

# ORBOST HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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## NEWSLETTER

### BILLS HORSE TROUGHS

A notable feature of this year's Historical Society bus trip around the Orbost township was the recollection that a number of water troughs located in Orbost had all but disappeared. Lindsay Thomson and Jenny McLennan provided background information on the Bills horse troughs and Lindsay's detailed map showed the location of Orbost's water troughs. Marina Johnson located Orbost's only known remaining Bills Horse Trough and a check of the internet led to a website which provided the following information:

#### But who were Annis and George Bills?

Have you ever wondered about those concrete horse troughs, still seen in parts of NSW and Victoria, which bear the inscription, "Donated by Annis and George Bills Australia".

Well very few are now in use except for ones found at pony clubs or in showgrounds.

Most troughs are usually empty and showing signs of age, or have been converted into flower boxes. Many of them have been removed from their original sites because of roadworks, and danger to traffic and redundancy. Many have been placed in museums where they can be seen today.

#### Their story

The story begins in 1859 when George Bills was born in Brighton, England. He came to Australia as a young man, and he and his brother established a wire mattress manufacturing business in Kent Street, Sydney, which operated successfully over many years.

During his lifetime, George was a philanthropist. He took a keen interest in seeking out cases of human need and gave many thousands of pounds anonymously to assist the needy folk.

George Bills died 14 Dec 1927 and his wife, Annis died on the 20 Jun 1910. After providing some personal bequests, his will directed the income from the residue of his estate to be used to provide troughs for horses, and for the pur-



**George Bills 1859-1927**

pose of preventing cruelty, and alleviating the sufferings of animals in any country.

More than 500 troughs were erected in Australia mostly in New South Wales and Victoria, and some in overseas countries - England, Ireland, Switzerland [for donkeys] and Japan.

In the early stages of trough supply, each was individually designed and constructed. One of the first was a granite Memorial trough, hewn in one piece as a memorial to Mr Bills. It was situated in Barton Street, Hawthorn, Melbourne; the trough has long since been removed.

Later a standard design was adopted, and Rocla concrete products supplied many hundreds of the troughs in Victoria and New South Wales. Troughs were supplied on application

to the Bills Trust by Councils, and truckloads of 10 would often leave the Rocla Factory for installation by a team of men in country towns. Most of the troughs were made and supplied in the 1930's in Victoria.



**Bills Horse Trough, Howitt Park, Bairnsdale**

The cumbersome steel and concrete moulds were later moved to a Rocla factory at Junee, NSW., where about 20 troughs were made in 1938. The moulds were transferred to Sydney where about 200 troughs were made and supplied to various areas. But the growing use of the motor car and trucks caused a halt in demand for the troughs and none have been installed since World War II.

### The Bills Trust

The objectives of the Bills trust, however, have been subsequently met in other ways. Today thousands of horses, cattle, dogs, cats, and other pets are benefiting from the generosity of a simple, unassuming but philanthropic married couple who died almost eighty years ago.

One big project made possible by the Bills Trust was the establishment, in co-operation with the RSPCA, of the big Rest Home at Tally Ho, Victoria which caters for dogs, cats, and other pets. Another, the George Bills RSPCA Rescue Centre, Burwood, a suburb of Melbourne, was opened by His Excellency the Governor of Victoria, Sir Rohan Delacombe, on June 23, 1964. The cost of the centre was paid by the estate, and it is proving of great benefit in the treatment of injured strays.



**Bills Horse Trough, Bruthen**

### The Will of George Bills

The will was handled by Wynne & Riddell Solicitors Melbourne.

In the will George Bills directed that after many generous bequests to family and friends, that the

income from the estate be distributed.

A trust fund be formed to construct, and erect, and pay for Horse troughs, wherever they may be of opinion that such horse troughs are necessary, or desirable for the relief of horses or other such dumb animals either in Australasia, in the British Isles or in any part of the world subject to the consent of the proper authorities being obtained.

To pay such sums or sums of money, as they in absolute discretion think fit, to any Society or Societies for the protection of Animals, or for the alleviation of cruelty to Animals either in Australia or the British Islands or any other part of the World and for the purposes aforesaid.

