

# the warragul projects

ROY EVERARD ROSS ENGINEER, INVESTOR, QUARRYMAN, PHILANTHROPIST

AFTER HE FINISHED WORKING AS SHIRE ENGINEER AT THE SHIRE OF WARRAGUL, ROY ROSS MOVED INTO OFFICES IN THE WARRAGUL THEATRE BUILDING IN 1934.

From those offices he conducted business as a Licensed Surveyor and on an ever-increasing range of other commercial interests. He also continued in his role as Shire Engineer and Building Surveyor to the Buln Buln and Narracan Shires and as Engineer and Manager to the Warragul and Buln Buln Shires Joint Municipal Quarry.

At times the office had two female secretaries and a number of survey

personnel working there. Alan Worth, his former indentured pupil, came with him from the Shire of Warragul and eventually became his partner in the surveying side of the business. Worth worked with Ross for nearly 47 years.

In 1957 Alan Worth's son, Ian, first worked for the survey firm and eventually became indentured to Roy Ross. After Ross' death his Executors allowed Ian to carry on the survey practice using Ross' name. The name Ross & Worth was still in operation in 2002.

Alan Glen began working for Ross & Worth in 1951, when he became articled to Ross as a Survey Assistant. The practice undertook all types of title and engineering surveys including the marking of title boundaries, the designing of roads and other civil works. Most of the engineering surveys for both the quarries later to be owned by Ross - Bayview Quarries and Hillview Quarries - were performed by the firm.



▲ INTERSECTION OF SMITH AND QUEEN STREETS, WARRAGUL, C.1935

Ross was, Glen says, *'an aloof man, hard to get to know. He wouldn't speak to everybody if he walked down the street'*. As a boss, Glen says, Ross was polite and careful. And in the nearly 20 years Glen worked with him, he never called him anything but *'Mr Ross'*. Alan Worth also never called his mentor, friend and partner anything but *'Mr Ross'*.

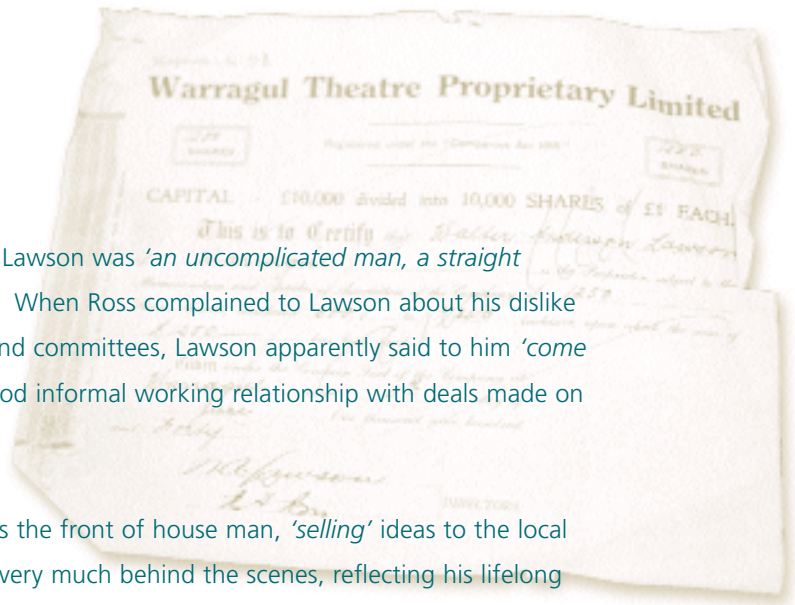
Ross spent a lot of time getting the right people to work for him in all of his businesses. Alan Glen said that when Ross and he travelled to visit the Bayview quarry site at Tullamarine, Ross would often have to introduce him to a new manager. *'What happened to the old one?'* Glen would ask. *'He was no bloody good,'* Ross would reply. He employed men who were of a practical mind and knew how to do the job. *'He wasn't impressed by young ones who had the formal qualifications,'* Glen said.

