

RESEARCHING A ROLL OF HONOUR

A talk by author, Jenny O'Donnell to Glen Eira Historical Society, July 2022.

The first question is: **Why research a list of names of unknown people?**

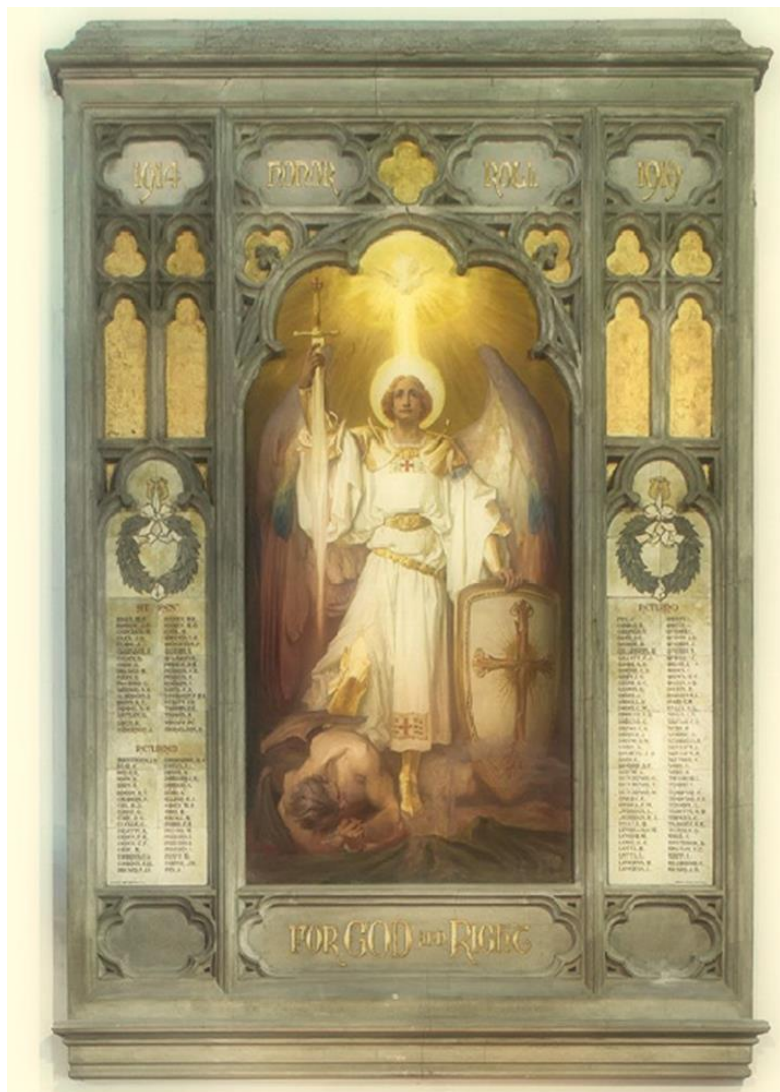
A Roll of Honour is more than a silent witness of imperial fervour and patriotism. It is usually a record of a community's collective grief and horror at the carnage of WWI and unprecedented loss. As such, discovering the lives of the people named on a roll of honour has much to tell us about that community. But honour rolls also reveal other things about community values and attitudes.

I'd like to show you six pictures of Honour Rolls - all of them in churches, and make a few comments to make the point:

St James, Liverpool, UK – speaks of wealth, power, pride and imperialism



Christ Church St Kilda (also made of opus sectile, a form of mosaic), speaks of affluence but not wealth, faith and of good over evil



St John's East Malvern is a simple board focussing on the **service** of the members of the Congregation, a style of honour roll familiar to us all.



All Saints Hunters Hill, NSW, more elaborate suggesting affluence, and focussing on sacrifice



St Andrews Wahroonga, NSW -here patriotism is the key value and rank. Note that this honour roll honours only those who died but omits the idea of “supreme sacrifice” (Is it saying ‘They did their duty’?) And why was the decision made to omit those who simply served? Also, it is very rare to find a roll of honour which does not treat all service personnel as equal without mention of rank.



Lastly, St Paul's Nova Scotia - this is an arch forming the entrance to the church. It speaks of community pride and wealth and empire (royal arms at the top of the arch). There's a long list of names but again the roll honours only those who died. Does it presume that service for the empire was expected? I think so.



The second question is: **What do you plan to do with the data? This decides how much research you are willing to do.**

Some people create an on-line data base of the basic information -more a research tool than anything else

Others create a book of photocopied Service Records for each person – it will tell you something about the person but nothing about their lives or the community they came from and returned to.

Others, like myself, write as complete as possible biography about each person and included photographs and extracts from letters. I also contacted family members, where possible. What emerges from this approach is a picture of the community, the impact of the war on families and I stress, ongoing generations. WW1 shaped the modern world and is still felt today.

Having settled that, where is the Roll of Honour?

Public buildings like some state schools, Town Halls, and RSL clubs often have a roll of honour. Most private schools have walls of Rolls of Honour.

Anglican churches, and some Methodist are the only churches where you are likely to find honour rolls -St John's East Malvern is an example, as is Christ Church St Kilda.

Sadly, many honour rolls from demolished or remodelled buildings are mouldering in storage in RSLs and Hist. Society sheds. It is absolutely essential that these relics are at least photographed and their origins recorded before they are lost.

So, which community does your Roll of Honour represent?

Easy you say - wherever the Honour Roll is found or came from. But how did it get there? Who promoted its erection? Who paid for it? The records, if you can find them of the organisation erecting the roll are helpful here. Together with a careful analysis of the information on each person's life, a full picture of a community emerges.

In St Kilda menfolk of five families – all living in the same boarding house and the 3 sons of the boarding house owner enlisted giving a vignette of St K life and community.

And where do you find the raw material – after you have a list of names?

National Archives of Australia is your starting point – free, easily accessible on-line, and with a lot more than just service records.

Anglican Diocesan Archives are helpful for churches and individual chaplains if you find one through Archives. The Archives of other denominations can also be helpful.

And of course – endless trawling through Trove and Ancestry_(free at Public Records Office of Vic, the State Library of Vic and local libraries) to fill in the gaps.

Pitfalls are many

- Variant spellings of names
- Incorrectly spelt names
- Enlistment under a false name
- Incorrect or omitted initials
- Enlisted more than once

And the unexpected

- Listed as served but didn't
- Listed as killed but weren't
- Hidden women

And - who was left off when other family members were not – brothers, fathers, husbands, in-laws, wives, sisters. WHY?