record. In this project, we collaborate with representatives from community heritage institutions across Australia to co-develop strategies for recognising value, measuring organisational sustainability and creating benchmarks for sustainable practice.

The zines in this series capture the work of the project as it unfolds, enabling volunteers in community heritage organisations to communicate their experiences and knowledge creatively and accessibly. We approach the zines as a way to facilitate a networked, co-designed understanding of organisational sustainability from a range of institutional contexts. The zines in the series identify challenges, but they also seek to build on existing resources, capabilities and ambitions already in place for the pursuit of viable futures.

For project updates and other issues of this zine series, see:
<https://communityheritagetoolkit.com/>



The background of the book cover is a collage. A central vertical band of solid orange color runs from top to bottom. On either side of this band are vertical strips of a pink and white grid pattern, which appear to be torn pieces of paper or fabric. The background also features a collage of historical artifacts: a wooden cabinet with glass doors on the left, a dark wooden chair, a framed picture, and a dark wooden box with a metal latch on the right.

Building on History: Organisational Sustainability and Ipswich Historical Society

Editors

Emily Kirry
Sarah Baker
Zelmarie Cantillon

Contributors

Brigid McCarthy
Carmel Crimean
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Published by Community Heritage Press

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Ethics

This project has received full ethical clearance from Griffith University's Human Ethics Committee (GU ref no: 2025/199).

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Contents

Editorial

- *Emily Kirry, Sarah Baker & Zelmari Cantillon*.....vii

Volunteer roles 1

- *Brigid McCarthy & Libby Coultas*.....1

Sticky note 1

- *Brigid McCarthy*.....2

Organisational strengths

- *Sandi Jones*.....3

Letter writing 1

- *Brigid McCarthy*.....4

Sticky note 2

- *Carmel Crimean*.....5

Visibility

- *Brigid McCarthy, Carmel Crimean, Libby Coultas & Sandi Jones*.....6

Collaboration 1

- *Carmel Crimean & Emily Kirry*7

Traffic light 1

- *Carmel Crimean*.....8

Intergenerational engagement

- *Carmel Crimean & Sandi Jones*.....9

Donations 1

- *Sandi Jones & Emily Kirry*.....10

Resilience scale

- *Sandi Jones & Emily Kirry*.....12

Letter writing 2

- *Sandi Jones*13

Volunteer roles 2

- *Sandi Jones*.....14

Volunteers 1

- *Sandi Jones*.....15

Our heritage

- *Libby Coultas*.....16

Letter writing 3

- *Libby Coultas*.....17

Organisational weaknesses	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	18
Traffic light 2	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	19
Collaboration 2	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	20
Importance of community heritage	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	21
Volunteers 2	
- <i>Libby Coultas</i>	22
Sticky note 3	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	23
Sticky note 4	
- <i>Libby Coultas</i>	24
Traffic light 3	
- <i>Libby Coultas</i>	25
Funding	
- <i>Carmel Crimean</i>	26
Donations	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	27
Visitors at IHS	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	28
Time	
- <i>Libby Coultas</i>	29
Decision-making	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	30
Recruiting and training volunteers	
- <i>Brigid McCarthy, Libby Coultas & Sandi Jones</i>	31
Traffic light 4	
- <i>Brigid McCarthy</i>	32
Letter writing 4	
- <i>Carmel Crimean</i>	33
Succession planning	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	35
Skills	
- <i>Sandi Jones</i>	36
Acknowledgements	37

Building on History: Organisational Sustainability and Ipswich Historical Society

Editorial

About Ipswich Historical Society

Ipswich Historical Society (IHS) was created in 1966 by locals who felt the area's rich history should be preserved. Ipswich had in the past supplied limestone for building projects in nearby places like Brisbane; when the last of Ipswich's limestone was to be removed, the Society was formed to ensure this history would not be forgotten. The group originally met up in spaces such as member's homes and local schools, until moving into their current location – Cooneana Heritage Centre – in 2000.

Cooneana is a multi-building complex that the Historical Society shares with five other community groups. IHS volunteers deliver guided tours of Cooneana Homestead, one of the buildings in this complex, which is from the 1860s, though sections of it have been restored as recently as 2019.¹ With meaningfully placed historical artefacts featured throughout, these tours showcase to visitors what the space could have looked and felt like in the past. There is a newer building too, for the Society's library and other Ipswich-related items, and this is where many of the members get together to discuss future plans for the IHS. The Society also runs school tours, bringing Ipswich's history to new generations. With a strong community focus, volunteers host events at Cooneana, often in collaboration with nearby organisations such as Jacaranda Jam Community Music, and by also inviting local stallholders to join their markets.

¹ Ipswich Historical Society. (n.d.). *Cooneana Homestead*.
<https://www.ipswichhistoricalsociety.com/what-we-do/cooneana-homestead>

Ipswich Historical Society has a mission to 'research, promote, collect, record, preserve and display [the] history [of Ipswich] in an informative and collaborative manner, using suitable technologies and to the best possible standard'.² This mission is supported by 30-40 active volunteers.

The title *Building on History* draws inspiration from volunteers' reflections on why preserving Ipswich's heritage matters. As Carmel, the Society secretary observed, 'we must preserve our history so we know where we have come from [and] so you can go forward'. Another volunteer, Brigid, encourages becoming 'lost in the stories of the artifacts' as a way of understanding the importance of preserving Ipswich's past. Together these reflections suggest that history is something to be both protected and built upon. The title also carries a local resonance, recalling the quarrying of limestone that shaped development in South East Queensland.

Building on History also signals how organisational sustainability at the Ipswich Historical Society is grounded in continuity between past, present and future. The Society's collections, stories and volunteer knowledge provide foundations on which new generations can learn, connect and contribute. Sustaining the Society, then, is not only about caring for historical objects, but about ensuring that heritage remains meaningful, accessible and relevant to contemporary communities. As such, *Building on History* describes the Society's purpose and its approach to organisational sustainability: using the foundations of the past to create a viable future.

Outline of this zine: What's inside?

Content for this zine was created during a two-hour workshop conducted with four volunteers on 26 March 2026. Emily, the project's Research Assistant and one of its PhD students, guided the volunteers through three activities aimed at getting them to think creatively about organisational sustainability.

Using sticky notes, the first activity asked participants to write down the first word(s) that came to mind when thinking about organisational sustainability in relation to the IHS, with a focus on their strengths and challenges. This activity resulted in discussions around record-keeping, shared skills and the Society's collections.

Following this, we turned to a traffic light activity, where participants evaluated the IHS using a preliminary framework of organisational sustainability created by Sarah and Zel. The framework invited the volunteers to reflect on how the Society was performing in relation to governance, resources, volunteer experience and community engagement. Participants used green (indicating strong performance), orange (good performance with some risks identified) and red (more attention could be focused) coloured pencils and markers to share their assessment of the IHS. Although there were some differences in answers, all participants agreed that space and equipment required considerable attention.



Our last activity allowed participants to write letters directed to future volunteers. Participants were given the option to answer either or both writing prompts. The first option was to capture their hopes for the IHS' sustainable future with advice on how to spot when the organisation might be at-risk, and how to support themselves. The second prompt was for a letter directed at volunteers who are starting a new community heritage organisation – what lessons has the participant learned from their experiences with IHS that might inform recommendations a new organisation might consider to help ensure organisational sustainability.

Also dispersed throughout this zine are excerpts from an interview undertaken with Sandi, as well as snippets of discussions that took place during the zine workshop.