There is general agreement that Ross had a strong personality and was *'never wrong'*. If he was found to be wrong, Ian Worth says, he believed it was because he had been given the wrong information. Ross was a perfectionist and expected his staff to come up with the correct answer. However, if this was taking some time he would impatiently check the result and say *'that's near enough'*.

He was a stickler for people being on time and Alan Glen recalls a potential consultant being an hour late for an appointment. *'When he didn't turn up, he said, "Forget about him."'* Glen says. And they did.

During his time with the Shires, Ross had the right to conduct private survey work and he also developed other business interests. Some were in partnership with W.A. (Wally) Lawson, who became both a friend and colleague in many entrepreneurial ventures.

Born in North Melbourne, Lawson was a London-trained tailor who came to Warragul in 1908, but his interests went well beyond making clothes for the men of Warragul. He was in constant and close contact with the businessmen of the town, including Roy Ross, and he tapped into the ideas circulating about how Warragul could become a sustainable trading centre. A believer in an old fashioned way of working, Lawson kept a bottle of whisky under the counter with a jug of water and visitors were welcome for a drink and a talk.



Wally Lawson's grandson Stuart says Lawson was *'an uncomplicated man, a straight operator, and a good judge of men'*. When Ross complained to Lawson about his dislike of endlessly working with Councils and committees, Lawson apparently said to him *'come and work with me'*. There was a good informal working relationship with deals made on a handshake.

In their long partnership, Lawson was the front of house man, *'selling'* ideas to the local people while Ross' contribution was very much behind the scenes, reflecting his lifelong dislike of publicity. However, both were visionaries, with a *'big picture'* of how they thought Warragul could develop. They looked for opportunities and tried to realise them.

▲ SHARE CERTIFICATE,  
WARRAGUL THEATRE  
R.E. ROSS & WALLY  
LAWSON

Over a long period of time there came to be a number of local ventures commonly known as *'Lawson and Ross'* or *'Ross and Lawson'*, but there is now no certainty as to which was their first joint venture. By the time Ross arrived in Warragul in mid 1921 he was only 22, whereas Lawson was already well established in business.

Warragul Theatres Pty Ltd became a well-known joint venture, but the building of the Theatre was originally undertaken by A.E. Ekberg, Wally Lawson and others. Ekberg Bros were established contractors from nearby Trafalgar and the other brother, Charles, was the Works Supervisor for the Theatre project. Constructed in 1922 at a cost of £15,000, the building combined retail shops with the Cinema having an attractive street level aspect but a rather cavernous interior. Ross' involvement at that time was most likely as the Building Surveyor.

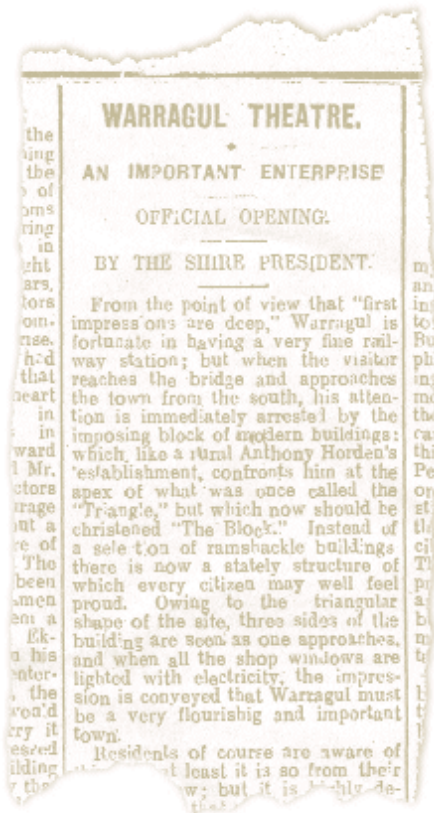
Various bulletins of The Warragul and District Historical Society chronicle the development of the Warragul Theatre, which was a significant addition to the town.

