

Staveley Historical and Geological Museum

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Ashburton District in Mid Canterbury is home to numerous museums. Some are thematic: aviation, trains, vintage cars and fire, while others are location based, such as Methven, Rakaia and Mt Somers. Staveley falls under the later heading although, with a twist, it also has an extensive collection of geological specimens, from this region and beyond. The Staveley Historical and Geological Museum, located in Staveley, just before the foothills (or hilly part of the otherwise flat Ashburton area) is housed in the old Springburn School.

The Museum tells the story of a small, but lively area containing Mt Somers, Alford Forest, Springburn, Bushside and Staveley. As some of the local place names suggest, the area was a heavily forested one. This was a bountiful source of food for Maori; a local fowling tree, Hine Paaka is remembered as a local landmark for many years until recent times. The trees also attracted bushmen and other settlers. For a time it was prosperous and well populated. But wood was not the only resource this small area could offer. Coal, silica sand and limestone were used locally as well as abroad. For a time it looked as if the area would be exceedingly rich as a diamond strike was recorded, although soon proven to be a false one.

For some, the attraction is the geological collection, established by a former Springburn School headmaster Tom Campbell, and added to over the years. For others it is the small collection of generic and specific objects that tells the story of the area, industries and people of the area.

However, for most the Museum's real asset is the large collection of photographic images as well as archives. While some of the more fragile material has been donated to the regional museum, in Ashburton (after being scanned), much of the collection remains

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in Staveley. The entire collection has been catalogued and is easily accessible to researchers. Many of the visitors come to inquire about family and the welcoming volunteers have a breadth of knowledge that enables even the vaguest of researchers to go away with some titbit of information.

Those of us working in larger institutions sometimes forget the passion that locals have for their history. I was lucky enough to be in the Museum, examining the collection, when it was closed. Three locals, including a young boy, heard me banging about and came into to see who was in 'their' museum. While it is easy to say such valuable records should be stored in 'proper' archives with controlled environmental conditions, it seems a shame that the materials should be removed to a larger center, removed from the community that generated them.

The volunteers' passion for the collection has seen it reboxed, using archival boxes and enclosures, and the archive room has its environment controlled by dehumidiers. This museum gives an example of how, with education, funding and support, a small community can successfully maintain their archives in appropriate conditions.

The collection is also a reminder that very valuable material can be hidden away and considered 'lost' simply because it is not to be found in large institutions or databases. For example, a rather insignificant looking minute book, with only a few pages was found to be the Staveley Bushman's Association, which listed prices for timber but also the members. This record is invaluable as these men were often itinerant or, having no land, missing from electoral rolls of the early 1800s. While time for outreach is often limited, maybe we, as professional archivists, should take the time to reach out to smaller, volunteer run, museums

In the near future the Museum will be sharing some of their photographic collections via their new facebook account and refurbishment will see new interactive displays and activities for children. It is certainly a museum to watch.