**Emily Kirry
Sarah Baker
Zelmarie Cantillon**



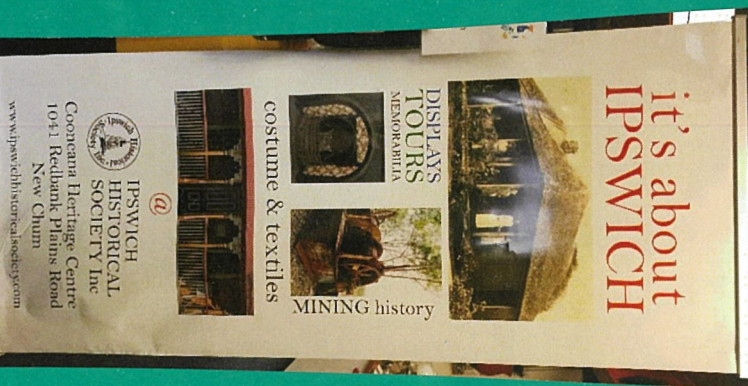


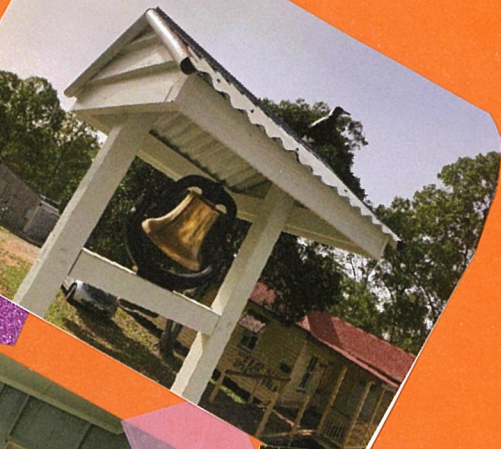
Brigid: With the volunteers you do have to find something that they're interested in to keep them interested.

Libby: Where their skill lies, their strengths.

Brigid: If you ask them to do something boring day after day after day –

Libby: If you don't like something, you're not going to be interested in it. You won't like doing it, so you won't do it.





Future security
for the IHS
and the associated
museum & its
collection.
New younger
volunteers to
carry on.





Emily: I'd love your opinion on what the organisation does well and what the key strengths are.

Sandi: What we do well is maintaining the site and that's because we've got a very, very keen and very capable gardening team. That is very good. What else do we do well? We're not bad at getting grants, we have had some significant grants over time. We're friendly and people who visit often say that the people that they meet, the members and volunteers are always very friendly and welcoming. I think that's an important part of what we do.... What do we do well? What do we do for sustainability? I think the interaction between members and volunteers is good on the whole and that allows us to keep volunteers and that enables sustainability in terms of manpower or person-power. It doesn't always happen, but I think we do a pretty good job of it.



Dear Future Volunteer,

Hopefully you will find your place in the society as I have.

Always consider how your work is of value to the society and that it is appreciated beyond just a contribution.

For the society's future be involved in the pursuit of funding and recognition by the public and governing bodies.

Allow yourself to be lost in the stories of the artifacts so you can then justify the continuation of the preservation of the history of Ipswich.

Be good, be kind & be keen on preserving our legacy.

COONEANA
HOMESTEAD
1848

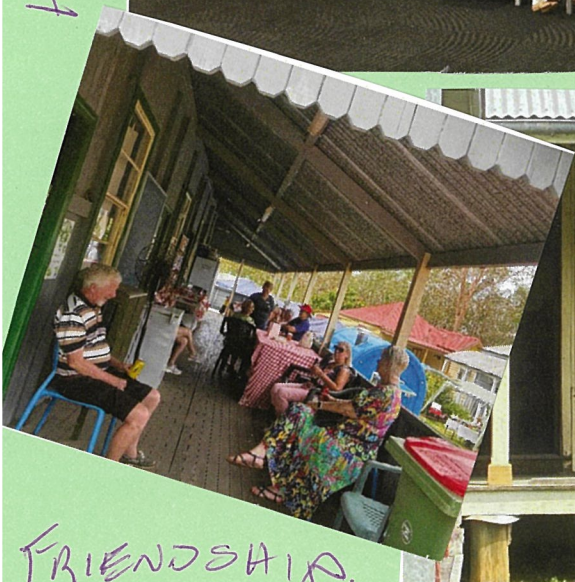


VOLUNTEERS.
FINANCE.
DONATIONS.
GRANTS.



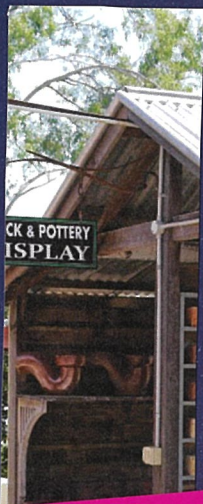
HISTORY

ACTIVITY



FRIENDSHIP.





Carmel: And that's a hard part because there's so many people who say, "Oh, we drive past all the time and never come in."

Sandi: "Never knew you were here."

Libby: "Oh, I didn't know you were there." It's so very hard

Brigid: "I used to be down the road" and it's like, "oh really?"

Sandi: If we had a dollar for everybody who come in and said that, we'd be right.

Libby: I think we'd be rich.



Carmel: I put red because we don't have a lot of time to collaborate with other like-minded museums and things like that. As much as we'd love to have, we don't have the time, so we don't collaborate. That's why I put the red.

Emily: Yeah. So the possibility is there, but just not enough people hours.

Carmel: That's right.



Dimension	Category	Strengths-based indicator
Governance	Participation	Adopts a participatory, democratic mode of governance
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Volunteer experience	Social atmosphere	Cultivates an inclusive, welcoming social environment
	Personal rewards	Provides opportunities for volunteers to activate their interests and learn new skills
Community engagement	Accessibility	Ensures venue and activities are accessible
	Visibility	Engages in outreach and builds a strong reputation
	Intergenerational engagement	Pursues younger audiences and volunteers
	Flexibility and dynamism	Adapts to changing local, political and social contexts

CARMEL

'Nea, that's intergenerational
[engagement].'



'Well, that's what I
thought. Nea is a really
good one for youngsters
who come in with their
parents and they want
to engage.'

SANDI

Emily: I saw the clear plastic boxes of donated items; there must be a lot to go through. Would you say you get something donated like weekly or monthly?

Sandi: Probably monthly. But what we have to do is teach our people who are on the receiving end to say, "I'm very sorry, but that doesn't fit with our collection," and they won't do it. A lot of people just won't turn things away, I will, but a lot of other people just say, "Oh well, we'll see what we can do with it, you know." We get people to fill out a donation form when they do donate things and part of the donation form says that they understand that first of all, they own the thing that they're donating in the first place. And then, secondly, that when they've filled in that form it becomes ours to do with what we think is best basically. And we might donate it to another organisation or we might keep it or we might throw it away, although it doesn't say throw it away; you know, dispose of it. ...

Emily: Do you think if you had more volunteers to help out, there would be a chance you'd get through the items quicker and have some sort of more consistent system in place?



Sandi: It would very much depend upon first of all the personalities of people who were working together, the ability of those people to utilise the cataloguing system and somebody going through and saying, "That's not part of our collection," first. But that's one of those things that has been on the cards for a long time and it hasn't actually happened. A lot of our volunteers and members say, "I don't know enough about this thing to know whether it's suitable, whether it's something that we can say is significant and we want it in our collection". And that's why in many cases, they'll accept everything.

Emily: So, ideally, you'd want a volunteer who is able to have that knowledge.