< WARRAGUL THEATRE IN THE 1920S





▲ INTERIOR OF WARRAGUL THEATRE [Stuart Lawson]



When a fire destroyed the hall in Williams Lane, where films were previously shown, the Warragul Theatre was near completion and immediately began operation. Officially opened by the Shire President in June 1923, the silent film *'The Prisoner of Zenda'* starring Douglas Fairbanks Snr. was the first feature. A special programme to mark the occasion included a performance by Miss Ida Lewis, who was engaged to sing *'Zenda'* and an orchestra which played selections from operas. The needs of the patrons were catered for by white coated boys who *'moved amongst the audience with baskets of chocolates and other delectables'*.

The oldest purpose built theatre in Gippsland, the Warragul Theatre seated approximately a thousand people, screened films between two and three nights a week and had upstairs office accommodation and a café and tearooms extending across the front of the building. It was also intended that local organisations would use the theatre for concerts, rallies, school speech nights and balls.

Each screening was attended by a fireman on duty and automatic shutters on the projection windows were a further protection against the spread of fire. The three sons of the Lawson family were all involved in the operation of the theatre, Ray as projectionist, assisted by Ivan, and Ken as house manager. Local orchestras were used for silent film screenings but the theatre was a bad one for sound and baffles and curtains were added later.

In April 1929, talkies were shown, the first film being *'The Jazz Singer'* featuring Al Jolson.

Though Roy Ross and Wally Lawson apparently had an unofficial business arrangement over the Warragul Theatre, they went into formal partnership as Lawson and Ross to take over the Garfield Theatre (a few kilometres away) in 1932, running it until 1948.



The Warragul Theatre screened until 1969 and in 2001, completing the cycle, Wally Lawson's grandson Stuart, a businessman committed to Warragul's future, undertook the revival of the cinema with a group of local business people.

Another joint Lawson and Ross project was their part in Warragul markets, a move which caused local controversy. In her 1988 work *'Forests Old Pastures New'* Sally Wilde says that while business in Warragul proceeded smoothly through the 1920s, *'the price of butterfat was falling, farmers did not have as much money to spend in town and by 1929 local shopkeepers could see their business shrinking'*. Warragul traders urged people to buy locally but they were not able to stop traders from elsewhere coming to town. By 1930, Wilde writes, *'the major problem was perceived to be the market stalls'* which had sprung up and were doing well.

In 1930, the Warragul Traders Association again tried to persuade the Council to close the markets down. In this they were not alone. Similar opposition had happened over the markets in Dandenong but, Wilde writes, *'the Dandenong experience showed that more people came to town that day and although they spent money at the market, they also spent at other businesses'*.

The same thing happened in Warragul on a Thursday. It had long been a busy day because it was the main day at the Saleyards, but the growth of the *'out-of-town'* traders' market drew increasing numbers of people into town. Wally Lawson and Roy Ross let out a Lawson building, which ran from Queen Street through to William Street. It was a very large undercover area with an asphalt floor where between 60 and 70 stallholders paid a fee to set up a stall to sell anything from fish to fur coats.



## MARKETS AT WARRAGUL

On Thursday last (says the Warragul *'Guardian'*) two public markets were opened at Warragul, and attracted a large crowd, some being purchasers, but far more seemed to be there from curiosity. It was reported, however, that all stallholders were well satisfied with the business done, and it seems likely that big developments will eventuate, for at each place extensive additions are being made. On Thursday bread was sold at 3d per large loaf, beef steak at 6d per lb., and 3lbs of mutton chops (loin) for 1/3, and other commodities at what appeared to a layman to be much below fair trading prices. This competition is most unfair to business men of the town, who have rents to pay and hands to employ, and just where it is all going to end is very hard to forecast.'

Gippsland Independent 14 August, 1931

The Warragul Market ran for many years and during that time three generations of Lawsons were involved and a number of generations of stallholders. Some of the stallholders who came to Australia as refugees after World War 2 had their start in business through the Warragul Market.