I empower my said Trustees at the expense of my estate to have each of such Horse Troughs wherever erected suitably inscribed with the name of Annis and George Bills.

Note: The value of the estate is not known but it is believed to be about 70,000 to 80,000 Pounds.



**Orbost's Bills Horse Trough**

The Bills Trust was established to manage the estate. Requests started to arrive from local Councils for horse troughs, and more than 500 troughs were made and installed whenever they were requested. Most of these troughs were made by "Rocla Concrete Pipes" and the troughs were installed in Victoria and NSW from 1930. No troughs were made after 1939. The cost of the troughs was about 13 pounds plus the transport and installing costs.



**The other half of Orbost's Bills Horse Trough**

## George Bills 11-3-1859 to 14-12-1927

George Bills was born in Brighton, England on the 11th of March 1859. He was the fourth child of Richard and Elizabeth Bills. They had 14 children and three of the children died at birth. The family first migrated to New Zealand and from there the family moved to Echuca, Victoria in August 1873.

In his early life he worked in Echuca with his father and some of his brothers. They were involved with trapping and trading in Birds. It was there that George developed a great love for all animals.

### Business Interests

In 1882 George opened a bird dealers shop on the Corner of Queen and Edward Street, in Brisbane. While working in Brisbane he met Annis Swann and they married on the 18th May 1885. He also started to do some wire weaving and with his brother Dick they started to make wire mattresses. This was the start of a very successful, business making inner spring mattresses. In 1884 George quit the shop and moved to Sydney, where with his brother Harry, he set up a factory in Liverpool St. His other brothers, Walter and Jack, were also working at the factory at that time. By 1890 they moved to larger premises at 60-62 Harbour Street and with improved equipment the business continued to prosper. They traded as Henry Bills till 1st March 1898 when the name was changed to Bills brothers.

In August 1900 they registered the trade mark "Lethe" which is a Greek word meaning "sleep well". The business continued to grow and in 1901 they moved to Kent Street. The fame of their mattress had spread so they moved into other fields.



**Bills Horse Trough, Omeo**

### Retirement

George retired in 1908 although he kept an interest in the business. George and Annis began taking overseas trips, and he moved to Melbourne and lived at 11 Leslie St Hawthorn.

George's love of horses became apparent and he started to have horse troughs installed around Melbourne. In some places there was only a hitching post installed with a hook on them to hold a bucket of water.

George kept his interests in animals and was made a Life Governor of the RSPCA in 1924.

## The love of animals

George and Annis also took an interest in seeking out cases of human hardship. They gave many thousands of pounds to assist the needy people. These feelings were reflected in his will, which after providing some personal bequests directed that the income from the residue of his estate be used to provide watering troughs for horses, for the purpose of preventing cruelty and to alleviate the suffering of animals in any country.

George died on the 14th December 1927 and was cremated at Fawkner cemetery.



**Annis Bills 1859-1910**

### About Annis Bills

Annis Swann was born in Sheffield England on the 25th September 1859. She was the daughter of Thomas and Mary Swann [nee Hobson]. Thomas was a brace and bit manufacturer. She married George Bills at the General Registry Office Brisbane on the 18th May 1885. She was 26 years old.