Sandi: Well, I don't think any new volunteers can do that sort of thing. They would have to be here for a while, they would have to become very familiar with our collection policy, which needs updating, and understand the cataloguing system. There's a lot of learning for volunteers to do, before they could really get into it. ... [Volunteers have come in saying they] can do accessioning, but what [they've] done is started a whole new system. And so, it gets to the point where you think well, how can we continue with this? Because individuals have their own way of doing things and they think "well, I've volunteered to do this, so I'll do it my way", and that isn't a good way to run.



5/10

Resilience

Emily: On a scale of one to ten, one being low and ten being high, how resilient would you say the organisation is to change?

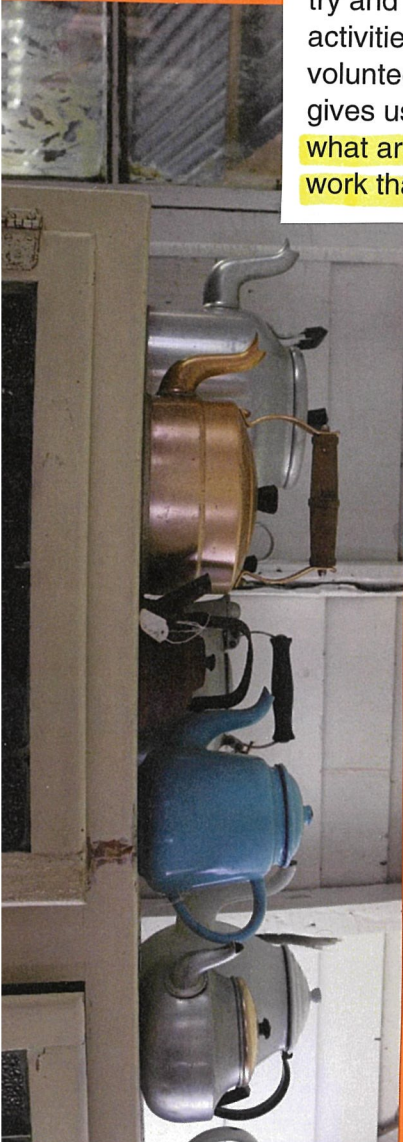
Sandi: I think about five. I think it would depend on what sort of change it was and the personalities of the current membership. I think that's a big issue. Personality comes into resilience and if we haven't all got the same sort of personality, then we've probably got different forms of identifying what makes us resilient

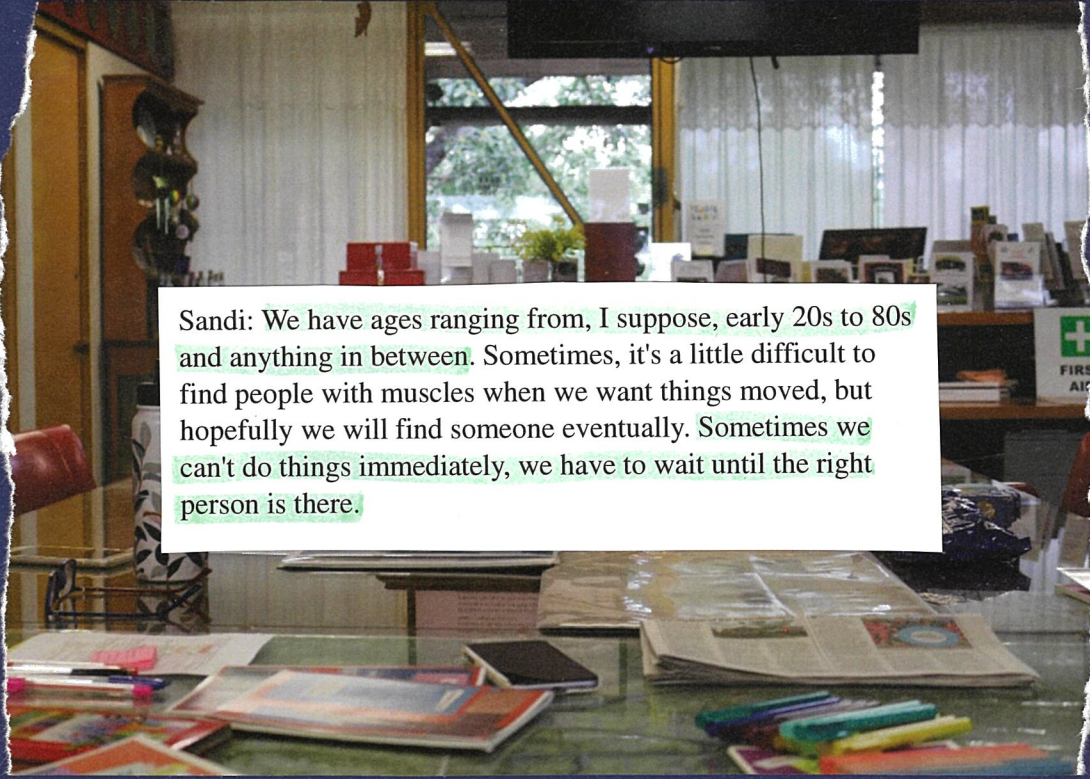
Hi there!

Welcome to the Ipswich Historical Society. As you begin your journey as a volunteer, I suggest you spend some time reading the policies, procedures and information on the website to understand the range of activities the Society undertakes. Then make sure to ask questions. Long time volunteers and members are always happy to answer.

If you find something that you think will hurt the Society's reputation or its ability to continue into the future, talk to others in a calm, respectful way and, if you have suggestions to improve, offer them. Written suggestions are best as the spoken word is often misremembered.

Sandi: It's not always easy to give someone a role that they want to do every time they come. We'd like people to feel that they can do whatever makes them happy, which is not always the case. So, people will be involved in maybe doing some cooking for an event or they might be involved in the displays or we have got one lady who does accessioning. That's the sort of thing, that there are always things to do here, yes, even if it's just cleaning, there's a lot to do. So, people will pick up and do things as and when they wish really. Although we do try and give people the option to choose the sort of activities they want to be involved in. We have a volunteer information sheet which they fill out and it gives us an opportunity to ask them, "Of all these things, what are you interested in?" And then, we can try and work that into what they do.





Sandi: We have ages ranging from, I suppose, early 20s to 80s and anything in between. Sometimes, it's a little difficult to find people with muscles when we want things moved, but hopefully we will find someone eventually. Sometimes we can't do things immediately, we have to wait until the right person is there.

OUR

it's about
IPSWICH



DISPLAYS
TOURS
MEMORABILIA



MINING history

costume & textiles



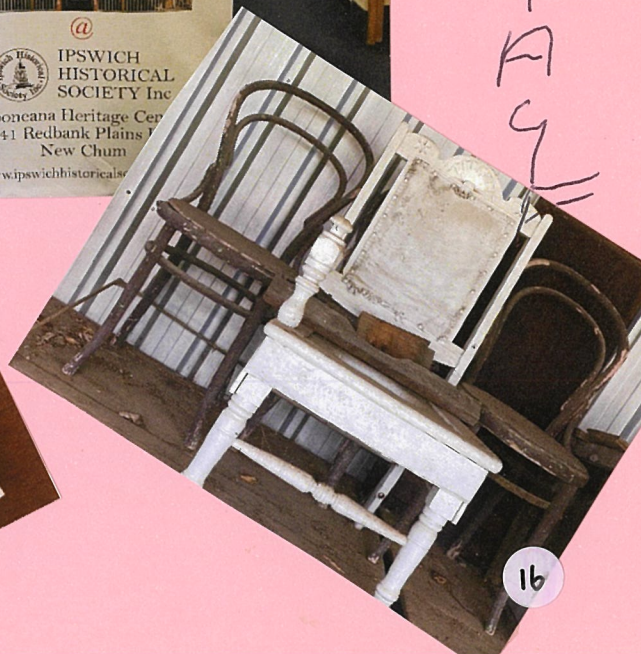
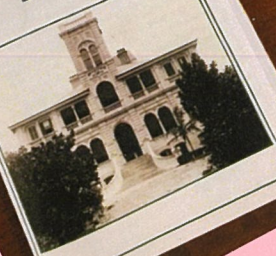
IPSWICH
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY Inc