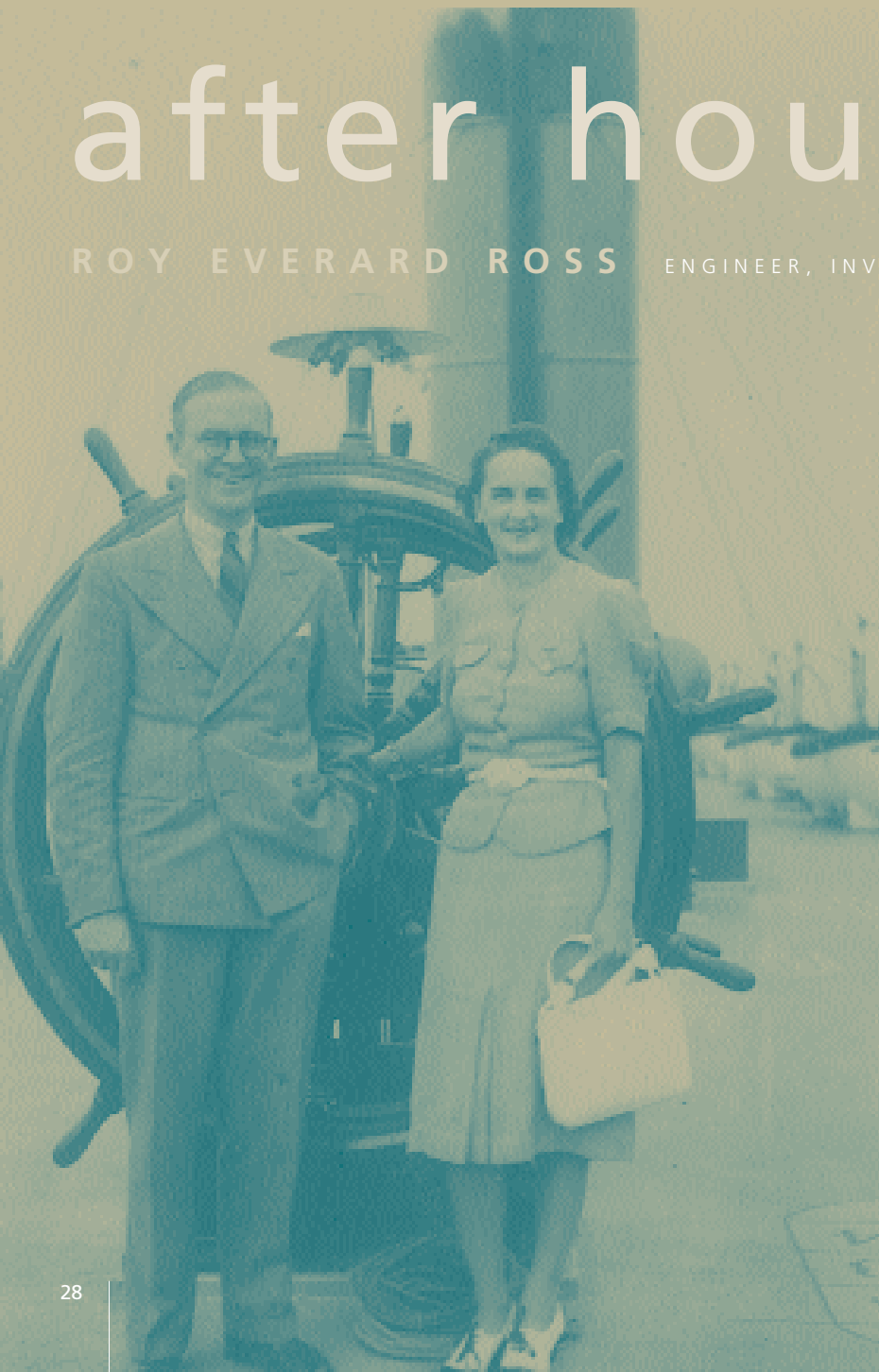
For many years Ross' office in the Theatre Building was the place where the *'books were kept'* for his many commercial interests including the administration for the seven farms, the initial period of the quarry ventures, a number of rental properties, the Warragul Market and the Orient Hotel (Warragul).

Eventually, in 1959, Ross went down the path of investing in shares, advised by stockbroker Robert Dalziel, who became the first Chairman of The R.E. Ross Trust and later by Graeme Moir. Wally Lawson kept investing in property.