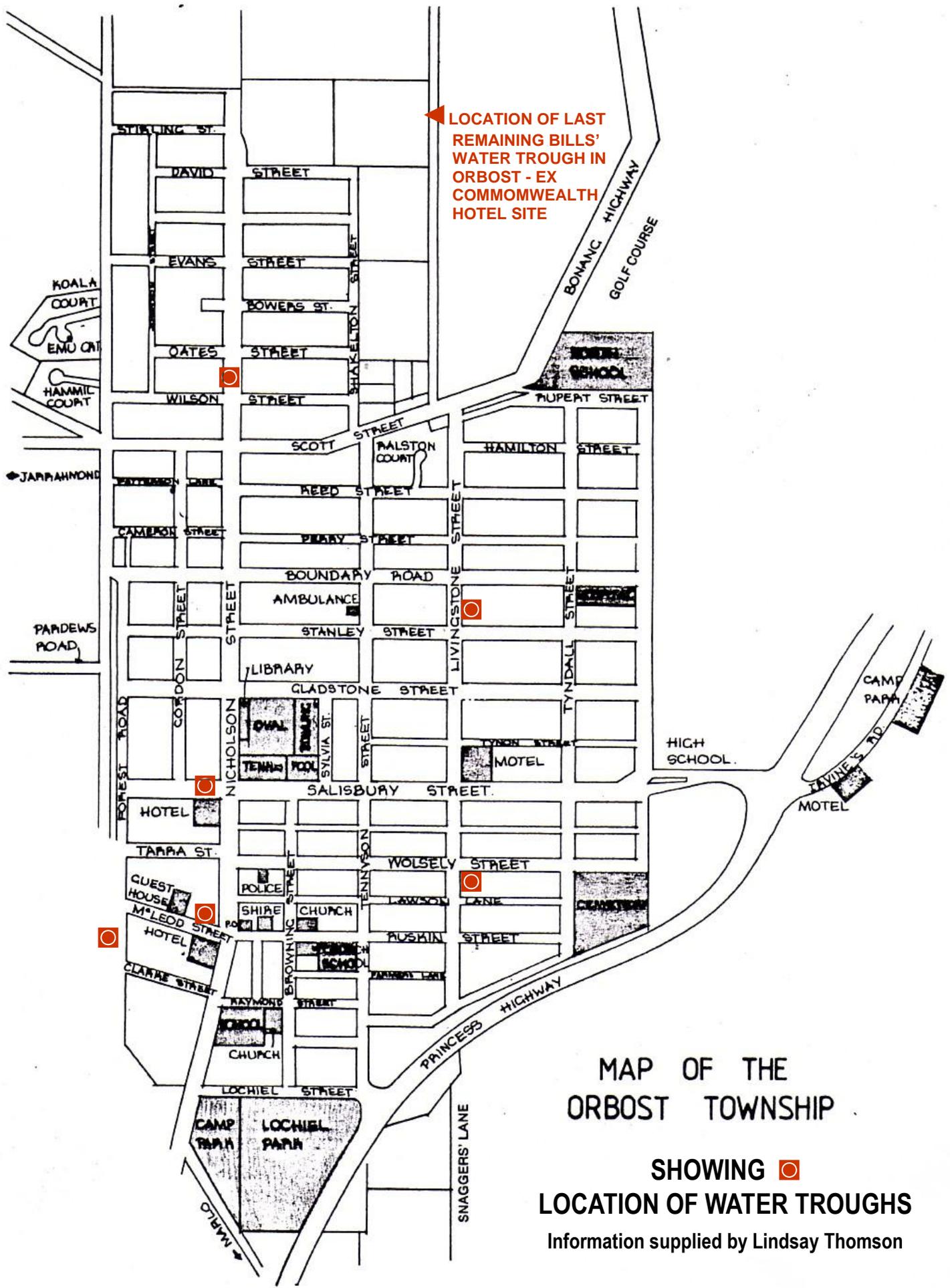
Annis shared the same love of animals which George Bills had. The couple did not have any children.

In 1910 George and Annis went for a holiday to England, in Brighton, Sussex. Annis died there on the 20th June 1910 and she was buried in the Hove Cemetery. Annis was 50 years old when she died. George returned to Melbourne where he had purchased a house and land between Auburn and Robinson Roads, Hawthorn, the house called Ingleburn. George did quite a lot of travelling. He was always reluctant to tell strangers his occupation saying he was a "glass eye manufacturer" or a "Coronation Programme Seller".

Annis is remembered by her name being on all the Bills Troughs which all bear the inscription "Donated by Annis and George Bills Australia".



LOCATION OF LAST  
REMAINING BILLS'  
WATER TROUGH IN  
ORBOST - EX  
COMMONWEALTH  
HOTEL SITE



### MAP OF THE ORBOST TOWNSHIP

SHOWING ■  
LOCATION OF WATER TROUGHS

Information supplied by Lindsay Thomson