Cooneana Heritage Centre
1041 Redbank Plains Road
New Chum

www.ipswichhistoricalsociety.com.au

HERITAGE

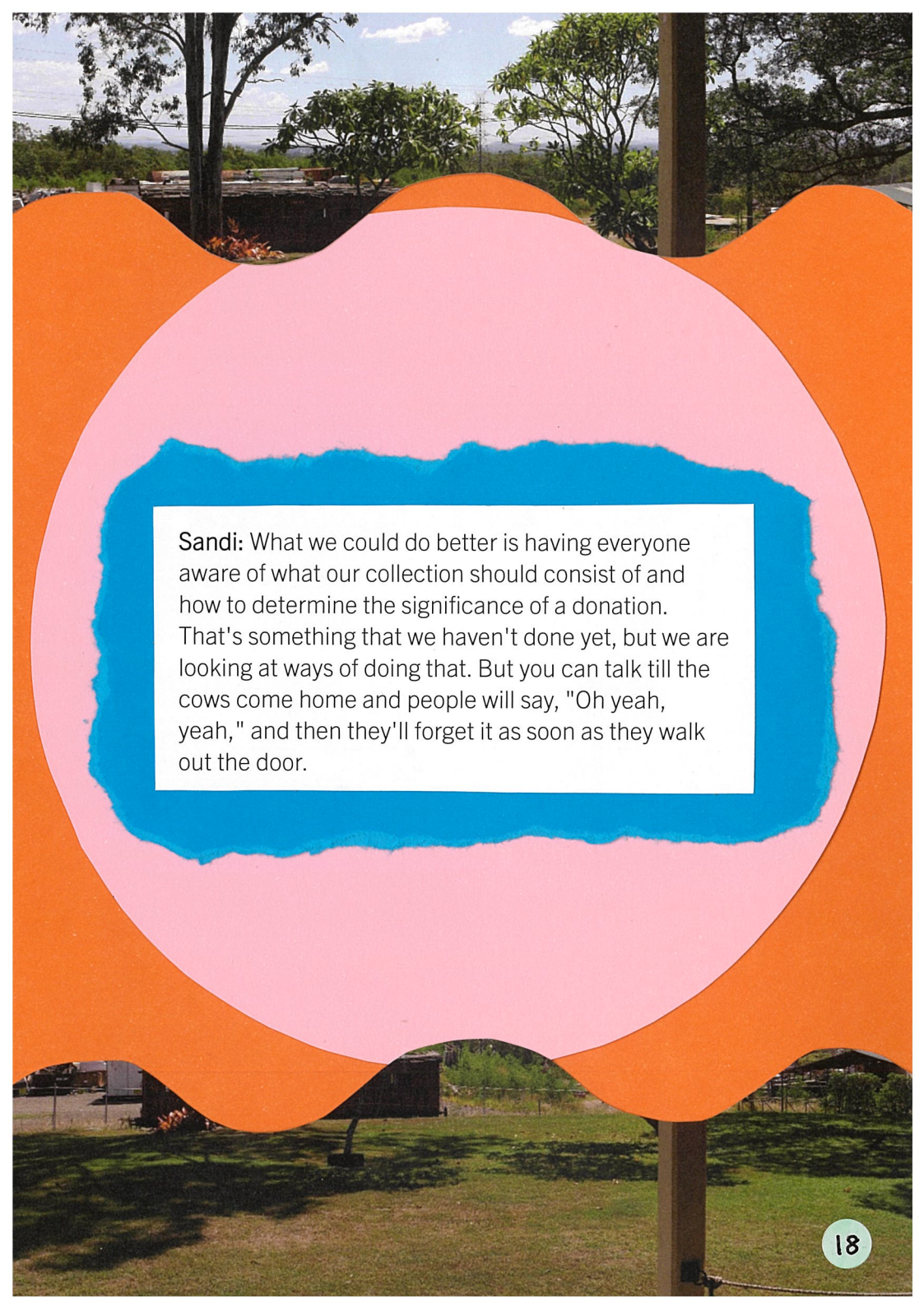
THE
BRYNHYFRYD
STORY



DEAR FUTURE VOLUNTEERS,

WE WOULD WISH YOU TO CARRY ON
AND IMPROVE ~~ON~~ OUR PRESENTATION
OF OUR HISTORY TO HAND ON TO
THE FUTURE GENERATIONS OF HOW
OUR WAY OF LIFE HAS EVOLVED
THROUGH THE LONG HISTORY OF OUR
REGION.

HOW OUR ANCESTORS HAVE BUILT
THE GREAT PLACE THAT WE LIVE IN
PRESERVE OUR ARTIFACTS + RECORDS
FOR AN UNDERSTANDING OF OUR PAST.
AND APPRECIATION OF OUR PAST
GENERATIONS.



Sandi: What we could do better is having everyone aware of what our collection should consist of and how to determine the significance of a donation. That's something that we haven't done yet, but we are looking at ways of doing that. But you can talk till the cows come home and people will say, "Oh yeah, yeah," and then they'll forget it as soon as they walk out the door.

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	Intergenerational engagement	Pursues younger audiences and volunteers
	Flexibility and dynamism	Adapts to changing local, political and social contexts

* physical mainly

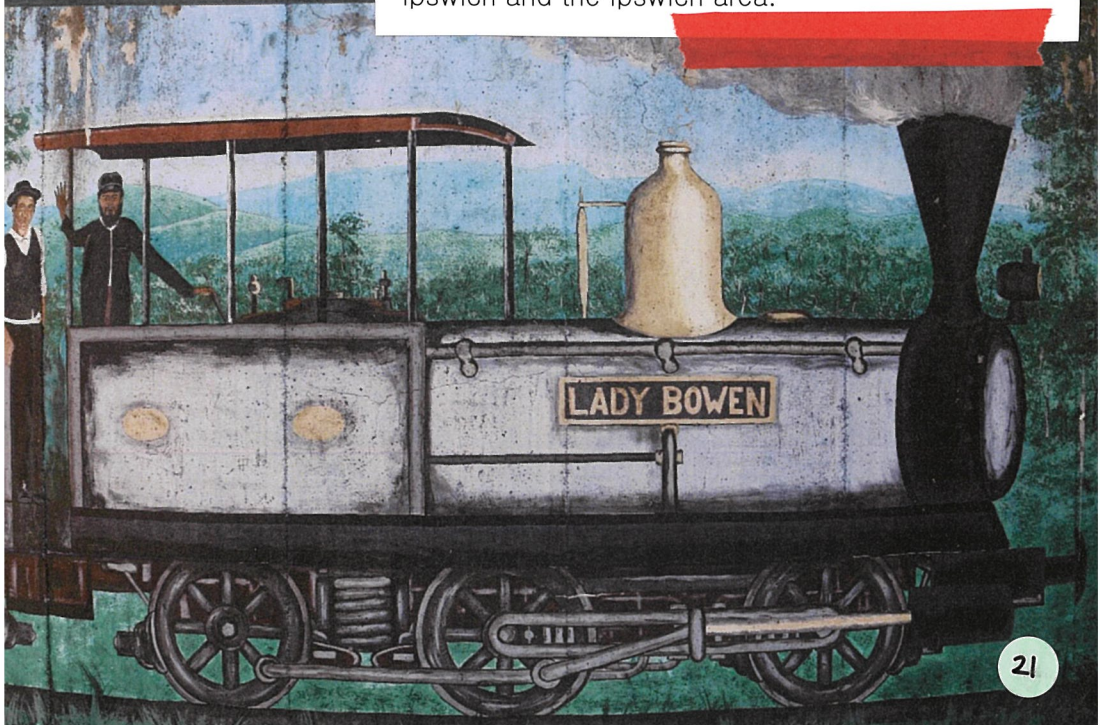


Sandi: I have orange. [...] I think when we have events we do encourage like-minded organisations to join us. I think there are alliances and then there are other alliances. So, some alliances are stronger than others. But we do try to invite other like-minded organisations to help out with things that we do.