For some years during the 1950s Ross had a flat in Melbourne where he would often spend part of the week, always returning to Warragul on Tuesdays to fulfil the requirements of his surveying licence to sign papers and oversee plans and for the weekends. The Ross' eventually moved to Douglas Street, Toorak, in 1959.

# after hours

ROY EVERARD ROSS ENGINEER, INVESTOR, QUARRYMAN, PHILANTHROPIST



< MOLLIE AND ROY ROSS SS 'ORION', MARCH 1939

**T** TO MALCOLM DICKSON, ROY ROSS WAS LIKE A SECOND FATHER. MALCOLM'S FATHER ROBERT AND HIS MOTHER NETA CAME TO WARRAGUL IN 1917.

---

Robert and Ross became good friends, going to the New South Wales south coast town of Merimbula for deep sea fishing trips. Their wives, Neta and Molly, were also good friends.

Malcolm Dickson said that Ross loved children and regretted that he and Molly were childless. *'He was great fun. He'd come round, I'd meet him in the front hall and he'd pick me up, hold me up over his head and give me an aeroplane ride. He'd get you excited – then he went home and your parents would need to settle you down.'* As a youngster, Malcolm washed Ross' car: *'a great big Buick'*.

Ian Worth also remembers him as a practical joker with children and someone he was always keen to see. As a young boy, Ian was making his first unaccompanied trip to the hairdresser. By the time he got there he was confused and upset because Ross had told him he had to ask for *'short on top and long on the sides'*, rather than the other way round.

The other side of Ross was his *'big head'*, selfishness and bad temper. Every Monday night there was a card game at the rear of Wally Lawson's shop at 85 Queen Street, attended by Ross, Arty Duncan, Joe Cumming, Don McNeill and Bill Pettit. Every Tuesday morning, Malcolm said, all the players except Ross came in to talk about the game. *'Rossy was known as a bad loser,'* Malcolm said. A good billiards and snooker player, Ross once broke the billiard cue over his knee.

Malcolm recalls him as not particularly generous, spending little on himself and influenced by his wife's frugality. Later in life, the only obvious sign of his wealth were his cars and the fact he always dressed well, keeping good quality clothes for years, among them cashmere pullovers bought from the specialist men's wear store Henry Bucks.

Dedicated to long working hours, Ross excused them by saying he *'was paying so much tax he couldn't stop'*.

Molly and Ross lived at 13 Bowen Street, Warragul, regarded as the *'Toorak'* of the area. A large and attractive house, it still stands, with many of the trees planted by Ross in its garden today.



▲ MOLLIE AND ROY'S HOUSE IN WARRAGUL; 13 BOWEN STREET

Ross' wife Molly is described by those who knew her as attractive and proud, with a regal bearing not unlike that of the then Queen Mary. Her family, the Hunters, were wealthy, with a business in real estate. Molly went to school at the convent in Warragul and then to St. Catherine's School in Toorak. Though her frugality was well known, one of her small luxuries were lovely magazines brought from Melbourne which she then gave to Malcolm Dickson's mother. Locally, the Ross marriage was regarded as a happy one, though it was widely known they lived in separate parts of their large house and rarely went to social gatherings together. Both played golf, but not together. Ross, however, partnered other women at golf and had a reputation as being flirtatious. He would have been, Malcolm says *'a hard man to live with'*.

Janice Kirk (née Playle) is Molly's niece who lived next door to her aunt and uncle in Warragul throughout the Second World War. She regarded both of them as *'her other parents'* and remembers Molly as a warm and loving woman, though with a permanent migraine, thinking of herself as *'delicate'* despite living to the age of 93. *'She entertained well, played golf and cards – and made gorgeous biscuits,'* Janice said. She often stayed with her aunt and uncle after the war and says the relationship with them was a complex one. *'To me they were loving and warm but Roy Ross only liked people who he regarded as successful, usually those with money. He had no really close friends.'* She agrees with the assessment of Ross as a poor loser: *'He always had to be the best'*.