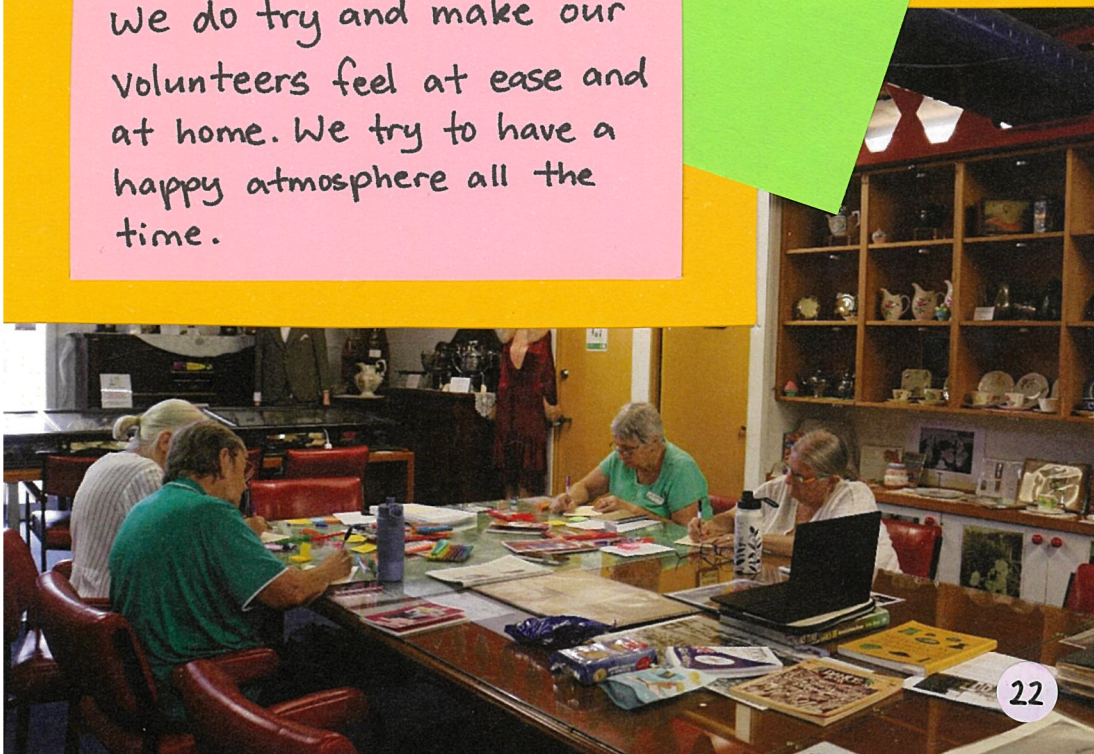
Sandi: I think there are so many people moving into this area, that if they can learn a little about the community in which they're living and the history of this community, it will make them more likely to respect the place they've moved to and the people they are now living with. And that's one of the things we try to do, educate people about, the history of Ipswich and the Ipswich area.



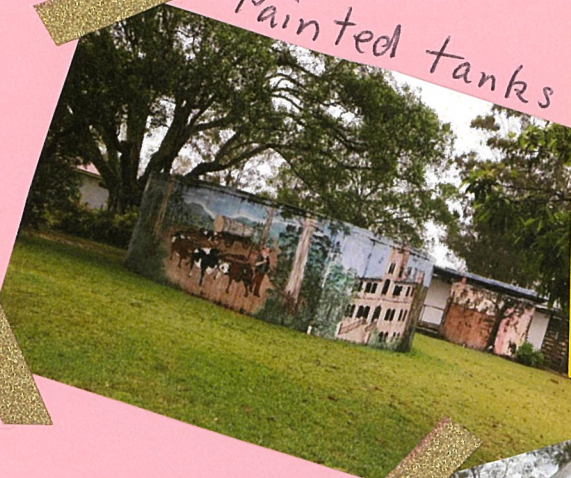


LIBBY
↙

We do try and make our volunteers feel at ease and at home. We try to have a happy atmosphere all the time.



Painted tanks



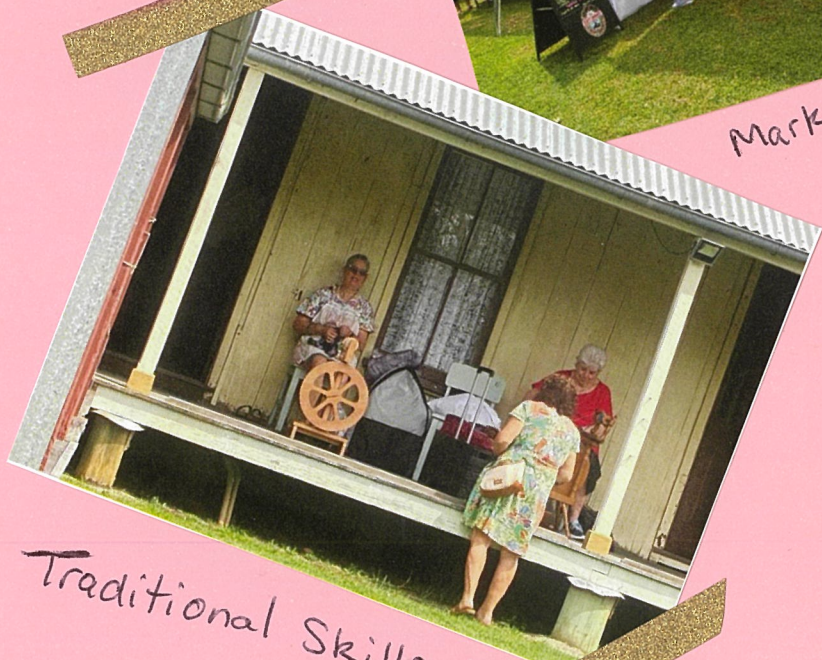
Water-town
water & sewerage

Shared skills

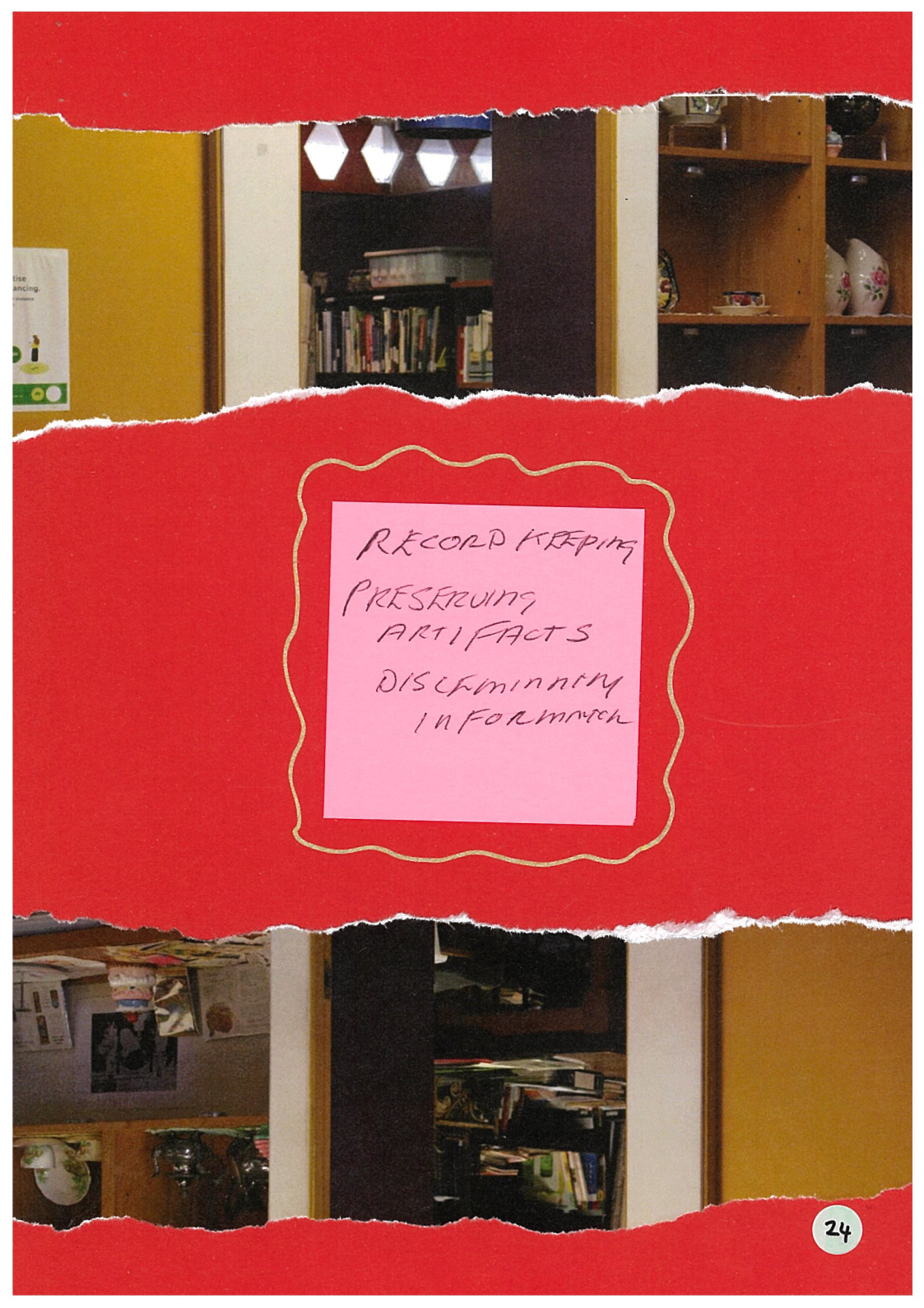
Understanding
of systems



Market stall

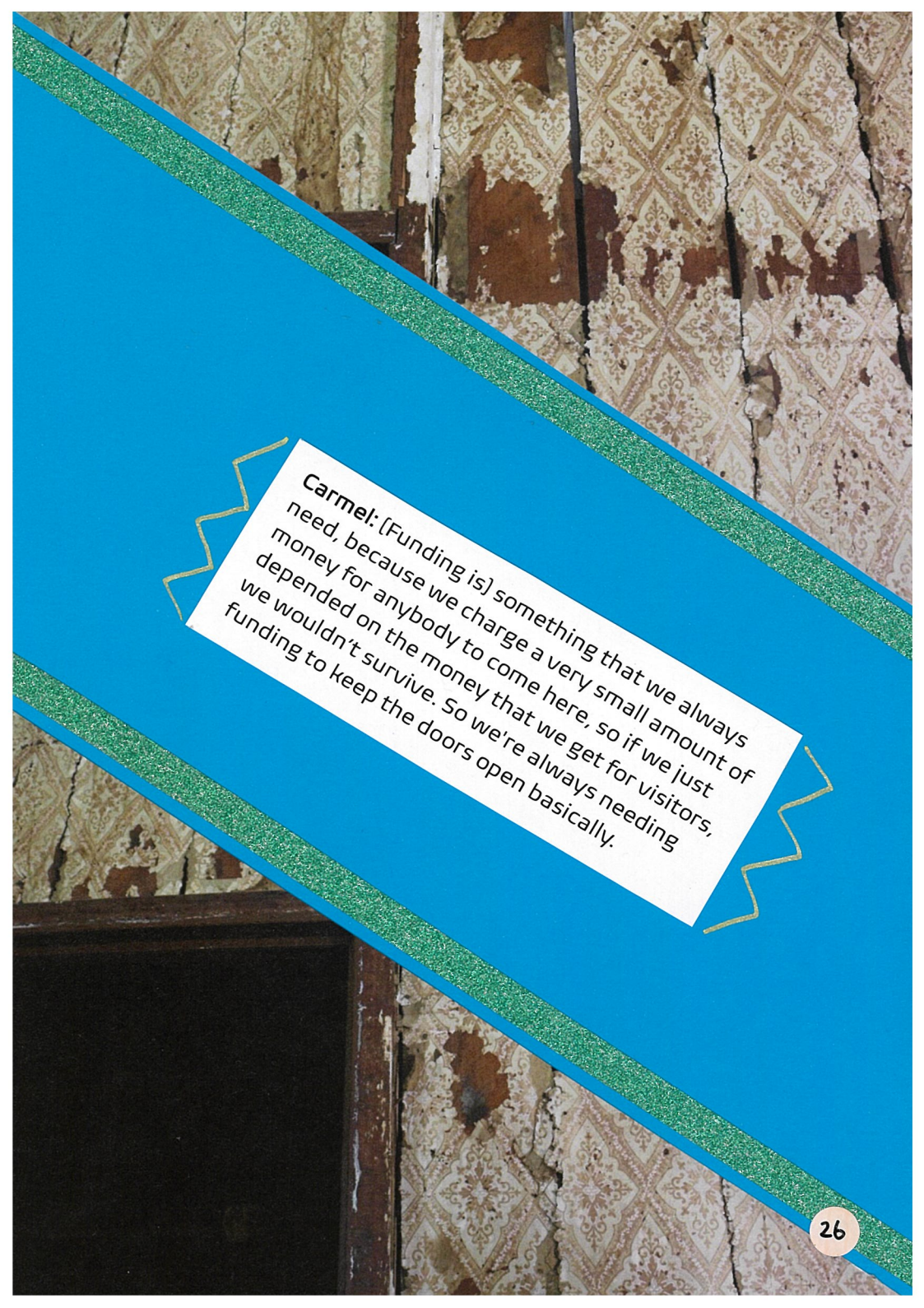


Traditional Skills!



RECORD KEEPING
PRESERVING
ARTIFACTS
DISSEMINATING
INFORMATION

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Carmel: (Funding is) something that we always need, because we charge a very small amount of money for anybody to come here, so if we just depended on the money that we get for visitors, we wouldn't survive. So we're always needing funding to keep the doors open basically.