Ross apparently travelled widely overseas, sometimes with Molly. One extensive round-the-world trip was in 1939, when the interest of their travels was overshadowed by the darkening mood in the world as Europe moved towards war with Germany.



▲ POSTCARD FROM ROY'S TRIP OVERSEAS (C.1939)

In August 1939, Roy and Molly Ross visited the New York World's Fair, which grew from an idea born at the height of the Depression, when a group of New York businessmen decided that what the city and nation needed to lift itself out of the difficulties of the times was an international exposition. The Fair commemorated the 150th anniversary of George Washington's presidential inauguration in the city that was, in its day, the capital of the United States.

The Fair linked a message of international cooperation with one of Ross' great interests, the benefits of technology. Major scientific figures including Albert Einstein attended and the most visited and discussed exhibit was 'Futurama' at the General Motors Pavilion which Ross attended.

Another of Ross' great interests was conservation and he was, Janice Kirk said, 'a genuine conservationist before his time. He was passionate about trees, always advising people about the best ones to plant. He loved gardening and was a great vegetable gardener'.

As well, he loved listening to classical music, was well read, enjoyed art and loved England, even adopting a slight English accent after his visits there.

< ROY ROSS AT ANDOVER, ENGLAND, WITH FRIENDS

# trees and golf

ROY EVERARD ROSS ENGINEER, INVESTOR, QUARRYMAN, PHILANTHROPIST



< AERIAL VIEW OF WARRAGUL GOLF COURSE IN THE 1960'S  
Reproduced with permission of Warragul Historical Society

TWO OF THE GREAT PASSIONS IN THE LIFE OF ROY ROSS WERE HIS LOVE OF TREES AND OF THE GAME OF GOLF.

Both these passions were combined in Ross' role in planning and overseeing the planting of trees at the Warragul Golf Club Course, which today looks more like a botanical garden than a golf course.

Norm Pattinson, who was Secretary/Manager of the Warragul Golf Course from 1974 to 1991 said that many of the trees, in particular the cypress, some of which are now of immense size, are regularly '*cursed by golfers*' because of their ability to collect golf balls.

The trees were selected by Ross from Melbourne nurseries and came to Warragul by train, then by horse and cart to the Club. Some locals believe that Ross brought back trees from England and put them in quarantine. Norm Pattinson says that the Warragul Club was regarded as the major Club in West Gippsland because of its extraordinary beauty due to the variety of established trees on the course and its prime site close to town. This closeness made it accessible to members of all ages including young players who could walk or ride their bikes to the course. Involved from his early years in Warragul, Ross was active on the Club Committee, as Treasurer in 1924, a committee member in 1925 and 1926 and Club President from its establishment on its present site



^ WARRAGUL GOLF COURSE UNDER CONSTRUCTION  
Reproduced with permission of Warragul Historical Society

## SECURING THE WARRAGUL GOLF CLUB

At the annual meeting of 1927, R.E. Ross, C.E., a well-known municipal engineer for some years connected with the Warragul shire, and an equally well-known golfing enthusiast, was elected president of the Warragul golf club. At the meeting following, the opportunity of securing a property for their links was discussed by the committee. The place was to be offered by auction, and it was decided to try to secure it. The president had interviewed a gentleman who was willing to finance the purchase on certain conditions, and a sub-committee was appointed to see if the conditions could be complied with. In the meantime, however, the matter was generously arranged by D.T. Jones, a club member of long standing, who, when the position was explained to him, said that there was no occasion to go out of the town to find a purchaser, and that he would buy the land in the interests of the club on particularly easy terms.

Thus the Warragul golf club secured its links after years of anxiety and insecurity, and it would be safe to say that the site is an ideal one for the purpose, and will, in a very short time, be really second to none in the State. The property consists of eighty acres, within a few minutes' walk of the town, and is most beautifully situated in the centre of smiling homes and prosperous farms, on undulating country dotted with ornamental trees and hedges.