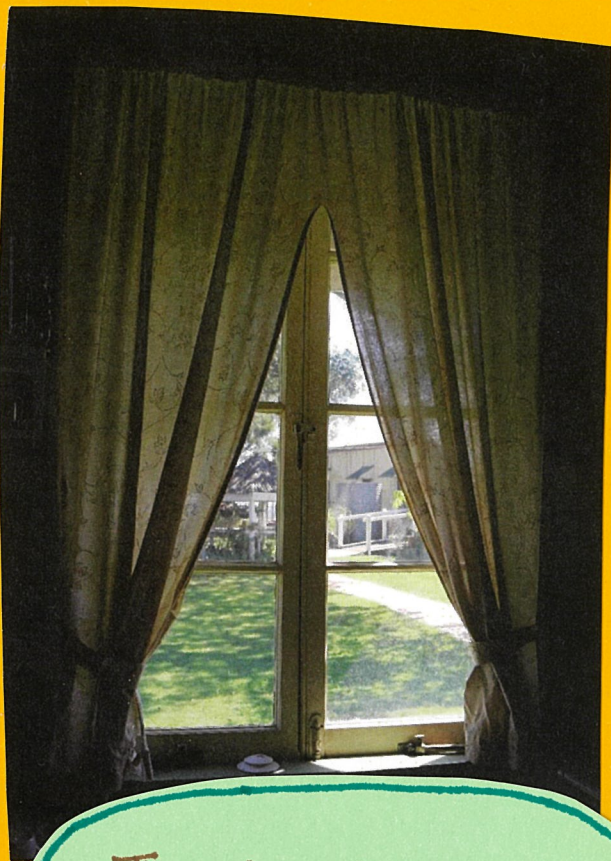
Sandi: the younger people, often they will say, "Oh, you know, I've got all this stuff, my parents just passed on and I've got to sort their house out, do you want it?" "No." <laughs> We only really try to accept things that have some significance to the Historical Society and to the history of Ipswich. So, it might be things that belonged to a prominent person over time, or it might be something that was made in Ipswich We have got a gentleman's wardrobe over in Cooneana Homestead that was made by George Dowden. He was an upholsterer and a cabinetmaker in Ipswich at the end of the 19th century, beginning of the 20th century. And he was also an undertaker, because cabinetmakers made coffins as well. It was down in Sydney; it had passed through his family and one of his descendants had it in Sydney. She looked us up and said, "Would you like this wardrobe, because it was made in Ipswich?" "Yes, please." She sent it up to us, donated it and paid for it to be sent up and it's over there in Cooneana now.



Happy Visitors!



Creative Blacksmithing.



There's only so many
hours in your
volunteer day.

LIBBY





Sandi: Well, I think that the executive are responsible for major decisions, but they always bring those major decisions to our member's meetings, and if anyone has an issue they are allowed to speak about it, and maybe the executive will take it back and reconsider. Which I think is participatory and democratic.





Sandi: Recruits is green, isn't it?

Brigid: Recruiting is – we do try to recruit. COVID just about killed us because we did have a lot of ones in.... Training, it's like in-house training. We don't really have any official training. And a skilled workforce, well, when they volunteer we do ask them what sort of skills they have. So at the moment we've got people that are really interested in restoration and yeah, we don't train them though. They come with those skills. That's why it's orange. We don't deal with training really. It's only in-house sort of –

Libby: Pick up skills from the existing volunteers that hand on their skills.



SUNLIGHT PRIZE CUP
Presented by
LEVER BROS. LTD.
Manufacturers of Sunlight Soap
National Agricultural & Industrial Assoc. of Gd.
[CORANATION SHOW]
1911
Won by
E. BURTON'S "SILVER BELL"
Cows yielding the largest amount of Butterfat in
48 hours

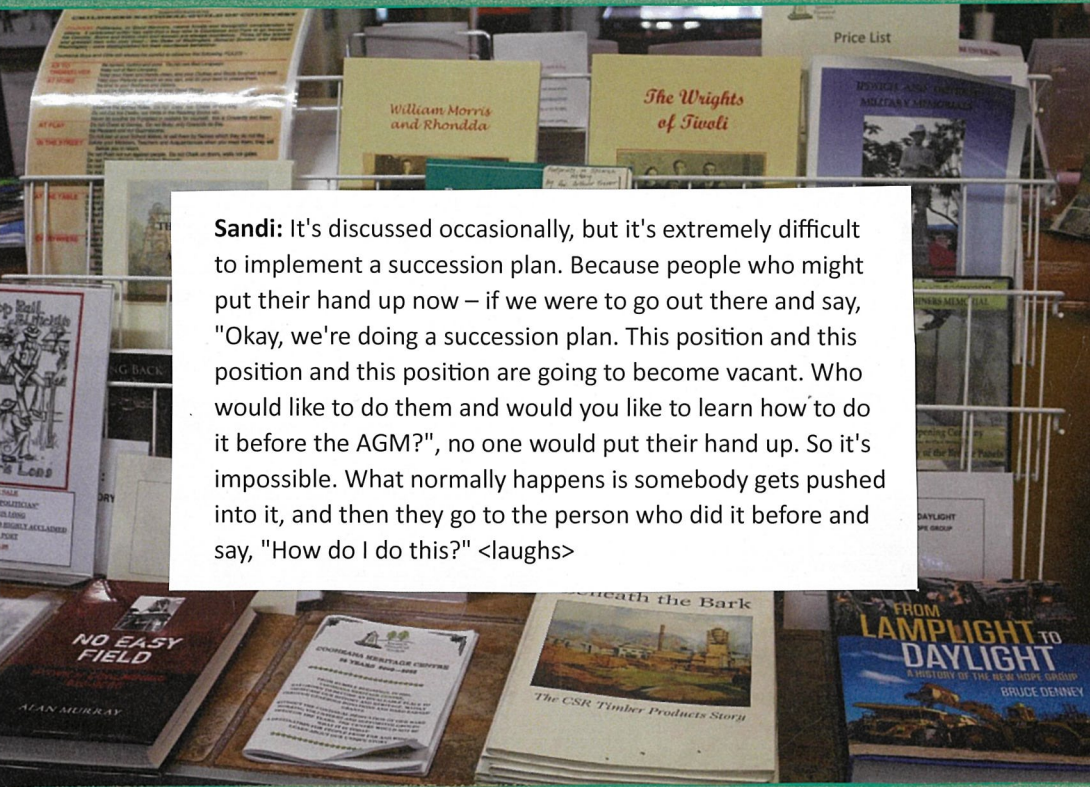
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	Volunteers	Recruits, trains and retains a skilled workforce
	Space and equipment	Secures an appropriate venue for artefacts and activities
Volunteer experience	Social atmosphere	Cultivates an inclusive, welcoming social environment
	Personal rewards	Provides opportunities for volunteers to activate their interests and learn new skills
Community engagement	Accessibility	Ensures venue and activities are accessible
	Visibility	Engages in outreach and builds a strong reputation
	Intergenerational engagement	Pursues younger audiences and volunteers
	Flexibility and dynamism	Adapts to changing local, political and social contexts

TO A FUTURE VOLUNTEER,
PLEASE REMEMBER THAT THE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY IS HERE TO
KEEP THE HISTORY OF IPSWICH
ALIVE AND VIABLE FOR WHO
ARE INTERESTED IN OUR
HISTORY. WE HAVE TRIED TO
KEEP ARTIFACTS AND COLLECTIONS
FROM INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE
FROM ALL WORKS OF LIFE,
RELIGIONS, HOUSES. WE MUST
PRESERVE OUR HISTORY, SO
WE KNOW WHERE WE
HAVE COME FROM. SO YOU
CAN GO FORWARD.