The view from any part of the links is so entrancing that strangers sometimes forget their play, while they stand gazing at the vista, pointing out its beauties to their partners, forgetting for the time the importance of their cards, and the fact that others are following them. The acquisition of all these advantages at a cost of £2000 was a remarkable bargain, and the club lost no time in laying out improvements. The course has attracted the attention of experts, who predict that it will be the acme of perfection from a golfing point of view, whilst its value, as an asset to the town, is difficult to estimate.

From *The Path of Progress: From Forests of Yesterday to Homes of To-day* by Hugh Copeland, 1934

in 1927 until 1930. During the 1930s, he played Country Week, where a team of nine or ten good golfers from various country clubs played in Melbourne. In 1941 he was named Club Champion, playing off a handicap of five.

Playing for the R.E. Ross Trophy began in 1946 and is still played today, known as the R.E. Ross Memorial Trophy. The Board recording trophy winners hangs in the Men's Locker Room at the Club.

Alan Glen, who assisted Ross in his surveying practice, says that after he moved to Melbourne, he returned to Warragul every Tuesday, partly to sign off on plans and check work in progress in the morning, and to play golf in the afternoon. *'Tuesday was Men's Golf Day and there were no appointments made that afternoon,'* Glen said.



▲ LIFE MEMBER WARRAGUL GOLF CLUB

## A TREE FOR THE SECRETARY

Peggy Bown was Ross' secretary at Bayview Limited and then Hillview Quarries and one of the two people to whom he left a personal legacy in his Will. Her husband Alan also starting working for Ross in 1968. *'One funny incident happened after Alan and I had bought a new home and Mr Ross had this tree in his back garden and it was about an eight foot lace-edged silver birch. He insisted we had this tree for our back garden. So we both went over on a Saturday morning and he insisted on helping me dig this tree out of the ground. We had an Austin 1800, how we got this tree into it I shall never know and how we got it back to Burwood without being booked I'll never know either. And then we lived in constant fear that we would plant it in the wrong place or it would die. Because he used to come and check.'*

Ross joined the Royal Melbourne Golf Club on 16 July 1927, nominated by Mr G.V. Stephens and Mr A.H. A'Beckett. He played there often, sometimes with colleagues from Warragul including three who played there with him the week before his death: Perc Wilkinson, Pat Caldwell and Danny Talbot.

On November 1st, 1970, the day Roy Ross died, he began playing with his old friend Eddie Watson and a guest at the Club, John Warburton, then in his twenties. John Warburton recalls that the three had played six holes on the west course when Ross said he wasn't feeling well and would go

> WARRAGUL  
GOLF COURSE, 2001



back to the Clubhouse. When Watson and Warburton offered to go with him, he said *'You play on, it's only indigestion'*. When the pair came up to the 18th hole, they saw the Club flag at half mast and Watson jokingly said *'I hope that's not Roy!'* A few moments later, the Club Secretary came to meet them and said *'I've got some very sad news for you – Roy Ross died in the Clubhouse'*.

## BEHIND THE SCENES TO THE LAST

The article in the Warragul Gazette of November 3, 1970, two days after Ross' death, underlines his lifelong desire to remain anonymous. The fact that his name was not a household word in Warragul, where he spent almost forty years of his life, shows a man who shunned publicity and had no need to seek public acclaim.

Written by Geo. Lowe, the headline reads: 'TRIBUTE TO RON ROSS' and what might have been a typographical error is compounded by a repetition in the article itself:

*'The sudden death of R.E. Ross after playing a round of golf at Royal Melbourne at the weekend came as a great shock to his many friends here. His association with golf at Warragul was an invaluable interest, to which he gave his time and knowledge. Both on trees and grass, he was an expert, and after the club lost the two holes over the road, he sponsored the re-arrangement and general progress which kept the local course an inspiration for other country clubs. His game was based on the rich verdant Gippsland turf and the care and placement of his beloved trees. Ron's four ball matches over the many years make memorable local golf history. His final round at Royal Melbourne Club over the weekend was undoubtedly in a perfect setting. The tragic end must be deeply felt by his many friends and his bereaved wife, to whom I express my heartfelt sympathy.'*