MANY ITEMS WE HAVE IN
THE COLLECTION, ARE NOT
USED ANY MORE, AND YOU WILL
WONDER WHAT IT WAS USED
FOR. IF WE DON'T COLLECT
IT NOW. YOU WILL NOT HAVE
IT IN FUTURE. TO LEARN
ABOUT. WE HOPE YOU
WILL FIND OUR COLLECTION
INTERESTING AND CAN
LEARN FROM IT.

REGARDS

CARMEL

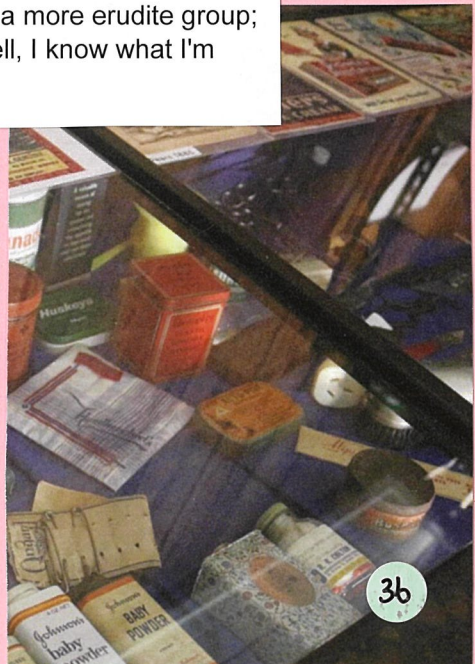


Sandi: It's discussed occasionally, but it's extremely difficult to implement a succession plan. Because people who might put their hand up now – if we were to go out there and say, "Okay, we're doing a succession plan. This position and this position and this position are going to become vacant. Who would like to do them and would you like to learn how to do it before the AGM?", no one would put their hand up. So it's impossible. What normally happens is somebody gets pushed into it, and then they go to the person who did it before and say, "How do I do this?" <laughs>



Emily: Would you say in general, the organisation has the right expertise, skills, equipment, supplies, to –

Sandi: No, we don't all have the right expertise. We trust people who say they have expertise to look at the systems that we have in place and then work within those systems, but it doesn't happen very often. There's some expertise, but it's not throughout the whole membership or for the whole lot of volunteers. ... We're trying to incrementally develop more skills. And hopefully eventually we will have a more erudite group; people who actually can say, "Well, I know what I'm doing."



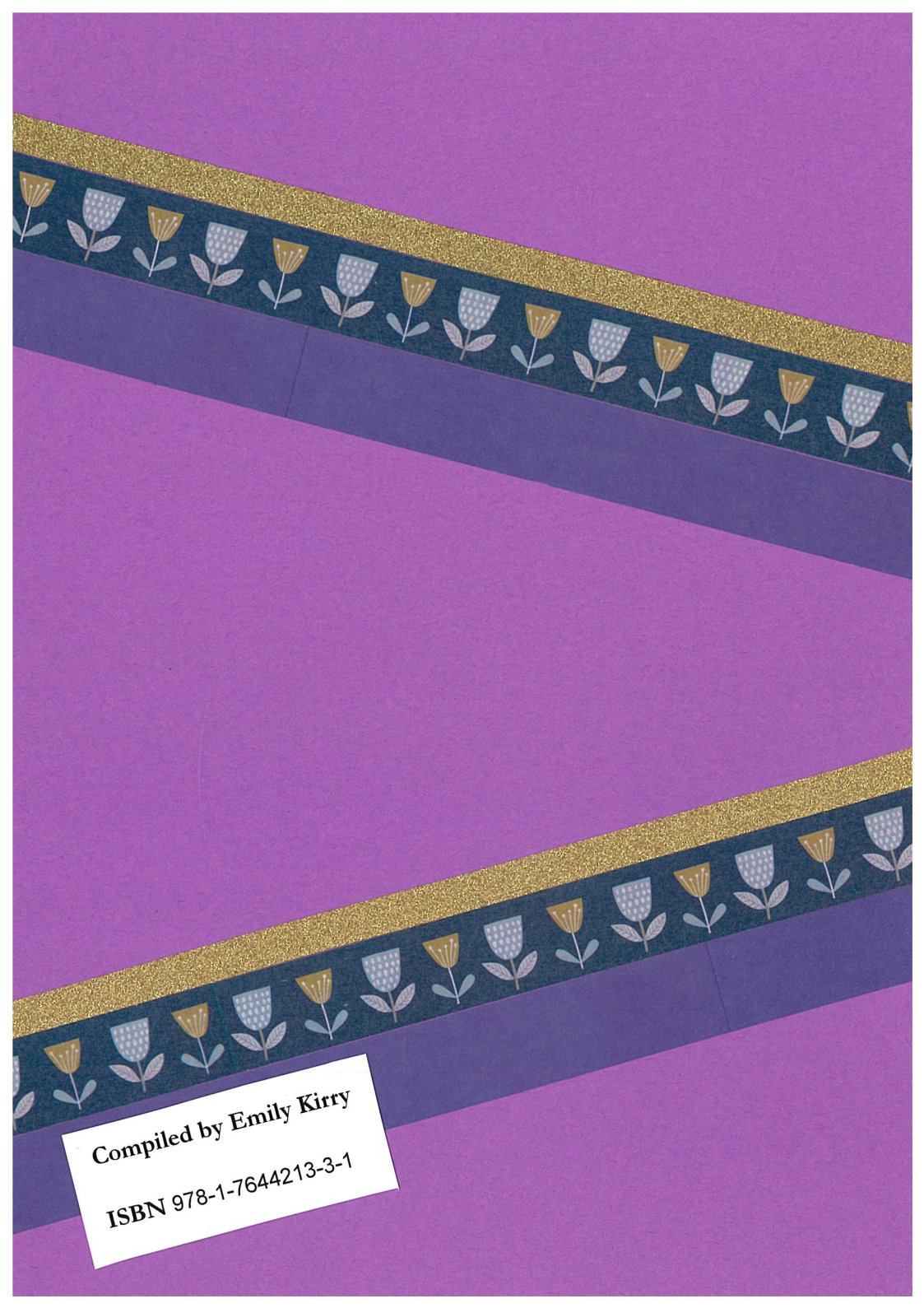
A hand is holding a white card with a collage of four small photographs. The photos show various scenes: a person in a red shirt, a person in a black shirt, a person in a purple shirt, and a person in a black shirt. The hand is positioned over a wooden desk. On the desk, there are several other photographs, a purple cap, and a pair of glasses. The background is a teal wall.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the volunteers of IHS who engaged with this research. Your willingness to share experiences and offer your views on the sector's organisational sustainability are central to creating a zine series that captures viable futures for community heritage organisations.

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Some images used throughout the zine were provided courtesy of IHS (p. 1, bottom; pp. 2, 5, 14 bottom-left; pp. 16, 20 bottom; pp. 22, top; pp. 23, 27, top; p. 28) – thank you Sandi! Others were taken by Emily during fieldwork.

The book cover features a vibrant purple background. Two diagonal borders, one near the top and one near the bottom, consist of a thin gold glitter line above a dark blue band with a repeating pattern of stylized tulips in gold and light blue. The tulips have simple green leaves. The text is located in a white rectangular box in the bottom left corner.

Compiled by Emily Kirry

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